

DIVERSITY

Diversity or multiculturalism?

In our *Introduction to multicultural teamwork* you will see that we have used both *diverse* and *multicultural* to describe project groups composed of students from divergent backgrounds. Often the two words can be treated as synonyms as both refer to work units with a high degree of heterogeneity. Yet you should note that the terms have slightly different connotations as one foregrounds 'culture', while the other suggests variation in a broader sense.

Multicultural relates to the idea of multiculturalism, which describes the condition in a society composed of individuals from a range of different socio-cultural backgrounds. Here the key word is 'culture', which is generally understood with reference to people's national, ethnic, religious and linguistic identities. To these some add socio-economic variables such as gender, age, ability, sexual orientation and class. What is not included are elements such as organisational membership, education, professional networks, leisure activities and political activism, even though these have a significant impact on our perception of society and organisations.

In comparison, *diversity* is a broader term, which can include all forms of 'differences' found in a community or workplace. In business, *diversity management* has become popular, prompting some to suggest that we look beyond traditional categorisations based on race, gender or class and instead treat employees (and students!) as complex individuals shaped by their memberships of different social groups. As a business strategy, diversity management has been criticised for drawing our attention away from ethnicity and gender, which remain common sources of discrimination within an organisation. Yet the broad concept of 'diversity' is useful for our purpose, motivating us to ask: What 'differences' make a difference to an AAU project group?

Does diversity really impact a team?

What do you think of when asked to define intercultural communication? Many people immediately start talking about national culture, ethnic diversity or religious beliefs, suggesting that these represent a potential obstacle to successful dialogue and cooperation. But do you think such an explanation can hold? How much does the fact that you happen to be born in Iceland or Russia tell us about the experiences and expectations that you bring into education? And even if you communicate in a distinctively German or Cameroonian way is this really significant once you get down to the business of defining and solving a problem?

People's tendency to reduce diversity to a question of nation, race and religion distorts our understanding of diversity, causing us to exaggerate certain characteristics whilst ignoring other important differences. In an MA course, for instance, students are recruited from a variety of BA programmes, including some provided by university colleges, which are generally concerned with professional practice and not the development of theoretical and methodological knowledge. Some newcomers are 'international', others are 'domestic', but they all need to acquire new skills such as scientific methods and academic writing. Yet from 'old' AAU students we often hear comments like: *We cannot work with X. She is an international student. It is too demanding on us if we have to teach all the internationals how to do a PBL project.*

The students could be right that X has little experience with the Aalborg model for X might be a newcomer to AAU, recruited from an international university or a Danish university college. But ascribing this to *international-ness* is wrong. It has nothing to do with national culture, but reflects a difference in students' educational backgrounds. So instead of dismissing X, the Danish students may want to find out more about the knowledge possessed by X. In return for teaching X about methods and theory, the local students could gain new understandings, adding to their project the professional practitioner's perspective that X acquired at the university college.

When diversity matters

The example shows that it is important to postpone judgement when working with people from diverse backgrounds. Only when we have enough knowledge about other people's beliefs, capabilities and experience can we start to assess to what extent they can make a positive contribution to a team. And adding someone 'different' may strengthen a team. Those who consider themselves PBL 'experts' will have to explain to a newcomer what works in a project group, which makes work processes transparent rather than something taken for granted. All group members will have to contribute to the building of an inclusive team culture, and this teaches you interpersonal and intercultural skills that you need in a global labour market.

If we seek a closer understanding of how multiculturalism can impact project work, we should build on a broad conceptualisation of diversity. Tensions arise in multicultural groups, but more often than not, individuals clash because of divergent disciplinary understandings, academic socialisation, communication problems, organisational skills, and interpersonal relations. Such conflicts cannot be ascribed to 'culture', and we recommend that, as a group policy, you agree that cultural explanations are not acceptable unless you have investigated an issue thoroughly.

Why talk about diversity if we are trying to abandon the idea of culture altogether? Because groups need to know more about team members' divergent backgrounds in order to identify the resources available to them. We mentioned the difference between AAU students, who have acquired skills in scientific methodology and theory, and the university college graduates, who can contribute with knowledge about professional practice in sectors such as Health, Childcare, Tourism or Marketing. Similarly, a group containing students from BA programmes in International Relations, Sociology and Modern Languages can build a joint project on theoretical knowledge about global affairs, research methods from Social Science and Humanities, and linguistic expertise in one or several foreign languages. Add to this the cultural and linguistic knowledge international group members have about their home country and region, and you have built the foundation for a strong team performance.

Diversity auditing

In order to work out what 'differences' are present in a work environment, business managers rely on so-called 'diversity questionnaires', asking employees about elements such as socio-cultural background, education, international experience, and linguistic competences. Provided that people are honest when filling in such forms, a diversity survey enables managers to map differences within an organisation and thereby identify resources possessed by individual employees.

Diversity questionnaires have been used in both business organisations and education. Last year the present author performed a diversity audit in a 3rd semester class on Intercultural

Communication. Judging from names, the class was homogenous, composed exclusively of domestic students from North and West Jutland. However, by asking about parents' native languages we found out that almost 20 per cent in the parents' generation did not have Danish as their mother tongue, which tells us something about multiculturalism in this part of Denmark.

A diversity questionnaire will need to reflect the particular needs and resources of your group. We advise you to design your own questionnaire, foregrounding the aspects of diversity that seem most relevant to you. Below you see a template, developed with an international, interdisciplinary MA course in mind.

Diversity Questionnaire: MA in Culture, Communication and Globalisation		
<i>Socio-cultural background</i>		
Name		
Age:	Gender:	Nationality:
Ethnicity:	Home town/region:	
First language(s)		
Parents' first language	Mother:	Father:
<i>Educational background</i>		
Previous education (degree, discipline, institution):		
Academic strengths (name 3-5):		
Study/internship abroad (place + time spent)		
Foreign languages (+ level of proficiency)		
Other educational qualifications:		
<i>Other experience</i>		
International experience	Countries lived in (> six months) International organisations/NGOs Network activities Other	
Professional experience	(please provide description)	
Voluntary work	(please provide description)	
Other	(please explain)	
Interpersonal/intercultural competences (name 3-5)		

(template based on Leask, *Internationalizing the Curriculum* 2015, 94)

Comments on the categories used:

1) *Socio-cultural background*: This part is meant to establish what linguistic and socio-cultural characteristics group members possess. Traditional categories such as gender, age and nationality are used, but to these are added ethnicity, home region and parental languages, which acknowledges the spread of multiculturalism in most contemporary societies. Thus it will matter to the student from Glasgow that he is Scottish as well as British, and even if he claims to speak English only, he may have grown up in a family where the mother had Gaelic as her first language, while his father spoke German. This has taught him something about managing in a multilingual environment, which is a useful insight to the group that is linguistically diverse.

2) *Educational background* is self-explanatory – it asks for information about your previous education, including academic discipline and institutions attended. Disciplines are important because they tell you something about areas of specialisation, including what forms of theoretical knowledge, methodology and contexts you have been exposed to. Students with a BA in Anthropology and Business Communication, respectively, will probably find that they approach a project very differently. Sometimes such differences result in accusations such as *student X lacks knowledge about research methods*, or *student Y knows nothing about business practices*. To avoid wasting your time on such debates we encourage you to explore educational differences, foregrounding the competences that *your* discipline and specialisation add to the group.

3) *Other experience*: The final questions are a mixed bag. This reflects the fact that good group work depends on interpersonal and intercultural competences that are sometimes taught in formal education, but which you are more likely to pick up in informal settings such as NGOs, international teams, social movements and local community projects. In the Global Graduate programme, we acknowledge such efforts, inviting you to claim - on the basis of your international, intercultural and voluntary experiences - a special certificate issued by the Department of Culture and Global Studies. However, we should like to advise all students to consider what 'other' experiences have developed your understanding of and capacity to manage work processes in a diverse team. You may want to write a brief description of your key capabilities in the areas of intercultural and interpersonal relations as this could be useful to you when putting together a job application or CV.

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