Developing global graduate competencies through analysing intercultural interaction in teamwork: Scaffolding student reflection through pedagogical practice

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The top-ranked competency for a global graduate is "the ability to work collaboratively with teams of people from a range of backgrounds and countries" (CIHE, 2011). Yet graduates typically bring difficult memories of working in multicultural project teams at university with them into assessment centres and job interviews, and into the workplace. A few may successfully recontextualise such experiences to their advantage, for example in telling 'a story of conflict' in a job interview. This openly acknowledges the challenges inherent in teamwork. Notably, educators Oakley, Felder, Brent & Elhajj (2004) advocate for "turning student groups into effective teams" through training that starts by triggering reflection on previous bad experiences. At postgraduate level, however, students’ cynicism about groupwork is often ingrained. Especially when team allocation is outside their control (mirroring the future workplace), in resorting unreflexively to familiar patterns of engagement and interpretation, when problems occur around participation they too often attribute these to culture. This can happen even when they are studying for an advanced qualification in communication taught within a non-essentialist paradigm.

This presentation reports on an exercise devised to help such students transfer those skills honed through previously analysing workplace communication examples, and to encourage reflection on their own participation in teamwork projects. A diverse international cohort of 39 postgraduate students studying intercultural communication for business at a UK university undertook a real-life marketing task, to be done collaboratively in groups of five over several weeks. This task afforded them a vehicle to reflect individually through a discourse-analytical lens of their choice on the linguistic and interactional features of communication in those team meetings that they jointly agreed to record. The presentation discusses some examples of student perspectives on interactional style in multicultural teams, and concludes with implications for better understanding the co-construction among peers of team leadership.

Keywords: teamwork, interactional style, intercultural competencies.