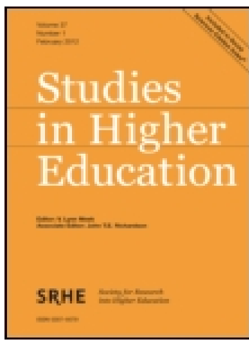

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Participative pedagogies, group work and the international classroom: an account of students' and tutors' experiences

Carole Jane Elliott[a]* and Michael Reynolds[b]

[a]*Business School, University of Hull, Hull, UK;* [b]*Management Learning and Leadership, Management School, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK*

The focus of the paper is to consider the ways in which the cultural complexity inherent in multinational student groups is thrown into relief when participative methods are used. Participative approaches are a means of encouraging students to learn from each other's ideas and experience and, from a critical perspective, as supporting democratic values. The authors draw on their reflections of working with multinational student groups and on former students' projects in which they examined their own and fellow students' learning experiences. Theoretical frameworks which illustrate contrasting perspectives are considered for their potential contribution to our understanding of the sociopolitical processes involved in the participative, multinational classroom, and to supporting students and tutors in working with such complexities.

Keywords: multinational classroom; participative pedagogies; critical perspectives; group work; management students

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Introduction

> I mean, everyone's different but some people were too different. (a student)

Recent years have seen a growing interest in international students' experiences of higher education in English-speaking settings. In the UK at least, this focus seems to run in parallel with the expansion in numbers of international students, especially at postgraduate level. The aim of this paper is to consider in particular the opportunities and problems emerging from participative learning approaches, such as group work, within international student groups. Group work plays a major part in management education programmes for quite different reasons: as a way of dealing with an increasing student–staff ratio or as a way of developing social skills which will be essential in future professional careers. Pedagogically, working in groups has long been thought of as a means of enhancing students' sense of involvement and interest, and as an approach which encourages students to learn from each other's ideas and experience. These rationales are further reinforced from a critical perspective in which participative pedagogies are seen as supporting democratic values.

The focus of this paper is to consider the ways in which the cultural complexity inherent in international student groups is thrown into relief when participative

*Corresponding author. Email: c.j.elliott@hull.ac.uk

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methods, with their varied and often unpredictable social dynamics, are introduced. The requirement for master's level students to become more self-directed in their learning, to work in groups, to be more questioning in their approach and critical of the knowledge they encounter, can represent a 'fairly frightening and unfamiliar scenario for many' (Ridley 2004, 95). Adding a further facet to this area of inquiry, participative approaches, such as group work, are often considered appropriate as methods that encourage students to address issues emerging from difference and diversity.

Our paper has two objectives. First, it seeks to contribute to our understanding of the sociopolitical processes generated and experienced in the international classroom, particularly when employing group work. We will draw on our own reflections of working with international student groups and on former students' projects in which they examined their own and fellow students' experiences of group work. Second, the paper explores ideas which may be necessary in supporting students and tutors in understanding and working with group processes. This has relevance for future work in organisations. As Vince (1996) points out 'all educational contexts represent and replicate, within their own internal processes, external social power relations' (124). Episodes redolent with power and equality, issues that occur within the management education classroom, might therefore be examined in respect of their parallels and contiguity with broader social systems (Elliott and Turnbull 2005).

Following a review of the literature, the paper briefly describes the MA in Human Resource Development (HRD) and Consulting at Lancaster before presenting some of the ways students have experienced this programme, both generally, and in relation to being involved in group work. Finally, in discussion we draw on Archer and Francis's (2005) framework as a way of highlighting different perspectives applied by researchers in this field and as a means of making sense of the complex dynamics of the international classroom.

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Working in groups: studies of international students' experience

In this section we will note the range of aspects of international students' experience covered in the literature, and of equal interest, note the different perspectives which authors draw on in making sense of them. To date, research has included observations of the difficulties of studying in a second language (e.g. Ledwith and Seymour 2001); international students' academic performance (e.g. Morrison et al. 2005); their experience of the university environment as a whole (e.g. Asmar 2005); and contrasting stances towards the degree of interaction between tutors and students and among peers (Butcher and McGrath 2004; Maxwell et al. 2000). An earlier study, and closer to the focus of this paper, the Delors Commission (1998), warned that Western education systems could potentially create problems by bringing people from different groups together in a context of competitive stress. The implication for pedagogic approaches arising from this observation was that contact between various groups should be managed 'in an egalitarian setting' where 'common aims and projects are pursued' (97). Furthermore, some have pointed out that students' difficulties in understanding the pedagogies they encounter are worse if tutors have not taught outside their own national context, making it more difficult for them to see their own society from an outsider's perspective (Ledwith and Seymour 2001; Haigh 2002; Baker and Clark 2010).

While reviewing these studies, we noted with particular interest the different perspectives applied. Some authors take a strictly psychological position in understanding

such situations: for example Richards (1997) whose emphasis is on the impact of stereotypes; and within the context of management education, Griffiths, Winstanley, and Gabriel (2005) propose a construct of 'learning shock' as a way of understanding students' responses of frustration, confusion and anxiety when faced with unfamiliar pedagogical approaches. Valiente (2008) compares Western learning theory and Confucian principles in an attempt to increase academics' awareness of international students' backgrounds, proposing that teachers might employ theories of cross-cultural communication to complement learning styles as a means of understanding international students' experience.

From a rather different perspective, Warwick (2006) points out that isolation is reinforced in some UK universities through a process of institutionalised marginality when academics and administrators settle for a picture of overseas students as 'guests' or 'sojourners', reflecting this stereotype through reduced expectations and the provision of separate accommodation. In a similar vein, Morrison et al. (2005) have noted the literature's tendency to problematise international students, with many studies based on the assumption that these students lack the necessary skills and frameworks to succeed academically. Sulkowski and Deakin (2009) also place the emphasis on institutional processes rather than personal, psychological factors, in drawing attention to the limitations of assuming positive correlations between culture and learning approaches. They propose that if intending to eliminate 'segregation and prejudice' universities should place greater emphasis on 'managing diversity rather than attempt to respond to the particularities of individual cultural groups within the student body' (163).

Participative pedagogies, group work and the international classroom

From a review of the literature it would seem that the topic of group work in intercultural settings lends itself to questions as to what are the benefits and problems, and what seem to be useful ways to respond to or anticipate difficulties encountered by students who take part? As with the previous section, we are interested in the different perspectives adopted by authors – a theme we will develop in discussion later.

Lending weight to the Delors Commission's (1998) concern about the impact competitive aspects of the educational context can have on participants, when less hierarchical and participative approaches such as group work are introduced into the course design, students can experience anxiety about its significance for their individual grades. Ledwith and Seymour (2001) found that while international students reported that the best groups were multicultural, students with English as a first language preferred working in groups with other native English speakers and that 'regardless of culture, students consistently thought that their individual assessments better reflected their ability than their group work did' (1229). However when De Vita (2002) explored the belief among home (UK) students that their grades would suffer if they were to take part in 'multicultural' group work – seen in previous studies as a major factor in explaining students' reluctance to work in mixed nationality groups – the research suggested that working in mixed groups had a positive influence on the grades of *all* students.

Additional benefits are highlighted by Watson, Johnson, and Zgourides (2002) in their study of ethnically diverse learning groups. These authors emphasise the importance of such groups as preparation for work where diversity is an increasing factor. Significantly, their research echoes contemporary perspectives on leadership as a

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social process rather than an individual characteristic, with emergent leadership being associated with higher team performance than was the case with ethnically homogenous groups. In the intervening years since these studies there seems to have been an increasingly positive attitude to cross-cultural group work in spite of the problems which students can sometimes encounter in them (Montgomery 2009).

Sweeney, Weaven, and Herington (2008) however, observe that in spite of extensive literature, the benefits of multicultural group work in performance and in the development of group work skills were unclear. Their study, involving international and domestic postgraduate and undergraduate marketing students, did confirm that group work facilitates the development of interpersonal skills, cross-cultural collaboration and higher-level learning, but that this link was conditional on students being *prepared* for multicultural group work, and on being coached during and debriefed after – an observation we will return to later in this section.

> Although not originally anticipated, group work appears to have the potential of providing an altruistic benefit in fostering collaborative exchange relationships between students from different cultures and backgrounds, and this attitudinal shift may signify likely improvements in future student performance within the workplace. (129)

But whatever the reasons for encouraging students to work in international groups the approach is clearly not without its difficulties. As Livingstone and Lynch (2002) concluded in their 'reflections', group work can be a 'torrid business' but one which mirrors the experience of work life (215). Currie (2007), in his study of an international MBA, notes that it was based on an 'Anglo-American' pedagogy involving critique and argument in the lecture theatre with which Chinese students, especially at first, were uncomfortable. Currie makes the point that as educators we need to be sensitive to the different educational backgrounds international students come from, valuing these differences rather than expecting students to adapt, and to be aware of the disadvantage this puts them under. Of particular relevance to our paper, Currie notes that a more participative pedagogy 'moves dependency of a learner away from the management teacher and shifts responsibility for learning to the learner', and is likely to result in 'considerable anxiety' (2007, 549). But rather than fall into the trap of being overly protective of students' discomforts on encountering unfamiliar pedagogies, Currie reminds us that disruption to a certain degree can facilitate learning – as it does for students of any nationality. It is also important to question our assumptions about different educational experience, for as Jin and Cortazzi (1998) point out, Chinese teachers employ a variety of processes to encourage classroom interaction, 'which might easily be overlooked by Western observers' (739).

In their graphic account of 'synergies and dysfunctions' in mixed nationality learning groups, Gabriel and Griffiths (2008) found that although MBA students recognised the value in this approach for their future experience as international managers, their experience had not always been easy because of the complex dynamics of group work manifested in inequalities of power or 'contribution', being able to speak or be listened to, insensitivity, misconceptions and consequent problems of identity. Robinson's account (2006) of intercultural group work from case studies of MBA programmes in two universities is from a similarly sociopolitical perspective. The students saw benefits in group work but Robinson's analysis revealed that this was 'a contentious and an often uncomfortable experience' for them (6).

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> Overcoming or ‘transcending’ difference did not emerge significantly as a benefit of group working. Instead there was much more emphasis on ‘dealing with’ difference than on ‘understanding’ and celebrating difference. Having the skills for ‘dealing with difference’ in the workplace was seen as very important and in a similar category to dealing with ‘difficult’ people. (7)

What can be done?

From their survey of research findings on diversity in membership of learning groups Schullery and Schullery (2006) conclude, as do Sweeney et al. (2008), that there is no straightforward answer to whether mixed groups are an advantage. But be that as it may, given the possible benefits reported by students and teachers it would seem that the focus should be on how to strengthen the opportunity for a beneficial experience. Indeed, it could be that negative experiences indicate inadequate preparation or facilitation rather an intrinsic limitation of the method. In support of this position, while acknowledging the difficulties of mixed group work Robinson (2006) stresses the importance of integrating critical reflection and dialogue so as to promote understandings of differences rather than to ignore them. As Gabriel and Griffiths (2008) point out:

> Self-directed and action learning may offer students enormous insights into managing themselves and managing others, but these are by no means easy, comfortable experiences. We have become increasingly aware of the great amounts of support and guidance that these forms of learning require. (517)

Whatever misgivings expressed by students and lecturers, the potential benefits of intercultural group work have led some authors to suggest ways to make attaining them more likely, for example: by valuing students’ contexts Sharan (2010); and by introducing relevant theory and facilitation exercises to enable students understand and work with group processes (Piercy and Caldwell 2010; Woods, Barker, and Hibbins 2011). The emphasis on thinking through the kind of preparation that students and lecturers need if they are to get the best out of working in mixed-nationality groups is echoed by the proposals of Baker and Clark (2010). Based on their research with students and lecturers taking part in group work in an intercultural setting, Baker and Clark place emphasis on preparation and on opportunities for students to reflect on their experience. Their respondents clearly found that working in groups improved cross-cultural understanding but lecturers felt they were inadequately prepared for participative work. Lecturers and students in this study would have liked more training in working with conflict and the consequences of cultural difference.

What do our students say and what is our experience of all this?

The programme

For nearly two decades we have developed a one-year, full-time MA in Human Resource Development (HRD) for a student group of between 15 and 35 in number which has attracted increasingly numbers of international students. There is a strong emphasis on activities based on group exercises as a means of illustrating the conceptual content of the programme, on consulting projects and some sessions are designed and run by small groups for the rest of the class. Assessed work draws on discussions in group tutorials, and students are encouraged to read and comment on each other’s proposals in the tutorial meetings. This pedagogy is unfamiliar to most of the students, welcomed by

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some, and irksome to others. The interaction between students, and between students and lecturers, in making choices and decisions and being asked to work together within collaborative arrangements involves the students in processes which are more varied than in more didactic settings. A range of differences can be surfaced – whether these become explicit or whether they remain hidden as part of each student's experience. As well as structural differences of gender, age and ethnicity, there are preferences, comforts and discomforts as to working methods or working relationships. These preferences may have to be negotiated and may in turn be expressions of different cultural or educational experience (Reynolds and Trehan 2003).

As tutors we have had to reflect on our practice and on the range of interpretive ideas we bring in support of our own and students' developing understanding of the complex dynamics which evolve. And each year there are students who may use assignments – some involving fieldwork – as a way of making sense of their individual experience of working in groups. For some this is a way of coming to terms intellectually and emotionally with their experience of group work, and for others it provides a way of articulating misgivings via a critique of the pedagogy. This work is a source of insight to us as tutors because much of it would otherwise be hidden from our awareness, and so with the students' permission, in writing this paper we have drawn on accounts from their projects. This material includes extracts from their field research, usually from interviews with classmates, and their reflections on this data. The context of the material is a year in which there were 35 students on the programme: from China, Brazil, Ghana, India, Jamaica, India, Taiwan, Thailand, the UK and other European countries. The largest subgroup (of 13 students) was from China and there were 28 women and 9 men – not a surprising ratio within this professional context. We have drawn on data collected by five students in interviewing their classmates.[1] From students' ideas and accounts of experience of group work it is clear that our pedagogy can create problems for students regardless of nationality and educational history, and equally clear that there are important ways in which the additional dimension of national and cultural differences distinctively adds to this complexity.

Who to work with: choice and control

A fundamental aspect of group work is group membership and the degree of discretion which students have over choosing who they work with. These choices over membership and selection are some of the ways in which the distribution of power and control within the programme are reflected. As tutors, our dilemma is that on the one hand we wish to encourage students to take responsibility for such decisions, but on the other hand to exert control in the interests of students working with as many of their colleagues as possible through the year. Some students experience a similar dilemma as to whether to choose to work with friends, or to expand their experience by working with people they do not know well, as the following extracts from student interviews illustrate:

> The whole idea of predetermined groups scares me. I hate it – that happened at the start of the course. For one, it didn't really happen. Although we were assigned numbers … more often than not I just jumped in a group with someone I knew and liked.

> I work with my friends, and people that I have worked with before. I think that I have worked with my [tutorial groups] a lot. It was the only way at the start of the year, you knew something at least about these people. That was hard because you wanted to know more about other people, and you could do that by working with them. But then

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> they might not be good to work with, and you're stuck with them. I stayed with the same group, and then learnt more about others.

> The Chinese stick to the Chinese, the Greeks to the Greeks. It's easier that way. I'm not saying this happens all the time, there are the odd exceptions, but yes – people work with their own.

Comfort in the company of people known and liked has been shown by Cho and colleagues (2007) in a networked learning environment as supportive of learning early in a course but ultimately, not as useful as choosing less well-known companions. This was not the only reason for students preferring to exercise choice if given the opportunity. Perceived differences in commitment to the task were understandably salient for students working on group assignments and the concern to achieve good grades was the deciding factor for some:

> I suppose it's because I would like to control who goes into the groups I work in. I wouldn't like to just work with anybody, there are people on the course that I would try not to work with because I don't think they share my view towards work. I expect people to work hard all the time, and I think there are others who only put effort into assessed work that counts towards their final grade.

> I think it's more important to know about their academic life, how they work, what tasks they enjoy, how much effort they put in, and how clever they are – which is important on this course because some people want a distinction.

These extracts not only illustrate criteria for deciding who to work with but imply possible intentions for controlling group behaviour thereafter.

Difference, similarity and the international dimension

In describing their experience of the programme, students were conscious that differences could be both a positive and a negative factor for some, and a way of resolving this dilemma was to mix with others who were different in some way, but not for group tasks which were assessed. The basis of difference was not limited to nationality, but the more assessment became the issue the more language became a deciding factor. The following extracts illustrate a range of ways in which difference was experienced and responded to. This range of responses itself became a 'difference' students and tutors had to work with:

> This is the good thing that [the programme] brings. There are so many people on the course that each is different, bringing different ideas and opinions to the group. I think everyone is very good on the course at understanding everyone, and we live happily together.

> I think that it might be something to do with accepting everyone for who they are, which is really important on our course with the amount of differing people, and we are all different…. I suppose you could call that learning from difference, learning about other people and understanding how they do things.

> Language is important. I need to be able to communicate with people, and make sure that what I'm saying is being understood. I've made jokes before that people haven't got, and half way through the course I was getting annoyed with translating things for people. They have to speak English well.

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In a later section we will explore different perspectives open to us in making sense of these accounts. But equally, it is clear that students themselves differ in the extent to which they feel able to accept difference or come to resent it.

Disparities in contribution and dominance

The difference between how outspoken some students seem able to be and in contrast how silent others are, is more complex than can be explained by fluency in language alone. It is one of the ways students mark difference and is often perceived and referred to as having a cultural basis as well as being expressed as an individual's 'contribution':

> There are people who like to sit quietly and contemplate what they have learnt and what has been said, and there are individuals who are more vocal and prefer to discuss what they have learnt. I think that there are two main groups of people on this course, those who throw themselves into every aspect of the group and participate a lot in terms of discussion and the group exercises, and then the others who do not.

Students taking part in the projects we have drawn on were aware of differences of language, religion and attitudes to work with the programme. Some also made the connection between apparent ability, as indicated by grades, and confidence in class – as a UK student explains:

> There's always a notable difference there, the people who have done well, those who haven't, and even those who are annoyed about their mark. I think that that rests with their confidence and volume. There are some people on the course who I have never heard speak in class, and I think that this marks them as being different, or different compared to myself anyway.

On the other hand, when those referred to as 'some people' are invited to speak for themselves when interviewed for students' research projects, the experience of being silent in class and especially in group work is that of being dominated. As a Chinese student reported:

> When you kept quiet in a group you felt intense stress…. I became nervous and totally lost confidence in myself…. Especially when someone in the group tends to dominate, I am afraid to speak out.

Silence and its significance

Yuyu Chen, postgraduate student on the MA, researched and wrote one of her assignments on the significance of silence in group work. In applying Rigg and Trehan's work (1999) in interpreting silence as acceptance or resistance, Yuyu Chen wrote:

> It means the student keeps silent just to show his resistance of either the way the groupwork is going or the ideas some other members have put out. It is really dangerous for the progression of the whole group, for participation is essential to groupwork. The reasons for it vary … but obviously resistance is not good for the groupwork and the development of the whole group.

Yuyu Chen was conscious of the importance of language proficiency and that a student less confident in this regard might be silent in the meetings but prefer to circulate ideas

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on paper outside them. As a Chinese student there were aspects of this observation which were resonant, not least the value attached to silence in her own culture, as witnessed by a proverb, which ironically, echoes our own metaphor of 'empty vessels'.

> *Guard your mouth as though it were a vase, and guard your thoughts as you would a city wall.*

Yuyu saw this as a significant influence on Chinese students who seemed reluctant to speak, whether in large or small learning groups. Drawing on research literature she cites respect for authority as the underlying factor in Chinese students' apparent reticence in group work:

> This high respect for authority may cause a Chinese student to consider whether he could challenge a theory. And of course, they usually have no such kind of experience of challenging authority or giving different opinions from others. To avoid criticism, ridicule, rejection, or punishment (simply for having different opinions), and to win approval, acceptance or appreciation, they (the Chinese students) need to make sure whether or not their opinions, before being prematurely disclosed, are safely the same as those of others.

More than other methods are likely to, group work exposes each student to the possible impression that they either have no ideas worth contributing or that they are reluctant to do so. Lucy Shi Fan, another student in the same year, included in an essay on 'silence' extracts from her journal which demonstrate the link between group work, silence and its consequences in undermining the confidence of the student. Early in the programme Lucy's journal records her discomfort in group tasks on topics which were new to her although familiar to others – her English being flawless:

> I was amazed and shocked with what was expected of us with no content, no structure…. However groupwork was proved to be even more stressful … my silence upset my groupmates, for whom I was helpless, the only thing I could do was quietly prepare what was requested – drawing posters, doing the photocopying, doing my part in the role-play, and pretend that nothing happened.

Lucy also noted the irony of Chinese students finding difficulty with a pedagogy based on collective values central to their cultural tradition. Some weeks later, her journal entry graphically describes the experience of becoming anxious and marginal within the group activities which she was aware others might superficially interpret as unwillingness to join in.

Discussion

We have written this paper on the basis of our experience of working with a participative pedagogy – one which relies on group work in various forms – with classes of postgraduate students that have become increasingly international. We have been able to illustrate our description and discussion of the programme from student accounts written with the intention of reflecting on their own and others' experience of the programme. Our questions as researchers and teachers concern implications of introducing a participative pedagogy to groups of students who are different in gender, age, experience, and, in more recent years, in national and cultural context. How should we approach achieving understanding of the complex dynamics in which students and

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tutors are involved? What explanatory ideas are appropriate? In this section we will use the framework developed by Archer and Francis (2005) to begin to explore these questions.

Archer and Francis, in their study of educational policy distinguish three contrasting discourses in relation to ethnic diversity: compensatory; multicultural; and anti-racist – which we re-name more broadly as 'critical'. Their framework helps to distinguish between perspectives implicit in research accounts such as those reviewed earlier in the paper, and in positioning our own approach to working with international student groups. In applying this framework we are interested in asking whether, for example, a *compensatory* perspective would lead us to assume that certain groups of students that we think are unlikely to challenge native speakers in large group settings need protecting from the discomforts this would incur. If observing conflict between students from different nations or cultures, does a *multi-cultural* perspective necessarily lead us to subjugate cultural differences in the interests of establishing a democratic milieu? Would a critical perspective be more likely to illuminate the ways cultural differences are reflected in the exercise of power within participative pedagogies, including group work?

Applying critical perspectives to students' experience of group work

How we as tutors choose to intervene in our work with students in a participative course design will depend in part upon our pedagogical and ideological positions. From a critical perspective attempts to understand students' experiences should take account of intersections between power, gender and cultural context, and the interrelationship between the organisation of tutor-initiated activities as a manifestation of institutional power – particularly in the context of assessment – and its emotional consequences. In an earlier section quotations from students on our own programme illustrated the difficulty experienced by some in taking part and how this can be interpreted as a reluctance to speak in public or lack of interest in the topic. These explanations might prove simplistic; as Currie (2007) points out, Chinese students for example 'cope with fear, anxiety and confusion through remaining silent … and are mortified by the overt conflict during syndicate working' (549). Similarly Cathcart, Dixon-Dawson, and Hall (2006) reported on the tendency for UK students to fall back on the notion of 'social loafing' when South-East Asian students appear to be less prepared to 'pull their weight'. But 'pulling weight' often meant joining in aggressively with heated discussions, whereas South-East Asian students were more inclined to support 'weaker' group members than drive them to the margins (19).

Examining the ideas we use to inform our own and students' understanding of these issues is essential. Multicultural or compensatory perspectives are likely to be reinforced if we seek to interpret complex dynamics in the classroom through de-politicised or individualistic concepts. In our own field of management education, the literature on group behaviour still leans predominantly towards ways of explaining group processes from a psychological perspective rather than one which acknowledges their social, political dynamics. Perspectives are needed which enable tutors and students to identify and understand how different cultural contexts intersect with processes of power, authority and difference which are intrinsic to the dynamics of group activities (see for example Gabriel and Griffiths 2008 or Robinson 2006, both cited above).

There are other examples in the literature which describe ways of working with social and cultural processes involved in group work without resorting to multicultural or

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compensatory discourses. Singh (2010), for example, argues for the 'pedagogical potential of teacher ignorance' (31) as a starting point when working with international students, proposing that their 'epistemic ignorance' of Western educational practices coupled with Western educators' ignorance of their students' intellectual and cultural heritages offers the potential for pedagogical innovation. Singh (2010) cites the example of medical education, which has developed curricula and pedagogies that are intended, constructively, to 'better understand, tolerate and use certain kinds of ignorance' (42). Sliwa and Grandy (2006), in their interview-based study of Chinese students' experience of education in the North of England asked students about their experience of induction into an unfamiliar educational system, differences between this and the system they had been used to, and any difficulties they may have experienced. One of the points they make is to be skeptical of depictions in the research literature of cultures 'as definable, distinct and measurable entities that can be acquired' which 'fail to fully capture the complexity of cultural experiences as revealed by the individuals in this study' (2006, 20). In a further example of applying a critical perspective, Gabriel and Griffiths (2008) adopt the notion of 'othering' to describe processes of polarisation amongst participants within dysfunctional international learning groups on a postgraduate management programme. Students categorised as 'non-native speakers' included a Chinese-Canadian student whose first language was English, and conversely, a Kazakh student for whom English was his fourth language was considered a native speaker. Gabriel and Griffiths conclude that 'native speakers and non-native speakers are *constructions* with little relation to any objective qualities' (509; emphasis in original).

A principle which underlies participative approaches is that learning should be available to all students not some subgroup. Applying critical perspectives in order to make sense of the dynamics of the international classroom should be in the interests of realising this principle. It follows that as well as applying such perspectives we should perhaps be explicit about our reasons for introducing them and for encouraging students to apply them in making sense of their experience. De Vita (2000) for example advocates group assignments in which students are expected to draw on each other's cultural contexts. Cathcart, Dixon-Dawson, and Hall (2006) suggest that students are asked to write up their experiences of group work drawing on explanatory concepts which reflect a critical perspective of some kind. Peelo and Luxon (2007) propose that tutors engage students in the deconstruction of the educational philosophy in which they are engaged: this in sharp contrast with approaches which involve the 'renunciation of original culture norms and their replacement by the norms of the host culture' (Brown 2007, 245).

All this is not to lose sight of the likelihood that as 'participative' pedagogues we are imposing our own values and beliefs on the classroom. Reflexively, the language of critique can be collectively applied to the pedagogy and to the assumptions about roles and relationships it brings with it. As a profession we have demonstrated considerable creativity in designing experiential and group-based learning activities. Sometimes, this skill appears to outstrip our ability to make sense of the social processes which result, whereas these, more critical interpretations, do justice to a level of complexity often hidden from us as tutors in taking account of the dynamics of power, privilege and disadvantage. Easier said than done. To challenge the dominant subgroups regarding their lack of tolerance towards individuals from different ethnic backgrounds might require us as tutors to take a stance that assumes an explicit position of power – a position which will be in tension with the less hierarchical values enshrined in our participative pedagogy.

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Conclusions and implications for practice

Informed by students' accounts of their experience of participative pedagogy in an international programme, we have found Archer and Francis's (2005) framework of value in distinguishing between discourses implicit in both theory and practice. We have been able to cite authors who are working from a critical perspective and who suggest practical measures which are consistent with this perspective. From these sources we are particularly struck by the value of preparing students and tutors for group work through readings and discussion. This might redress the imbalance in group work experience between students of different cultures noted by Turner (2009). Equally important is for groups to have the benefit of informed reflection during and after the event. It is to these practical measures that we hope our paper will contribute. We believe that, as when working with participative pedagogies in any context, as educators we should have some framework for making sense of the complex dynamics generated within the classroom and its institutional context.

Questions remain. We have asserted that in the international classroom the social and political dynamics are more complex. But while this might be true, it does not necessarily mean that the salient processes are intercultural. International groups of students, with or without significant work experience, can for example exhibit uneven patterns of 'contribution' to discussions in ways which seem to have more to do with gender than with differences in nationality. Of course, their experience and interpretation of such dynamics are likely to be influenced by cultural consciousness. Furthermore, while it seems consistent that working from a critical perspective should be reflected in a pedagogy based on participative principles, this is likely to mean that a central dynamic is the tutors' power to impose their choice of pedagogy on the student group.

As a way of constructively engaging with these dynamics and the complex ways in which various factors (gender, experience, ethnicity, age and so on) intersect, and as the means of strengthening the vocabulary of ideas which we and they can draw on in making sense of these complexities, we have introduced students to frameworks which aim to illuminate 'difference' from a critical perspective. The aim has been to offer ideas which might support students in making sense of their own experience of 'difference' of any kind within the classroom or in the wider context of the university. However, acceptance of these well-intentioned interventions cannot be taken for granted. In the interests of harmony, students may prefer to have differences overlooked rather than highlighted. To draw again on Archer and Francis's framework, students' wishes to assert a multicultural discourse in spite of the tutors' best efforts to introduce a more critical ethos, are understandable if illustrative of the need for some overarching explanatory framework. As Vince points out:

> Learning groups attempt to level differences of seniority, experience and desire for learning, as well as differences of gender, race and class to ensure that they are not seen as significant within learning space. The denial of difference is a political strategy to minimise antagonism and conflict. (2011, 337)

Tutors' interventions and students' responses to them are just as much a part of the dynamics of the participative classroom as the other aspects illustrated in the student material we featured earlier in the paper. This underlines the point we made earlier, that as tutors working with international student groups, we should be prepared to introduce explanatory frameworks which are capable of developing understanding of the

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complex processes we set in motion. However strongly we believe we can argue the rationale for a participative element in postgraduate education, we would do well to take account of our students' experiences of how difficult that can be for them.

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