

# Groupwork in multicultural classrooms: A South African case study

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**Abstract:** *Globally classrooms are becoming more multicultural and multilingual in nature and educators and learners alike are experiencing difficulty in coping with this diversity. This study started with problems that my colleagues in Science and Health Sciences were experiencing with interaction and communication among learners in their diverse classrooms. Educators were also experiencing difficulties in motivating students to work effectively in groups. The purpose of this paper was to structure and manage groupwork in the classroom not only for the benefit of learners but the educators as well, because they too have to learn to function effectively with their learners who come from diverse backgrounds, just as their learners have to communicate with them. Using an action research methodology, four phases of groupwork were conducted until a suitable structure was arrived at to the satisfaction of the participants. Valuable lessons in structuring groupwork, facilitating intercultural communication and conducting research in one's own classroom were learned from this study.*

**Keywords:** *action research; communication; culture; data triangulation; diversity; groupwork*

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## Introduction

Globally classrooms are becoming more multicultural and multilingual in nature, not only in terms of their learner population, but also in terms of their academic and administrative staff. In post apartheid South Africa where higher education institutions are regarded as the forerunners in education transformation, granting access to previously marginalized communities has resulted in institutions of learning becoming melting pots of diverse cultures and languages (see Ramrathan *et al*, 2007). Just how effectively is this diversity managed by all the players and stakeholders concerned? In this study conducted at two tertiary institutions in South Africa, the author found that the educators, learners, administrators and policy makers are still grappling with the issues relating to multiculturalism and multilingualism. This research was prompted by educators who said that *'our students do not speak to each other or to us in class'* and *'they may spend a whole year together and not get to know each other'*. Their learners complained that *'we do not understand our lecturers and they do not understand us'* and *'I have not spoken to my lecturer once and I am already seven months in the course'*. Other learners in the faculty said that *'we don't even talk to the other people in class, we are strangers to one another'*. In a country that boasts eleven official languages, one would assume that language and language related issues would be adequately catered for and that these issues would not be a problem.

Apartheid South Africa saw people of colour living in segregated communities or homelands with white people enjoying freedom, privilege, access to wealth, power, and education. Education was segregated to further the aims of the apartheid government. The House of Assembly controlled White education, Indian education was controlled by the House of Delegates, Coloured education was the responsibility of the House of Representatives and African education was controlled by the Department of Education and Training. These divisions served a particular purpose of discriminating in terms of funding, resources and facilities with White education being the most privileged. The Indians, Coloureds and then the Africans on a sliding scale were allocated money and resources for education. Dr H.F Verwoerd, then Minister of Native Affairs speaking in the House of Assembly in 1953, in order to disempower Blacks further through language and education, said that *'Bantu education must be controlled in conformity with the policy of*

the state ... Education must train and teach people in accordance with their opportunities in life' (Horrell, 1968, p.5). This meant that there was no need for blacks to be educated through the medium of English like their white counterparts as they could not aspire to higher careers or professions. When the Black majority government took over in 1994, White enrolment at universities in South Africa in 1994 accounted for 60% of the learner population. With a predominantly Black government in post-apartheid South Africa, there has been a three-fold increase in the number of African students from 40% to 61% in eleven universities (Schoole, 2006, pp.10-11).

Post-apartheid South Africa with its democratic constitution has afforded people of colour mobility, which means that they are now allowed to live where they choose, but apartheid has left a legacy of poverty which still prohibits people from living where they would wish. In the school environment, learners are accustomed to interacting mainly with people who shared similar backgrounds and/ or cultures with them because of the community that the school serves. At the tertiary institution, learners are grouped according to the programme of study chosen, which means that learners from diverse language, cultural, historical, social, economic and political backgrounds are put in one class. This diversity results in classes with different levels of language and linguistic ability and cognition, and varying cultural, home, school and educational backgrounds (*see* Jansen, 2004). This mixture of languages, cultures and levels of cognition pose tremendous challenges for the educator and for the education system at large. The educator may belong to a culture foreign to the learners. First year learners may also experience problems with adjustment and language difficulties where they have to interact with strangers in a new environment, strangers who may speak a different language or practice a different culture. What measures do the institutions put in place to facilitate interaction between the different language and cultural groups and what effect does this have on learning?

Every individual functions within a cultural context. According to Boeren (1994) each culture constructs its own 'reality', and no doubt, this construct influences the way members of a culture perceive and understand the experiences and ideas they are confronted with in life. Culture then is an essential component for one's creation of reality. The individual has to operate within the culture of the institution of

learning. This institutional culture is made up of the historical contexts of the different cultures within which individuals operate, and the influence of the environments (both at home and the institution). Davis *et al.* (2000, p.70) regard 'individual knowledge, collective knowledge and culture' as 'three-nested, self-similar levels of one phenomenon'. This, they say, explains the shift from 'the individual's efforts to shape an understanding of the world to the manners in which the world shapes the understanding of the individual'. The social and cultural background of the individual enables the individual to create their own reality, which influences their interpretations of the world. Further interactions and experiences are influenced by this reality and in turn these new experiences act to influence and shape the individual's worldview.

'Languages and cultures are linked. If we take culture to be a set of beliefs and practices which govern the life of society, then language is, on one hand, a vehicle for the expression of those beliefs, for their transmission from generation to generation and an instrument for finding out about the world. Being itself a social practice, it is on the other hand, a part of culture' (Hartley, 1982, p.101, *see also* Boeren, 1994, p.96 and Christopherson, 1973, p.22). Adey and Andrew (1990, p.44) add that language is probably the most complex problem in cross-cultural interaction. Where cultures meet, different languages cause problems (*see also* Avruch and Black, 1993, and Neuliep, 2006).

## **Demarcation of the problem**

This study started with the author's research into the incorporation of group oral assessment into the present system of assessment in tertiary Science at two universities in South Africa. When the author approached the educators regarding this research, they complained that when they used groupwork in class, they experienced problems with '*grouping students*' and '*in encouraging them to work together*'. They said that '*students do not interact with each other in class*' which makes groupwork '*very difficult*' as '*there is no teamwork*'. They added that '*some students end up doing all the work while the others just shirk their responsibilities*', '*some even bully the others into doing all the work*' and that '*they are very polarized*'. They added that '*this division interferes with teaching and learning because*

of the underlying conflicts'. Learners felt that 'our lecturers don't help the situation, they just expect us to get along'. The purpose of this paper was to structure and manage groupwork in the classroom not only for the benefit of learners but the educators as well, because they too have to learn to function effectively with their learners who come from diverse backgrounds just as their learners have to communicate with them.

## **Using an action research framework to explore groupwork**

This study used an action research framework within a constructivist approach. As the author needed to determine structure, format and administration of groupwork, it was necessary to employ techniques and tools that would provide for exploration and allow for modification along the way. Only after the system was devised and trialled, would the shortcomings become apparent. These shortcomings would then need to be addressed and the system or structure re-trialled until a good 'fit' (to borrow von Glasersfeld's, 1987, term) for the participants is acquired. After careful consideration it was decided that a tool that would allow such a cyclical method of trial/re-trial was an action research approach. As Bamber (2004, p.5) explained, 'socially useful theory and educational groupwork attempt to: make the connection between local activity and societal constraints, ensure that what is proposed is actually capable of enactment and identifies direct actions to be taken, embody the commitment to certain values in the way that things are done, and incorporate the analysis of what happens as a result of action taken into the theorising process.

The action research approach used drew on the common elements shared by the models of Calhoun (1994), Kemmis (1990), Lewin (1952), Sagor (1992), Stringer (1996) and Wells (1994) as explained by Mills (2000, p.18). The area of focus was identified, a structure was devised and employed, which was followed by the collection of data in the form of focus group discussions and observation of the group sessions themselves. The data was analyzed and interpreted and action was taken to overcome the shortcomings noted. This process was followed until a suitable structure was achieved.

## Settings and participants

Ten educators volunteered to participate in the study because as they said, *'we are really battling with all the cultures and languages here and if you can help us come to grips with our problems, we will participate in your research regarding oral assessments'*. The author readily agreed to help. The two institutions which participated in this study are situated in the city of Durban in South Africa where the home language of the majority of the population is isiZulu. Residents in Durban also speak English (which is widely used by the White, Indian and Coloured population), Afrikaans and a range of African, Indian and foreign languages to varying degrees. The sample for this study comprised all of the learners in each of their classes (*see* Sekaran, 1992, p.253). The sample was therefore made up of learners who came from the following backgrounds: 58% speak isiZulu and 11% speak isiXhosa as their home language, while 32% speak Afrikaans, Creole, Chinese, English, French, Hebrew, Hindi, Ndebele, North Sotho, South Sotho, Swazi, Tamil, Telegu or Urdu at home. Although language does not equal culture, learners chose to group themselves according to the languages they spoke, *'because that is what culture means to me. I mean that is what makes me different from other people'* explained one learner. The educator sample was made up of full-time and part-time members of staff and their participation was totally voluntary. They too classified themselves according to their language backgrounds which were listed as follows: Afrikaans, English, German, Hindi, isiZulu, isiXhosa and Italian.

There volunteered to be part of the survey 380 first and second year learners from the Faculties of Science and Health Sciences at two tertiary institutions in Durban, South Africa . This study was limited in terms of the population and the location because the author wanted to find out about perceptions and opinions of learners and educators at the institution where she teaches. As an instructor in language education, where intercultural communication is a part of the syllabus, the author is acutely aware of the problems that learners and educators experience at multicultural institutions.

Focus group discussions were conducted with learners and educators after the presentations to gather information about their experiences of the groups. These focus groups corresponded with their class groups. A focus group is a small group interview on a specific topic (Linville *et al.*, 2003, p.211). The author's use of focus groups grew out of a need to

gauge the feelings of the participants about groupwork. The best way, after all to learn about learner problems, is to ask learners themselves. Since the participants and especially the learners came from different backgrounds and proficiencies in English, the focus group method was chosen because they are based on the 'therapeutic assumption that people who share a common problem will be more willing to talk amid the security of others with the same problem' (Lederman, 1990, p.117). Suter (2000, p.2) also found that 'unlike other methods of data collection, focus group interviewing created conversational groups that, in turn, facilitated participant observation-like understandings'. Linville *et al.* (2003, p.211) agree that 'focus groups have certain advantages that other participatory methods may not. Because the learners give feedback in a group, they can build upon each other's answers ... and evaluators can gather a lot of information in a short time'. Unlike one-to-one interviews, group discussion substitutes for the directive questioning which is part of most other approaches to the task of gathering information (Brodigan, 1992, p.1) and 'the group potentially provides a safe atmosphere, a context in which the synergy can generate more than the sum of individual inputs' (Lederman, 1990, p.119).

To maximize the pool of information gathered from the discussions, a semi-structured method was used. Schlebusch (2002, p.2) describes the semi-structured interview as an interview where 'structured questions' can be 'followed up with unstructured, probing questions'. The focus group discussions were therefore made up of pre-prepared questions and sub-questions which were prompted by the responses of the participants. If the semi-structured method was not used, the discussion would have merely amounted to interviews with a group of learners. Garavan and Murphy (2001, pp.283-284) noted that semi-structured interviews can avoid researcher preconceptions embedded in questionnaire categories.

The groups were made up of a maximum of ten learners each to enable the author to talk individually with each learner, and, as Brodigan (1992, p.5) stated, 'focus groups can produce desirable results when sizes vary between 4 and 12 participants'. The duration of the group discussions fluctuated between 60 and 80 minutes depending on the number of learners in the group and also on some groups being more responsive than others. These discussions were audio-taped so that they could be translated verbatim and analysed. Analyses of the recordings

and the author's observations during the presentation sessions helped shape the next phase in the cycle of groupwork.

Ethical clearance to conduct research with the learners was gained from both the institutions before the study commenced. Written permission was also received from each of the participants to audio-tape the presentations and the focus group discussions. Participants were guaranteed anonymity in all communication and correspondence relating to the study. They were also assured that the author would be the only person listening to the recordings. Pseudonyms are therefore used in the reporting and write-up of the author's findings in this article.

Data triangulation was used to ensure validity and reliability in this study. Three main sources of data were generated in this study, viz.: transcriptions of the audio-tapes and field notes of the presentation sessions, and transcriptions of the audio-tape recorded focus group discussions with the learners and the educators. Cresswell and Miller (2000, p.126) define triangulation as 'a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study'. The principal aim of triangulation according to Massey (2004, p.2) seems to be to 'corroborate one set of findings with another; the hope is that two or more sets of findings will 'converge' on a single proposition'.

## **The study**

In compliance with the theories of action research, the procedure utilized for each phase of groupwork will be discussed individually. This is done to indicate the changes introduced to the procedure after each stage. Problems or concerns were identified from the learner and educator focus group discussions, from the participants themselves and from the author's observations.

Three phases of assessments were conducted. In each phase, the task remained constant. The Centre for the Study of Higher Education (2002) advocates that studying collaboratively directly enhances learning and that employers value the teamwork and other generic skills that groupwork may help develop. Each group was therefore assigned a section of the syllabus or topic, reading material and specific guidelines



for their presentation. Their task was to research the topic and the material provided and to present or teach that section or topic to the class. Learners had to work as a team and no individual presentations were allowed. Each group was allowed one hour for their presentations. Learners were informed that they would be assessed as a group which meant that they had to work together as a team if they wanted to 'pass' the task.

In the first phase of presentations, educators grouped the learners on the basis of their performance in the first and second semester assessments. The objective was to mix learners in terms of their ability so that the 'weaker' learners could be assisted by the learners who had achieved better results. Each group was made up of a minimum of six and a maximum of seven learners as it was felt that a smaller number would *'negate the purpose of group presentations'*. Educators stressed that groupwork teaches valuable lessons *'in teamwork, leadership and conflict resolution'* and *'our learners need to be prepared for the workplace where they have to work in teams'*. Each group therefore had to elect a team leader and that leadership had to be rotated on a weekly basis which meant that by the time of the presentation each member of the group would have the opportunity to be the team's leader.

The focus group discussions revealed that there was tension among all the groups. *'We wasted a lot of time choosing a leader every week'*, some said that *'no one wanted the job'* while others found that *'some people wanted to be leader every week'*. One learner felt insulted that *'I didn't get the chance, why, is it because my mother's tongue is not English? This does not make me stupid, I still have ideas'* to which another learner replied, *'well no-one else bothered to look up the information on the internet, and when I brought the notes, then everyone wanted a copy. It was only fair to me to be in charge because I did all the work!'* A heated discussion followed where learners accused Cathy of being 'racist' and *'thinking that she is the only one with brains'*.

A common complaint among 78.5% of the learners was that the first language speakers of English wanted to *'boss us around'* because they *'wanted to tell us how to do our parts'*. In another group, a learner confronted his peer with, *'well, the only reason we made you the group leader is because of affirmative action, you know how we have to give you guys power just because you are black. It has nothing to do with how smart you are, so don't fool yourself'*. This really started up a fierce debate

among the learners and the discussion had to be terminated after a while to allow the learners to calm down and to work through their feelings.

When the discussions resumed, some of the learners said that *'the English students read fast and we found it hard to keep up'* and *'they just made us more nervous for the presentations'*. Bensoussan and Zeidner (1989, p.45) found that learners who reported being more anxious on oral exams also appeared to be more anxious when exposed to social encounters involving different ethnic groups as well. This finding was supported in the focus group discussion, when the majority of the learners said that they preferred to be assessed with *'other blacks'*, *'other first language speakers of English'*, or *'other Zulu speakers'*. Others felt that *'it was good to be in the same group because we learned more by listening to them. It made us understand the readings better'*.

In accordance with the principles of action research, the following changes were made to accommodate the comments and criticisms after the first phase of presentations: learners were allowed to choose their own groups but, again in order to achieve the aim of integrating learners, they had to ensure that there were an equal number of males and females in their groups. Groups could choose their own leaders and rotate leadership as they deemed necessary. Educators agreed to give them *'common free time'*, that is, two double periods per week to work on their presentations. Educators also agreed to do introductory lectures in class for each of the sections assigned to learners. Regarding the *'nerves'*, they agreed, that *'students are presenting in front of their classmates and unfortunately we cannot remove the audience otherwise there would be no one to teach to'*.

It was not surprising then that in the second phase, learners chose to group themselves according to race keeping their groups homogenous. Bensoussan and Zeidner (1989) found that when learners arranged to be tested together, they were more relaxed. But problems encountered during the preparation for the second phase of presentations again centred around the composition of the groups. Female learners complained that some of their male counterparts expected *'us to do all the work'* and they then *'criticised our ideas and wanted to dominate the presentations'*, *'they also don't attend when we want to discuss our presentation. So it is very hard to work as a group'*. The females insisted that the males had *'begged to be in our group because they know they are lazy'* but *'we like to be a group of*

girls only' as they come from a patriarchal society and they felt 'awkward' and 'overshadowed' by the males. Rockhill (1994, p.245) also noted the 'male/female differences in everyday communicative practices' which are 'constructed culturally and socially'. The male learners responded that *'the girls did not want to show us what they read'*; one said *'maybe it is better for us guys to stick together because when we don't know the work, eish, they will think we are dumb and they will not go out with us'*.

A Muslim learner said that she preferred to work with other Muslim learners *'simply because we have a common understanding. The other day in class, our lecturer put us into groups. I ended up sitting next to a girl who was eating a bacon sandwich while we were working. When I told her to put her sandwich away, she said I was not the boss of the group and that I should shut up'*. Another learner interjected with, *'that was, like, so rude. She just had no respect for my culture, for our culture. She went on eating her sandwich and we felt sick!'* They continued, *'and our lecturer, he just looked at us sternly when we complained. He said that we should get on with our work and not be petty!'* Educators too were very concerned that their learners' cultures were *'a mystery'* to them. They said that they did not understand *'why our students sometimes behave the way they do'*. On hearing about the Muslim learners' experience, one educator was aghast, *'but why did they not want the other student to eat her sandwich?'* The learners then explained that Muslims do not eat pork and that they do not associate themselves with any pork or related products. 'Wow', he said, *'but I thought that they only observed the rule of eating halaal meat. What does halaal mean anyway, is it spicy food?'* A discussion then ensued on eating habits and customs of different cultural groups. It was very apparent from several of the discussions that although people may be aware of terms or jargon relating to food and cultural practices, through the media or hearsay, they need not necessarily have an understanding of the concepts.

In terms of the presentation itself, learners were pleased that the introductory lectures *'gave them a good footing'*. There were no other complaints about the structure of the presentations. Educators agreed after phase two to allow the learners to work in homogenous groups without specifying any criteria. Learners welcomed this option as they felt that *'this will allow us to shine'*.

Analyses after phase three revealed some unexpected developments. Learners (predominantly second language) said that because *'we had*

*worked with other members in our class, we got to know them a little better* and *'we could go to them for help'*. Others said *'it is not always good to work with your friends because they take advantage'* and *'they do not pitch up for discussions and preparing the work'* but *'they expect to be given parts for the presentation'*. The educators confirmed that there were many complaints about team members and *'fights'* during the preparation phase which led to *'some students being left out of the presentations'*. Educators were *'baffled'* after the third phase, *'what now?'* they asked. *'Mixing them did not work'* said one educator, and another added, *'neither did keeping them apart. What's left?'*

Having listened very carefully to all the focus group discussions after phase three, the author suggested a fourth phase where learners should be allowed to choose their own groups once again. But the educators and learners were growing weary after three phases of presentation and they felt that they had been *'defeated'*. They felt that they had *'already tried this out and it did not work'* but the author managed to convince them to try once again.

Educators were very surprised when the learners chose *'mixed groups'* for phase four. With the exception of one group that had all African learners, all the other groups were mixed (to varying degrees) in terms of race, gender and culture. This one group was mixed in terms of gender and cultural make-up.

Discussions and analyses after the fourth phase revealed that learners were able to work together *'despite some differences'*. They said that, *'we usually stick to working with people we know'* and *'we don't bother about the others in the class'*, but *'now we have met other people for the first time yet we have been in the same class for six months'*. They were surprised about the *'amount of interaction'* that had taken place over the course of preparation and the presentations themselves. The educators regarded this interaction among the learners as *'a breakthrough'*. It became evident at this stage that the learners became more engaged in the design and construction of their groups when they had to draw on their own life experiences. As McIntyre-Mills (2005, p.17, *see also* McIntyre, 2003) said, *'engaging ordinary people in the process of creating their own communities, using participatory action research and action learning that shifts the power, knowledge and control from the expert to the ordinary participant can be vital for building capacity'*. Muir (2000, p.60) agrees that the educational value of one's work *'increases*

in direct proportion to the degree of ownership, management and responsibility experienced by the students'. Their experiences with the group presentations in the previous phases taught them '*valuable lessons about the people in our class*'. Empowered and motivated, they were able to draw on these and other related experiences to construct meaning and make decisions about their tasks, which led to them becoming more involved and engaged in the task. Wilson *et al* (2004, p.5) agree that 'participation in the process of personal empowerment is cultivated through collective support and mutual aid'. Learners added that '*yes, we learned about the classroom stuff, but we also learned about each other*' and '*why Nirmala wears a black dot on her forehead*' and '*why Andile wears sheepskin on his hand*'. Educators were also grateful that they too learned about the '*different cultural practices in our class*'. As one educator said, '*this is a far cry from Science but it is mind boggling. Usually when I stand in front of my class, all I see is a sea of faces. It is very interesting to know what makes my students tick*'.

## Conclusion

Educators were grateful that they were able to gain '*different insights during each phase of the presentations*'. '*I've tried using heterogeneous groups in my class on several occasions but the results were completely different*' said one educator. To which another added, '*they obviously needed to go through the trials and tribulations of the other combinations first, and maybe that's where we fell short*'. Learners agreed that because they interacted with each other '*so much*' they '*got to know one another a little better*'. One learner said that '*if we work in groups more often, we can learn more about each other*' to which another added '*and not just about the subject*'. The assessors too were grateful for '*lessons learned about our students*'. As one assessor said, '*I have interacted with my students more over this short period of the presentations than I have ever done before*'.

The action research approach used led to improved relationships among the participants in the study. Because they had worked together over a period of time, each time toward a common goal, they were actually synchronising their efforts '*unaware of the dynamics at play*'. They were getting to know each other and even though there were many arguments and disagreements, in each phase of the presentations and

the discussions that ensued, they learned more about each other.

A valuable lesson in classroom research was also learned from this study. The educators were grateful to learn that they can use action research to seek answers or solutions to problem situations in their own classrooms. Used in this way, action research can become an invaluable tool for every educator. Having worked with their learners over four phases of presentations, educators agreed that they could use action research and groupwork in different combinations to teach and assess learners, and to promote communication and intercultural harmony.

Multiculturalism and multilingualism needs to be promoted as a sense of national pride and togetherness in our learners, so that they carry this forth into their personal lives and into the working environment. Silverlock (2000, p.72) agrees that introducing a real-life element makes education more attractive and purposeful to students than traditional classroom work. To this end educators need to encourage active integration and assimilation into the multilingual and multicultural ethos which defines their institutions. Groupwork can be used as a valuable tool in achieving this aim. Not only will learners be informed about sections of their syllabus, but they will also learn about each other. It would be very useful for educators who use groupwork to track the progress of learners while at the institution and into the workplace to determine what impact such assimilation has on their socialisation and their success.

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