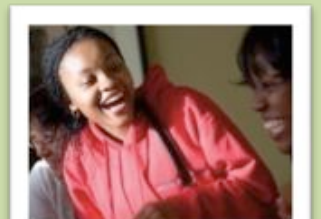

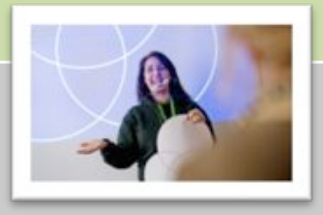

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Understanding international students' social networks and their impact on learning

Enhancing the student experience conference

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CENTRE FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING & LEARNING
ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

Why do we have international students?

to prepare students to develop competences and tolerances that enable them to live and work in an intercultural context (Knight and de Wit, 1995: 13).

in order to develop these skills there needs to be academic, social and cultural exchange between students of diverse backgrounds – an aim of international higher education

Is it working?

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Where are the positive stories of teaching, learning and assessment in an international academic context?

Answers in the research?

- cross-cultural interaction in HE is changing (Volet and Ang, 1998 and Montgomery, 2008)

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A decade of internationalisation…

Looking at cross-cultural interaction in HE in 1998 and 2008

1998 study

- In 1998 the resource provided by cultural diversity on campus is not being explored to the benefit of the student group as a whole
- *'Cultural diversity on university campuses creates ideal social forums for inter-cultural learning, yet, one of the most disturbing aspects of the internationalisation of Higher Education in Australia is the lack of interactions between local and international students from Asian backgrounds'* (Volet and Ang, 1998: 5).

A desire to stay with 'your own people'

- *'I find it easier to work… with people from my own country, we can work with our own language and I am more comfortable telling the others to work if they are not putting in effort. I am also more comfortable advising them.' (Indonesian student)*

- *'Sometimes we don't understand what they are saying and sometimes they don't understand what we are saying.' (Australian student)*

negative stereotypes

- *'I prefer working with students from Indonesia or at least Asians rather than Australians. Australians are more into speaking only rather than action. I had a previous experience with a group of Australians where at the first meeting, there were lots of suggestions and ideas from the Australian students but they left all the work to the last minute. I believe they have great ideas but no motivation to work.' ('Asian' student)*

Missing the detail of culture…

none of the international student group made reference to the diversity inherent in Australian ethnic backgrounds

unusual that they did not notice that many Australian students are from Asian and non-Anglo-Saxon origins (1998: 14)

Experiencing working together…

- *'In my discussion group, there was one Australian. Maybe my impression about them is a bit discriminative. I find that sometimes they are a bit lazy but when I work with them, I think when they are under pressure they really do their work – which is something that changed my perception. Initially, I was very critical, sceptical about it but when I was in this discussion group, she made me see something of a different culture which I learnt from it'* (international student, 1998: 14).

changing common perceptions?

Are international students 'too quiet'?

'Not in our group. Once they got going there was no shutting them up' (Australian student, 1998: 16).

2008 study

Study and Setting	Methodology	Discipline	Nationalities
1998 Volet and Ang in Australian university	40 students interviewed in 11 focus groups with semi-structured interview	Single discipline - Business School	23 international (18 Chinese from Singapore and Malaysia, 5 'other SE Asia'); 17 Australian
2008 Montgomery in British university	70 students interviewed in 12 informal and situated focus groups with semi structured interview	3 different disciplines Business, Design and Engineering	37 British; 33 international (China, India, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, Russia, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, France, USA, Sri Lanka, Germany).

the 2008 study - a different social atmosphere?

'The whole idea of working with people from different nationalities was quite appealing actually.' (Indian PG Design student)

'It's interesting [working in mixed nationality groups]. Like I would ask questions all the time because I'm really interested in other people's cultures and we talk about religion and everything… and clothes and that in Sri Lanka. It just makes it more fun.' (British UG Business student)

awareness of diversity within culture

'between Bombay and Delhi, there's so much difference'

acknowledgement of diversity within one's own culture

Valuing intercultural interaction…

*'Experience with others [is important] because we can get different experience from different areas… we can [get to] know each other and a little about what these people think about from this country and this idea… so when we go back to our country we [have] more international information from each area.' (*PG Design student from India)

different sources of conflict

- difficulties arose from differences in disciplinary backgrounds – view of subject as a 'culture'
- different ways of thinking and practising in the subject
- 'how to get things done' in groups

'There was a little bit of friction because…everyone, you know, is professionally qualified in their field and everyone thinks that they are right so there is like a clash between opinions and things like that.'

language less of an issue…?

- *'I don't think we have anyone on our course who can't understand or who [has] a problem talking. There are some English people who can't speak… [laughter]'*
- Many of the students in the study, particularly in the Business group were also learning languages themselves and some of them were multi-lingual and about to go out on international placements

or is it…?

- in each discipline there was at least one account of experience of a significant language competence issue where it had hindered or almost destroyed students' abilities to work together effectively
- *it's not that they had bad ideas it's just that we didn't understand their ideas and they didn't understand ours and in the beginning there was a lot of chaos and confusion.'*

beyond university walls – 'not always serious'

- interaction outside of class and virtual meetings on MSN and 'Facebook'

'But we all work together really well anyway, it's not like a divide… everybody has a say… Well everybody is on [Facebook]… so you are always in contact… We don't just meet up as a group, like we would talk outside of that as well and as friends as well. It's not always serious.' (Business UG student from Northern Ireland)

vestiges of prejudice?

- some comments resonant of negativity and prejudices expressed in the 1998 study
- Negative discourse particularly for Chinese students:

'We don't feel disadvantaged by having an international student in our group. Because sometimes in the past, like, some students, a lot of Chinese students don't like to contribute a lot, even in meetings and things, they don't like to talk, they don't express their opinions very well, just from my experience of working in groups like that.' (Spanish UG Business Student)

The influence of the teaching, learning and assessment environment

- The design of the teaching, learning and assessment environment could have a significant impact on student perceptions of intercultural learning
- So what sort of learning environment could produce positive results?

An AfL perspective

- Keep it low-stakes
- Make it authentic
- Provide practice in group work
- Provide guidance and make criteria explicit

a developing international teaching and learning environment?

- positive student perceptions of the benefits of working in a multi-cultural environment in Higher Education
- a developing awareness of the complexity of culture
- differences in academic discipline and variation in ideas about how to get things done were more prominent than culture
- an informality in relationships between students of different cultural backgrounds and attempts to minimise the divides between cultures

A sea change?

- Is Higher Education beginning to see evidence of the realisation of Volet and Ang's 1998 suggestion that social cohesion has to come from formal and informal opportunities to mix in the study environment?

  'I don't think there's one person in our class who's averse to diversity. I think we cherish and welcome it. As long as it's working and it's not just for the sake of it, but it's kind of a good thing. A good collaboration between other cultures [is] great. It's what we want.' (British PG Design student)

More about Assessment for Learning

- Research and Evaluation toolkit. Centre for Excellence in AfL, Northumbria University. Available at http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/cetl_afl/research/?view=Standard

- Email: c.montgomery@northumbria.ac.uk