Challenges of Working in Multicultural Teams and Cultural Differences: a Case Study

María-Eugenia Ruiz-Molina[1], Antonio Marín-García[2]

Abstract

Cultural diversity is a current characteristic of the student populations of universities throughout the world. The present paper aims to examine challenges potentially related to multicultural student group work in higher education and the relation between the students' perceived importance of such challenges and their cultural background, measured in terms of the Hofstede's cultural dimensions. In order to achieve this aim, an online survey was completed by 100 students of 21 different nationalities of the 6-EC (European Credits) International Marketing course taught in English language at the Universitat de València, who had to work in multicultural teams in the practical sessions. This survey provides evidence about the fact that students do not seem to experience relevant problems because of working in multicultural teams. The most important perceived challenges are more linked to differences in motivation and workload imbalances rather than related to cultural differences. Consistently, most of the correlations between students' perceived importance of challenges of working in multicultural groups and Hofstede's cultural dimensions are not significant. From these findings it might be inferred that the benefits of working in multicultural teams may be greater than the challenges associated to multiculturality and, therefore, course instructors should try to manage cultural diversity to promote work in multicultural teams in order to enable students to acquire the competence to work in an international environment, that is required by many organizations because of globalization processes.

Keywords: *cultural diversity, team work, higher education;*

1. Introduction and background

Many of our current university students, once graduated, will work in organizations with strategic interests in international markets. Thus, the ability to work effectively in culturally heterogeneous teams may become a highly valued competence in these futures professionals [1] and it has been highlighted that cultural differences should be taken into consideration when designing and implementing learning activities (e.g. [2]).

Multicultural student group work has been defined as a collaboration of two or more individuals from different cultural backgrounds, who have been assigned interdependent tasks and are jointly responsible for the final results, and who manage their relationships within a certain educational institution [3].

Previous research provides evidence about benefits of multicultural team work in terms of a more global and less ethnocentric approach in higher education, preparing students for working effectively in culturally heterogeneous groups in both academic and professional settings, and exchanging culturally diverse knowledge [1]. Notwithstanding, incorporating team work in multicultural groups in higher education creates both challenges that are common for monocultural groups (e.g. challenges related to planning and task coordination, problem solving and decision making, conflict management, deadlines compliance, and acceptable group behaviour) and challenges that are peculiar to multicultural groups due to cultural differences [4]. In this sense, some studies have pointed to the problem of multicultural student group work ineffectiveness [5], and how group members' cultural dimensions of behavior affect their understanding of a collaborative situation and their behaviors (e.g., [4]). In this sense, people from collectivistic cultures prefer indirect communication, while representatives of individualistic cultures prefer direct modes of communication [6]. This involves differences in perceptions of group diversity between collectivists and individualists [7], in the sense that students from collectivist cultures are likely to perceive cultural diversity as more problematic than students from individualistic countries.

Since group-level challenges mostly determine group success [8], knowledge of these challenges and how culturally diverse students perceive them is required, but still scarce in the academic literature.

The present paper aims to analyse the challenges potentially related to multicultural student group work in higher education and the relation between the students' perceived importance of such

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[1] Universitat de València, Spain
[2] Universitat de València, Spain

challenges and their cultural background. In this way, we expect to assist educators and instructional designers in underlying cultural causes of conflict, and to enable them to effectively manage multicultural group work in higher education.

2. Method and analyses

In order to achieve the aim of this work, an online survey was completed by 100 students of 21 different nationalities of the 6-EC (European Credits) International Marketing course taught in English language at the Universitat de València. In this course students must develop an international marketing plan during the 14-week practical sessions in multicultural teams of around 5 members. Students' perceived importance of challenges related to multicultural student group work were measured in the survey through a 19-item scale adapted from Popov et al. (2012) using a 5-point Likert scale, where respondents were asked to rank their disagreement or agreement with the proposed statements (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). Regarding Hofstede's cultural dimensions (i.e. power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, indulgence), the corresponding scores for the country of origin of the student were obtained from [9]. Last, classification variables are also included (i.e. gender, age, studies, and nationality).

A total of 100 valid questionnaires were collected through this online survey. Descriptive statistics about the sample characteristics are provided in Table 1. The distribution of the sample in terms of age and gender is assumed to be representative of the students' population at the Faculty of Economics of the Universitat de València.

Table 1. Sample descriptive statistics.

Variable	Values	N	%
Gender	Male	32	32
	Female	68	68
Age	19	6	6
	20	27	27
	21	32	32
	22	18	18
	23	9	9
	≥ 24	8	8
Studies	Business Administration	29	29
	International Business	55	55
	Economics	8	8
	Marketing	3	3
	Tourism	3	3
	Other	2	2
Nationality	German	21	21
	Dutch	10	10
	Italian	10	10
	French	17	17
	British	4	4
	Irish	8	8
	Danish	3	3
	Chinese	3	3
	Austrian	2	2
	Polish	2	2
	Slovak	2	2
	Belgian	2	2
	Finnish	3	3
	Other	13	13

Once data were collected, first, in order to examine the challenges potentially related to multicultural student group work, means and standard deviations for each item are calculated (Table 2).

Table 2. Mean values and standard deviations for importance of challenges of multicultural student group work

Items	Mean	St. dev.
MCT_01 Show free-riding behaviour	3.18	1.086
MCT_02 Have insufficient English/Spanish language skills	3.18	1.167
MCT_03 Can not communicate properly	3.11	1.286
MCT_04 Have a low level of motivation	3.21	1.465
MCT_05 Can not manage the group effectively	3.00	1.239
MCT_06 Have conflicts with the group	2.94	1.510
MCT_07 Have diverse disciplinary backgrounds	2.76	1.248
MCT_08 Have attitudinal problems such as dislike, mistrust and lack of cohesion	2.85	1.359
MCT_09 Have heterogeneous group composition	2.73	1.072
MCT_10 Show differences in academic attitude	2.96	1.082
MCT_11 Show differences in ambitions (e.g., aiming for an "Excellent" grade or just "Passed")	3.41	1.256
MCT_12 Show culturally different styles of decision making and problem solving	2.86	1.054
MCT_13 Have different attitudes toward deadlines	3.23	1.286
MCT_14 Have culturally different styles of con?ict management	2.55	0.869
MCT_15 Show culturally different ways of interacting	2.64	1.097
MCT_16 Show differences in content knowledge	2.96	1.034
MCT_17 Have culturally different styles of complying with supervisor's/teacher's guidelines	2.78	1.106
MCT_18 Have dominating group members	2.87	1.107
MCT_19 Have the pressure to defend group decisions while not agreeing with them	2.82	1.019

In general, students do not seem to have great concerns about working in multicultural teams, since the scores are below 4 in all cases, and most of items show scores below 3, that is the midpoint of the scale. According to the mean values obtained, the most relevant challenge is "Differences across team members in ambitions" (e.g., aiming for an "Excellent" grade or just "Passed"), followed by "Different attitudes toward deadlines", "Low level of motivation", "Free-riding behavior", and "Insufficient English language skills". Most of these items showing the highest scores are not really related to the fact of working in multicultural teams, but because of working in teams. Therefore, cultural issues do not seem to exert an important negative influence, as it may be expected. The main culture-related challenge refers to communication problems and lack of English proficiency, in the line of the findings of [10].

Second, to examine the extent to which students' perceived importance of challenges of working in multicultural groups as related to Hofstede's cultural dimensions (i.e. power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, indulgence), correlations between these variables are estimated (Table 3).

Table 3. Correlations between students' perceived importance of challenges of working in multicultural groups and cultural dimensions

Items	Power distance	Individ.	Mascul.	Uncert. Avoid.	Long-term Orient	Indulg.
MCT_01 Show free-riding behaviour	-,203(*)	,121	,006	,036	,085	,068
MCT_02 Have insufficient English/Spanish language skills	-,180	,043	,033	,039	,075	-,051
MCT_03 Can not communicate properly	-,337(**)	-,017	,026	-,140	-,070	,040
MCT_04 Have a low level of motivation	-,328(**)	-,016	,111	-,161	-,004	-,033
MCT_05 Can not manage the group effectively	-,290(**)	-,052	,108	-,127	,032	-,072
MCT_06 Have conflicts with the group	-,423(**)	,006	,023	-,137	-,120	,035
MCT_07 Have diverse disciplinary backgrounds	-,068	-,130	,161	,233(*)	,249(*)	-,304(**)
MCT_08 Have attitudinal problems such as dislike, mistrust and lack of cohesion	-,380(**)	,063	,032	-,100	-,053	,007
MCT_09 Have heterogeneous group composition	-,040	,131	-,124	,108	-,044	-,002
MCT_10 Show differences in academic attitude	-,240(*)	,059	,099	-,030	,111	-,006
MCT_11 Show differences in ambitions (e.g., aiming for an "Excellent" grade or just "Passed")	-,303(**)	,080	-,037	-,053	,148	-,025
MCT_12 Show culturally different styles of decision	,068	,058	-,029	,198	,214(*)	-,151

making and problem solving						
MCT_13 Have different attitudes toward deadlines	-,244(*)	,098	,009	-,020	,125	-,060
MCT_14 Have culturally different styles of conflict management	-,009	,027	-,052	,212(*)	,070	-,111
MCT_15 Show culturally different ways of interacting	,134	-,129	,091	,156	,062	-,115
MCT_16 Show differences in content knowledge	-,030	-,045	,014	-,020	,051	-,015
MCT_17 Have culturally different styles of complying with supervisor's/teacher's guidelines	-,206(*)	-,051	-,059	-,087	-,074	,077
MCT_18 Have dominating group members	,044	-,138	,112	,046	-,080	-,022
MCT_19 Have the pressure to defend group decisions while not agreeing with them	,045	-,076	,051	,095	,045	-,049

The results for the correlations between students' perceived importance of challenges of working in multicultural groups and Hofstede's cultural dimensions show that power distance emerges as the cultural dimension most significantly related to the students' perceived importance of challenges related to multicultural group work, in the sense that the lower the power distance, the higher the perceived risks of working in multicultural groups. In contrast to previous research (e.g. [1]), no relation between students perceptions of multicultural team work and the Hofstede's individualism dimension is observed. This fact may be explained because the cultural differences between groups might be not as big as suggested by Hofstede's dimensions due to his/her personal travel experiences.

3. Conclusions

The present case study provides evidence about the fact that the challenges observed by students because of working in multicultural teams are mainly due to team work organizational aspects rather than to multiculturality cues. Bearing in mind the limitations in terms of external validity, inherent to case studies, we conclude that the benefits of working in multicultural teams may be greater than the challenges associated to cultural diversity and, therefore, we would recommend course instructors to try to manage cultural diversity to promote work in multicultural teams in order to enable students to acquire the competence to work in international environments, that is required by many organizations because of globalization.

Moreover, since the most relevant challenge of team work in multicultural settings related to cultural differences refers to lack of English proficiency, higher education institutions may increase the language requirements for exchange students and/or offer students specific courses to improve their communication skills in order to guarantee students' team work effectiveness and acquisition of the competence to work in culturally diverse teams through the learning activities.

Future research should examine the influence of team cultural composition on students' perceptions about challenges of working in multicultural teams, and explore the development and adaptation of educational methods and techniques to specifically address these culture-related differences. In addition to this, not only Hofstede's dimensions, but also other cultural values frameworks could be applied to multicultural group work research in order to ensure reliability. Last, research should assess if challenges related to multicultural student group work could be alleviated with increased opportunity for team members to form social relationships within and outside the classroom, as suggested by [11].

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