

Strategies to overcome cultural clashes in college group work

Research Paper

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### Strategies to overcome cultural clashes in college group work

Group work has always been a thorn in the sides of those who are part of it in many aspects. One major aspect is in the communication which can be difficult enough when group members don't agree and even more so when contrasting cultures are mixed within the group. Each culture brings new insights along with language barriers, and differences in general lifestyle, behaviour, and education which can affect the group process by impeding communication. Misinterpretation can then result in conflict resulting in a cultural clash. Brislin (1993) states, "a 'well-meaning cultural clash' can be defined as the misunderstanding or disagreement that results when two or more individuals from different backgrounds interact, each basing their behaviours on a different set of rules for what is expected and/or considered appropriate" (as cited in Chamberlain et al, 1999). Strategies to overcome this dilemma can be controlled and monitored to improve communication and avoid the clashes when proper measures are in place.

#### Understanding the causes

College Instructors need to develop strategies to help students communicate effectively by understanding the fact that language barriers, differences in general lifestyle, behaviour and education of the various cultures in the classroom exist which can cause cultural clashes. Clashes may occur if one culture has had a poor relationship with another, thus, forming a stereotype, and "what is culturally appropriate in one culture may be highly inappropriate in another" (Classroom, n.d.). Before strategies can be applied and used to overcome the clashes, a clear understanding of the various cultures is necessary. Greenfield (1995) argues that the modes of interaction and how students behave originates in the home which often conflicts with what is known as the "invisible culture of the classroom" (as cited in Williams, 2003). Brown (1993) and Goodlad (1990) write that the gap between cultures is further "exacerbated" with teachers having limited intercultural

knowledge graduating from a “monocultural perspective to teaching and learning” (as cited in Chamberlain et al, 1999). They need to understand the differences in cultural behaviour in the home and school to avoid overwhelming affects (Chamberlain et al, 1999).

Communication is the backbone of cultural clashes and “intercultural communication, simply put, is communication between people from different cultural backgrounds” (Jandt, 2013). When communication occurs within the same cultural group, it can be misconstrued. When members of different cultures try to convey messages to each other, it can become even more complicated and misunderstood. Differences can exist in how close a person stands to another when conversing or allowing an interruption while having a conversation. Adler (2008) states that, "if the conflict can be traced to cultural differences between two or more group members, obtaining cultural synergy may be necessary" (as cited in Sikes, 2010). There will always be a diversity of ideas and opinions within group work, but the dominating beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of a particular culture may create a dominance forming a majority. Differences may also exist within the particular cultural group according to Ford (2009) (as cited in Sikes, 2010).

Group work can be a challenge trying to find a middle ground and dealing with dominance amongst group members. Jandt (2013) describes "how people define themselves and their relationship with others" (p.169) as the individualist or collectivist. The individualist focusses on their own interests while the collectivist centers their attention on their group (Jandt, 2013). When two cultures from opposite ends of this spectrum are placed in a group, the extent to which conversation is made will differ. The individualist is associated with direct style of communication and will be more expressive in the spoken message, whereby, the collectivist associated with in-direct communication style, will be more passive (Jandt, 2013). The collectivist may appear uninterested or lacking understanding of their role in the group which can present

communication issues from the individualist in the group. Understanding the nature of these cultural dimensions can contribute to the reasons for cultural conflict. In an environment of mostly collectivist cultures where verbal communication is weak, the chance for misinterpretation is strong. Hofstede's (1980) fourth dimension of uncertainty avoidance is the extent by which students in a particular culture feel threatened by what they don't know or understand (Jandt, 2013). This can create a feeling of inferiority and add fuel to the fire, ethnocentrism becomes evident and according to Northouse, should be discouraged "as it tends to lift up one culture at the expense of another" (Sikes, 2010).

The level in which a student receives education and discipline can also dictate the possibilities of cultural clash. Students from an educational system setting high standards working in a group with others where education is less disciplining can certainly feel the difference in performance levels. In my own observations, this was definitely apparent between two cultures, which will be unnamed in this paper. One culture was pro-active, assertive, and had high levels of comprehension and command of the English language and grammar. Whereas, the other culture had a relaxed attitude, difficulty decoding expectations, depended strongly on the Instructor's direction by limiting their research beyond the classroom and finally, struggled with the English language and grammar. The division of the groups at the forming stage was meant to merge the two cultures in hopes to find a median to help discover each other's cultures. It was extremely challenging to balance this as the differences were too strong.

A recent discussion on the radio suggested keeping members of the same cultures in a group rather than splitting them. This discussion also alluded to situations within the same cultures and suggested keeping those known as "slackers" all in the same group to avoid conflict where half the group performed at much higher levels. The question that came to my mind was

"who are we doing this for"? Should an Instructor be concerned with merging cultures? Who will benefit and how much time can be spent on monitoring performance to ensure equal participation? What is the learning objective? Is it to determine how well a student performs in group work or is it how well a group can achieve the outcomes as a whole? My intention was to accomplish the maximum benefits and I planned to set myself up for the challenge.

Identify strategies to overcome cultural clashes

Sikes (2010) identifies open communication as a necessity when trying to "resolve differences in perception and interpretation. Some sort of compromise between individuals or sub-groups may be necessary in order to move beyond the situation. Commonalities between members of different cultures should be emphasized and differences minimized". When trying to overcome a cultural clash between students, it is imperative that the Instructor continually observe any suspicious actions toward conflict and when necessary, investigate the reason by meeting with each student, individually. Each student should be asked what occurred and what upset the student. In order to avoid taking sides, the Instructor would need to see the situation from each perspective. The person who committed the proposed offense would be asked to explain what her original intention was. Language difficulty and/or inability to express a point in most cases are a common cause. An Instructor can act as a mediator and often a counsellor; therefore, building a trust with students is crucial by informing them of the confidentiality. Students need to be convinced of the benefits in communicating with other cultures in order to work collaboratively.

Informing the class of ways to avoid conflict can be delivered through lectures on cultural differences as part of the process in resolution. Setting standards for all students should alleviate some of the identified cultural differences. Treating all students equally and fairly is important but can also require effort to maintain a balance by the Instructor. An Instructor's job is multi-fold to

include helping students understand the "value differences between cultures" without offending them (Classroom, n.d.). Misunderstandings can be overcome by learning how other cultures behave. Journals were used in my class and students were asked to submit at certain intervals which provided me with insight and uncovered the difficulties students were experiencing. It was interesting to find out that the culture of high-performers was frustrated with the lack of work from the other culture, but were willing to give it a chance. The culture of low performers seemed content for the most part. My conclusion is that the low performers were leaning on the others. My concern was the low performers were repeatedly reminded they were being monitored on their participation regularly in class and through the online group forum. Some improvement was noticeable towards the end of the course through these constant reminders.

#### Conclusion

Communication is the key, and to what extent and format it occurs will impact the result of pacifying any cultural clash. Competency occurs when individuals understand the "social customs and social system of the host culture" (Jandt, 2013, p.36). Group performance can improve by understanding and embracing the cultural differences and perspectives (Sikes, 2010). Group meetings with the Instructor and reinforcement of good performance can shed a positive tone and can reset the hostile mood to an earlier time during the "forming" stage of their group when relationships were new. Journals and online group forums provide a "fly on the wall" environment for the Instructor to help monitor situations regularly and deal with cultural clashes early. Educating ourselves as Instructors on cultural behavioural differences helps understand the motive for a person's actions. The Instructor should remain calm; demonstrate good listening skills and empathy to both sides. Providing honest feedback and patience can turn a cultural clash into a "cultural class" (Classroom, n.d.).

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