

This handout is for instructors who are using group work either in face to face classes or online.



Teaching and Learning

- What it means to be a ‘teacher’ or ‘student’ varies across cultures – in some cultures a teacher is a facilitator, in others, a teacher is expected to be an expert, a guru and even in some cases someone who acts as a mentor for students on their personal life as well as academic studies.
- Students who are used to the instructor being ‘the expert’ or ‘guru’ may not understand the value of learning from peers. You may have to be very explicit in explaining your rationale for working in groups, peer assessment etc.
- Students from some cultures may expect very explicit direction from an instructor about how to go about a task and may be hesitant to take the initiative. This approach may sometimes be misinterpreted as lack of engagement or willingness to contribute.

Culture and Group Work

- Different cultures may have different orientations to what is considered appropriate behaviour in a group setting. Moreover, in some cultures, students do not do group work in class
- Research shows that mono-cultural groups tend to do better with performance tasks, while tasks that require creativity and problem solving get better results with diverse groups

- Diverse groups take longer to work together to achieve the final goal than mono-cultural groups, so more time is often needed for projects where the groups include diverse students
- Contributions to group discussions may end up being unequal due to cultural differences in communication styles in groups (e.g., the expectation that men speak before women, or that the older person – or person perceived as having more experience – should speak first)
- Students from more collectivist cultures or with a more particularistic orientation (where relationships are prioritized and the application of ‘rules’ may vary according to context, rather than applying universal rules to all/most situations), may need more time for ‘relationship building’ in order to feel part of the group and therefore to be able to fully contribute
- Students from collectivist cultures are more likely to value indirect communication styles and place more importance on group agreement rather than individual contributions; such indirect communication may not be understood by students with a more direct style and from more individualistic cultures. The latter may interpret indirect styles as vague or demonstrating a lack of knowledge; the former may interpret direct styles as rude or arrogant

References / Resources

Hofstede Insights. <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/>

If you're not familiar with Hofstede's work on dimensions of national culture, this website is a good place to start. In addition to providing a brief overview of what the dimensions reveal, you can search different countries and do comparisons of broader cultural trends. For a more in-depth exploration of how dimensions impact the way we view and interact in the world, Hofstede's book on Culture and Organizations (details below) is excellent.

Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind*. (3rd ed.) US: McGraw Hill.

TRU: A globally minded campus – A resource for academic departments. Retrieved from https://www.tru.ca/_shared/assets/gmc6666.pdf

This is a lengthy resource and includes sections such as: Challenges for international students and The Canadian student experience. Part II is devoted to “Working with international students.”

Wursten, H., & Jacobs, C. (n.d.). The impact of culture on education: Can we introduce best practices in education across cultures? Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/12349034/The_impact_of_culture_on_education

This is a useful article for gaining an understanding of the differences in expectations of students and teachers in different contexts.