

# **The development of an on-line module for students on “Working in Intercultural Teams”**

Carole Quinn & Judith Smith

Office of Teaching Quality, Queensland University of Technology

## **Abstract**

*Since 2005 QUT through a number of large Teaching and Learning Grants has sponsored a range of teamwork learning initiatives to assist students to develop the teamwork skills demanded by industry. After a suite of six online team learning modules was developed, first year unit coordinators requested an additional module to address the challenges of working with the diverse range of social, cultural and personal values that students from different backgrounds bring to student teams. The Intercultural Teams module asks students to map themselves against a Cultural Orientations Framework so they can understand their own cultural beliefs. By learning about other cultural orientations and comparing and analysing their effects, team members can develop communication and team process management strategies to leverage their differences to realise effective and creative outcomes. The interactive session will demonstrate the elements of the Intercultural Teams module and ask participants to consider ways the module can be integrated into classroom learning to support the development of students' intercultural competencies.*

## **Rationale**

On graduation QUT students are expected to be able to work collaboratively as a cooperative and productive team member or leader (Queensland University of Technology [QUT], 2006). The internationalisation of the workforce and the student population requires that students be equipped to work with people from diverse cultures. For many students university will be their first experience of Australia's cultural diversity (Campbell, 2001). Commencing international students and students from non-English speaking backgrounds face additional communication and cultural barriers, such as forming teams with first year students with no experience of team processes and facing isolation and exclusion from local students (Centre for the Study of Higher Education [CSHE], 2002).

## **Background**

Large Teaching and Learning Grants have funded the trial and development of a number of Teamwork resources at QUT: “Enhancing Transition at QUT” (QUT, 2007), “Engaging Students” (Stewart, Smith & Dunn, 2008) and “Transitions In” (Transitions In Project Report 039, 2010) projects. The Engaging Students project identified a need for online resources to support the development of teamwork skills in first year students and prepare students to achieve project goals in teams. Six team learning modules have been developed, trialled and evaluated through first year core units in the Faculties of Information Technology and Creative Industries: Successful Teams, Team Roles, Team Lifecycles, Team Thinking Styles, Understanding Conflict and Resolving Conflict. These modules require students to reflect upon and critically analyse previous and current team experiences in order to arrive at understandings of team behaviours. The modules were revised to incorporate feedback from staff and student surveys and focus groups.

Two sub-projects undertaken in the Transitions in Project were the development of a Teamwork Survival Guide for students and the convening a Community of Practice for Unit Coordinators around the design, assessment and management of large first year units. It was participants in this Community of Practise that prompted the addition of the Intercultural Teams module to the suite of online team learning modules. The participants identified the need for this module to assist students generate sensitivity to domestic and international students' cultural perspectives and harness the diversity of behaviours and values that students from different backgrounds may bring to student teams.

### **The Intercultural Teams Module**

The focus of this module is on the development of intercultural competency. Freeman et al (n.d., p.9) in their review of literature developed the following working definition of intercultural competency:

A dynamic, ongoing, interactive self-reflective learning process that transforms attitudes, skills and knowledge for effective communication and interaction across cultures and contexts.

Having the ability to acknowledge and analyse your own and others cultural values and perspectives and capacity to negotiate, communicate and problem solve in cross-cultural contexts are seen as highly desirable competencies for people engaging in increasingly global market contexts. Like many institutions across the country, QUT recognises the development of these competencies as required graduate attributes for all students<sup>1</sup>. As such these competencies are mapped into all course curriculum design and there is ongoing work to integrate intercultural learning through the curriculum in what is taught, practiced and assessed in courses. This online module is designed to support and enhance this intercultural learning in classrooms. The aims of the Intercultural Teams Module, as described to students, are:

- to create teams that harness the strengths of individual team members;
- to understand how cultural differences can affect how you work in teams, and
- to recognise how your culture affects your behaviour.

#### *Principles*

Despite the challenges of different beliefs and team management expectations, the literature indicates that diverse teams can perform better than mono-cultural ones and have a positive effect on the “individual average mark of all students” (De Vita, 2002, p. 159). By viewing problems in different ways the team can mitigate “group think” (De Vita, 2001, p. 31) and rather than viewing differences as problematic, diversity in teams is an opportunity to realise effective and creative outcomes (Campbell, 2001; Caspersz, Skene & Wu, 2006; Distefano & Maznevski, 2000).

#### *Theoretical model*

We adopted Distefano & Maznevski's (2000) model for its three step approach (mapping, bridging and integrating differences) which allows students to use a Cultural Orientations Framework to map their differences at a personal level and use their maps as a tool for analysing the effect of difference upon teams. It stresses communication and managing participation for creative solutions in accordance with Effective Outcomes theories (Gudykunst, 2003).

The Mapping exercise provides an opportunity to reach “cultural convergence” and while it can never be perfectly realized, it is an introduction to a communication process “in which two or more individuals or groups share information in order to reach a mutual understanding of each other and the world in which they live” (Kinkaid as cited in Gudykunst, 2003, p. 168).

The Bridging step requires students to find the motivation to bridge differences. Using what they have learned from mapping to predict and explain attitudes and feelings and being mindful of their communication and behavioural styles, they can develop team processes that minimise misunderstanding and maximise the management of participation anxiety and uncertainty.

The Integrating step aligns with effective group decision-making theories (Oetzel as cited in Gudykunst, 2003, pp. 170-171). Equal participation leads to greater participation; consensus decisions are more effective than majority or compromise ones; and exploring the positive and negative consequences of many ideas leverages diversity and generates more effective and creative solutions (Oetzel as cited in Gudykunst, 2003, p. 14).

### *Module Format*

All the team-learning modules present theoretical principles, ideas, information, explanations and include quizzes and activities to assist students to apply team theory and personal reflection into their current team activity. The modules also allow students to recognise the relevance and importance of team skills to their professional development. They have been particularly designed to develop foundational teamwork capabilities for first year students working in teams.

The modules are designed to be generic enough to be used across all faculties and be integrated in small chunks over the course of the semester. Students complete the modules independently and are able to access their responses to the online activities at any time by clicking on the 'My Profile' link.

### *Integrating into the curriculum*

While the team learning modules are designed for students to complete individually, they should be encouraged to apply the knowledge, skills and strategies when working with other students on team activities, such as establishing team agreements, planning projects, and dealing with conflict that arises through teamwork.

To help integrate students' learning about teams, it is recommended academics incorporate discussions on the modules in class time. For example, students could be asked to bring to class a printout of their Profile summary from one or more completed modules. Then in small groups (4-6 people), they could share their reflections, explaining what they learned about team processes and this may relate to their current team activities. The team can then develop protocols about their own team processes.

Students need to be reminded that they are sharing very personal stories about their previous team work and life experiences, and that information shared in the groups needs to be treated with respect and confidentiality.

## **Formative evaluation inform future developments**

The development of the Intercultural Teams module has been supported by ongoing feedback from Language and Learning Advisors, academics and students. Language and Learning Advisors from International Student Services (ISS) at QUT were particularly involved in providing resource material, initial advice regarding cultural concepts and communication exercises and feedback on versions of the module.

Focus Group feedback from staff and students on this module indicated the module provided useful activities for students to better understand their own and others' cultural perspectives. They also recognised the module included practical strategies for working in intercultural contexts.

There was mixed feedback from staff about the inclusion of the Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions. While some staff saw Hofstede's work providing a useful framework to compare the patterns of differences between societies, others suggested the module should place greater emphasis on the limitations of Hofstede's model to reflect the cultural values of individual students and the changing values of sub cultures within societies. Language and Learning advisors were particularly keen to ensure a focus on similarities across cultures and shared their concerns about the challenges of facilitating discussions about cultural differences.

Suggestions for module improvements from students focussed on the presentation of the material. Students recommended a reduction of written text and an increase in the multimedia elements. They suggested the online interactions were what engaged students and recommended increasing these throughout the module.

Current work to further develop the module is being informed by this student and staff feedback. In response to this feedback professional development activities to support academics integrate intercultural competencies will also include strategies for facilitating student discussions about cultural differences.

## **Session Outline**

The interactive session will demonstrate elements and interactions from the Intercultural Teams module and ask participants to consider ways the module can be integrated into classroom learning to support the development of students' foundational intercultural competencies.

1. **Whole group discussion ice breaker** (5 mins): Consider the intercultural benefits and challenges you have encountered in facilitating student teams.
2. **Presenters** (7 mins): Outline purpose for online modules, demonstrate intercultural team module and approaches to implementation.
3. **Small group discussion** (10 mins): Participants consider one or more of the following:
  - In what ways does the module help address challenges and harness the benefits to students working in intercultural teams?

- What learning and assessment strategies could you use to integrate the Intercultural Team module into the curriculum to support the development of students' intercultural competencies?
  - What do you see are the challenges of this approach to integrating intercultural competencies in first year subjects/ units/courses?
4. **Whole group discussion** (8 mins): Draw together ideas from small group discussion to summarise possible implications and applications.

## References

- Campbell, A. (2001). Cultural diversity: Practising what we preach in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 5(3),
- Caspersz, D., Skene, J. & Wu, M. (2006). *HERDSA Guide: Managing student teams*. Milperra, NSW: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia.
- Centre for the Study of Higher Education. (2002). *Assessing student learning. Assessing students unfamiliar with assessment practices in Australian higher education*. University of Melbourne. Retrieved September 2006, from <http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/03/group.html>
- De Vita, G. (2001). The use of group work in large and diverse business management classes: Some critical issues. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 1(3), 27-35.
- De Vita, G. (2002). Does assessed multicultural group work really pull UK students' average down? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 27(2), 153-161.
- Distefano, J. J. & Maznevski, M. L. (2000). Creating value with diverse teams in global management. *Organizational Dynamics*, 29(1), 45-63.
- Freeman, M., Sykes, C., Chamberlain, A., Leask, B., Ramburuth, P., Simpson, L., & Treleaven, L. (submitted). Developing intercultural competence in Australian business higher education: A literature review. *Journal of Managerial Psychology: Special Issue Intercultural Competence*. Retrieved February 28, 2010, from <http://www.altexchange.edu.au/7-1-project-research-outcomes>.
- Gudykunst, W. B. (2003). *Cross cultural and intercultural communication*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- House, R. J., Javidan, M., Hanges, P., Dorfman, P. & Gupta, V. (Eds.). (2002). *Culture, leadership and organizations: The globe study of 62 societies*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Queensland University of Technology. (2006). *Manual of policies and procedures: Chapter C/4.3 Graduate capabilities*. Retrieved February 2010 from [http://www.mopp.qut.edu.au/C/C\\_04\\_03.jsp](http://www.mopp.qut.edu.au/C/C_04_03.jsp)
- Queensland University of Technology. (2007). *Enhancing transition at the Queensland University of Technology (ET@QUT). Final report*. Brisbane, Australia: Author.
- Transitions In Project Report 039. (2010). *The Transitions In Project - Final report*. Prepared for the Steering Committee. Queensland University of Technology. Brisbane, Australia.

*For QUT Staff Only*

Online team learning modules for students: [www.teamlearning.qut.edu.au](http://www.teamlearning.qut.edu.au)