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Reflecting on the 'International Group Working Experience': a study of two MBA programmes

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Abstract

This study explores students' experiences of group working in an internationalising MBA context using the research perspectives of postcolonialism (Spivak 1993; Prasad 2003) and critical management education (Reynolds 1997, 1999; Currie & Knights 2003). Data are drawn from interviews with 30 full-time MBA students at two leading UK business schools. Students' perceived gains from the international group working experience are identified, as are areas of concern, such as practices of exclusion and domination that occur in the group working process and a reluctance to talk about and reflect on their group work experiences, are identified. By comparing international group working experiences at the two case-study institutions helpful practices concerning organisation of group work and induction are identified. The paper considers ways in which group work could be made more inclusive and how students can make the most of being in an international environment. Recommendations are made for future course design, including more induction focusing on modes of participation and cultural differences, specific induction to group working including the examination of language and behaviours and the use of critical dialogue and debriefing in making sense of the experience. The paper concludes that assumptions around the benefits of group working need re-visiting within the international context and training is needed of students and staff alike on how to make group work a more beneficial and enjoyable experience for all concerned.

Key words: group work, internationalisation, MBA education, postcolonialism, critical management education.

Introduction

Since the mid 1990s the internationalisation agenda has been in full swing in UK universities (Scott 1998; Callan 1998; De Vita & Case 2003) and more specifically in UK business schools (Raimond & Halliburton 1995; Case & Selvester 2000). The internationalisation of formal management education has two distinct parts: a) the internationalisation of the student body (Brunch & Barty 1998) and b) making the courses and institutional structures more international (De Vita 2001; Case & Selvester 2000; De Vita & Case 2003).

The trend towards internationalisation is seen quite markedly in both institutional and student conceptions of full-time MBA education. It is assumed that students now expect management education that equips them to manage internationally as well as at home (Raimond & Halliburton 1995). The MBA is increasingly seen as an international qualification (Williams 2002; Stern 2002) and business schools increasingly use the internationalisation of the MBA as a selling point, offering students the opportunities to develop wider international knowledge, hone international group working skills in preparation for international careers and build international networks for future support (Howe & Martin 1998; Tomlinson & Egan 2002).

The implications of internationalisation on the whole design of the existing MBA, from educational philosophy to content, forms of teaching and pedagogic input and limitations and obstacles to these process are being discussed (see for example Tomlinson and Egan 2002; Currie 2005; Qi 2005; Robinson 2005*a*, Griffiths, Gabriel & Winstanley 2005). Such issues could also be placed within wider concerns about the role and future of the MBA. There has for some time been criticism of the MBA for being: *neo-imperialist* (Sturdy & Gabriel 2000), *ethnocentric* (Mellahi 2000; Currie & Knights 2003), *macho* (Sinclair 1995), *excessively functionalistic* (Latham, Latham & Whyte 2004), for *not meeting the needs of practising managers* (Mintzberg & Gosling 2002) and *not catering for human diversity* (Costea 1999; 2000). Many of these criticisms are brought together in *Managers not MBAs* (Mintzberg 2004) and by a forthcoming special issue of the journal *Management Learning* (2007). Such work is set within the context of a questioning of the (changing) role of business schools in the 21st Century and of their relationship to management practice (Grey & Mitev 1995; French & Grey 1996; Grey 2002, 2004; Wankel & DeFillipi 2002; Antonacopoulou 2002).

This current paper adds to these discussions by exploring, through the results of empirical research, the tensions between different groups of students and between students and the institutions themselves, which may arise through processes of internationalisation. These tensions are explored through a study of students' experiences of group work as an example of one pedagogic method deeply embedded in MBA curricula. This paper addresses three questions:

❖ What different experiences do students have of 'international' group working?

❖ How can these experiences be understood and what issues and tensions are emerging?

❖ In what ways could group work be made more inclusive?

By drawing on theories of postcolonialism (Spivak 1993; Lorbiecki & Jack 2002; Prasad 2003) and critical management education (Reynolds 1997, 1999; Currie & Knights 2003), issues of how representation and difference relate to the present structure of the MBA are considered. Recommendations are made as to how course design and best practice can enhance the international learning nature of such programmes.

The study and methodological strategy

Using a two-site case study approach (Yin 1994; Stake 1995, 2000), the primary focus of this study is the perceptions of the participants of the international group work experience; however other 'case study' data, such as course documentation, curricula and testimonies of lecturers and course administrators were also drawn upon to inform the analysis. Case study approaches have been widely used in education research (Bassey 1999; Merriam 1998), focusing for example on a class, a course or an individual student. They are useful tools for educational practitioners in that they build 'a picture to help inform our practice or to see unexplored details of a case' (Creswell 1998, *p.*95).

The study draws on transcripts from 30 in-depth interviews with full-time MBA students from two leading business schools, the first from a Northern U.K. campus university (University One) and the other from a Southern U.K. metropolitan university college (University Two). The composition of the two cohorts was different: at University One 15% of students were British, compared with 41% at University Two. University One had nearly 40% of mainland Chinese students whereas University Two had less than 20%. At University Two there were nearly 40 different nationalities on the course (140+cohort) and at University One there were around 20 nationalities (70+ cohort). The university profiles are summarised in the following table.

Data were analysed by a combination of critical hermeneutics (Thompson 1981) and narrative content theme analysis. The latter was conducted across the whole data set identifying common themes, processes

	UNI 1	UNI 2
Approx. no. of cohort	75	140
Average age	30	30
Approx. number of nationalities	23	37
Largest national group	Chinese	British
Approx. number of British students	9	40
Minimum work experience required	3 years	5 years

Table 1: Profiles of the full-time MBA for the two institutions

and challenges and a more in-depth hermeneutic narrative analysis (Ricoeur 1971; 1981) was conducted on selected transcripts which considered the views presented through the interviews and was used to bring to the surface significant differences and similarities between individual circumstances (see also Robinson 2005*b*). This combined methodological strategy was taken in order to: a) examine students' perceptions of the benefits of international group working; b) identify some tensions and issues arising from such activity; c) consider how to improve the international group working experience; and finally d) consider what this tells us more widely about processes of internationalisation which are taking place.

The following two tables represent the profiles of the students interviewed from both institutions participating in the study.

	Approx age	Sex	Nationality	Prof. Background
R1a	35	M	Iranian	Engineering
R1b	28	M	Indian	Publishing
R2	29	M	Georgian	Airlines
R3	25	M	Japanese	Sales
R4	30	M	Chinese	Sales
R5	34	M	British	Teaching
R6	44	M	British	Managerial/ Engineering
R7	26	F	Chinese	Financial
R8	29	M	Indian	Accountancy
R9	29	F	Chinese	Managerial
R10	28	M	Chinese	Sales
R11	25	M	Chinese	Managerial
R12	32	F	Chinese	Managerial
R13	34	M	Japanese	Airlines

Table 2: Student profiles of the full time MBA at University One

Data were collected and analysed by the author who was not connected professionally with either of the institutions and had gained access to the schools as an independent researcher, researching the phenomenon of the internationalisation of business school/management education.

Theoretical perspectives

The theoretical perspectives of post-colonialism and critical management education shaped the focus of this case study and were used to interpret the case study findings through a hermeneutic process (Ricoeur 1971; 1981). These perspectives were deemed suitable for this study for the following reasons. Firstly, *postcolonial theories* provide a way of considering the legacies of

	Approx age	Sex	Nationality	Prof. Background
R1	29	F	Belgian	Managerial (PS)
R2	43	F	British	Managerial (PbS)
R3	30	M	British	Navy
R4	35	M	Australian	Medical
R5	30	M	British	PR
R6	32	F	Irish	Engineering
R7	30	M	Chinese	Medical/Sales
R8	42	M	British	Financial
R9	31	M	Nigerian	Engineering
R10	33	M	American	Marketing
R11	26	F	Hong Kong	Engineering
R12	25	M	Chinese	Sales
R13	48	M	Irish	Music
R14	26	F	Thai	Accountancy
R15	34	F	British	PR
R16	28	M	Chinese	Sales
R17	32	F	Jordanian	NGO

Table 3: Student profiles of the full time MBA at University Two

(colonial) history, its reproductions and consequences (Prasad 2003). Postcolonial theory is an appropriate lens through which to research the effects of the internationalisation agenda in management education and specifically in the MBA in that the values of dominant (western) cultures may play a role in shaping curriculum and course design and influence concepts of management that are taught and educational practices that are favoured. In addition, however international a business school claims to be, it is still often based only in one country, has a majority of teaching staff from that country and draws on that country for content input (e.g. through the use of case studies). Also, the UK has a colonial history and many of the students the UK attracts are from countries with British colonial legacies. In terms of the study of managerial practice Prasad argues that postcolonial theory can be used to research organisational behaviour and practices in that:

> Postcolonial analysis is… helpful in unveiling the persistent imprint of colonialist ways of thinking and behaving in fields such as cross-cultural management and international management. Such understanding can be useful in giving a new orientation to current management practices as well as research (Prasad 2003, p.32).

Returning specifically to management education, the MBA itself also has an interesting history as an 'American export' (Currie & Knights 2003), associated with an attempt in the 1950s and 1960s and particularly following on from the Gordon and Howell report in 1959 (Pfeffer & Fong 2002) to bring 'scientific inquiry and an increased professionalism to the practice of management' (Baruch & Peiperl 2000, p.70). It therefore emerged with a specific structure and format which is still maintained through the role of accrediting bodies such as the Association of MBAs (AMBA). From a postcolonial perspective it could therefore be argued that the very shape and design of the MBA represents a certain historical epoch in one part of the world ('the West'). So there is arguably a 'paradox of internationalism' (Costea 2000, p.54) attached to the MBA that raises the fundamental questions of whether the MBA framework can 'overcome its cultural boundedness' (Costea 2000, p.55). In the UK context this cultural boundedness could be seen as operating in two ways: as a) an American/Western model (Locke 1998; Currie & Knights 2003) or, following Spivak (1993) who suggests that what happens in the 'teaching machine' is affected by what is outside it, as b) being affected by the country (or countries) in which it is delivered (i.e. as a sort of American/British hybrid).

Secondly, Critical Management Education (CME) perspectives argue that critical reflection should be central to management education (Reynolds 1997). In an international management education context the ability to engage in such reflection could lead to a better ability to operate effectively in an international context (Lorbiecki 1997). Elements of CME pedagogic theory are of relevance to the study and development of international MBA education for two reasons. Firstly, such an approach draws attention to global inequalities and hierarchies of power that could well be (albeit unwittingly) being replicated within the learning context. Secondly, the emphasis on critical reflection may help students to make sense of and reflect upon the processes (e.g. inclusion, exclusion, socialisation, negotiation of position) that they are experiencing within the course, especially through their group work experiences. More traditional models of management education, for example the *staff development* (Grey, Knights & Wilmott 1996) or *managerialist* (Grey & Mitev 1995) models, generally do not place emphasis on such reflection. In CME terms, critical dialogue between students and between students and teachers reflecting on both the learning experience and its relevance to the wider world is viewed as essential (Currie & Knights 2003).

Both postcolonialism and CME drive this research and guide the analysis as both perspectives call on researchers and teachers to question the taken-for-granteds and assumptions in everyday practice and to be on the outlook for the reproduction of inequality and prejudice. In the case of the internationalising MBA the reliance on group working is a good place to start as, if we consider the classroom as a forum where elements of the outside world may be reproduced (Brah & Hoy 1989), despite the good educational intentions of group work practices, processes such as the reaffirmation of inequalities, exclusions and hierarchies may inadvertently be taking place. This paper therefore aims to surface some of these tensions and contradictions and to explore ways of addressing them.

The use of group work in full-time MBA education

Group work is currently widely used in both undergraduate and postgraduate management education and in higher education more generally. The following quote encapsulates some of the assumptions about the benefits of using group work.

> Small group discussion has a valuable part to play in the all-round education of students. It allows them to negotiate meaning, to express themselves in the language of the subject and to establish a more intimate contact with academic staff than more formal methods permit. It also develops the more instrumental skills of listening, presenting ideas, persuading and teamwork (Jaques 2000, *p*.v).

Most full-time MBA programmes in the UK place heavy emphasis on group working, both in terms of informal co-operation and in terms of group work requiring formal group assignments. This is also a requirement of the MBA accrediting agency, AMBA: '[m]uch of the learning in an MBA can be expected to take place between members of the learning group, and opportunities for this to occur should be provided' (AMBA home page 2003).

A review of full-time MBA websites identified four common avowed educational intentions of group work:

* to facilitate content learning;
* to develop transferable skills, (for example, negotiation);
* to simulate work place interaction;
* to share and learn from each other.

However, it is increasingly being recognised in the management education community that 'learning is a highly problematic concept' (Griffiths *et al.* 2005, *p*.275) and that the growing internationalisation sets new pedagogic challenges for universities (Tomlinson & Egan 2002; De Vita & Case 2003). De Vita (2000, *p*.174) suggests that such a context should be 'an opportunity to learn from our differences, achieve cultural synergies and celebrate everyone'. However, group work has been identified as a potentially difficult area in the internationalising process (De Vita 2000, 2001; Griffiths *et al.* 2005; Cathcart, Dickson Dawson & Hall 2006), where the phenomenon of dysfunctional groups is highlighted (see for example Griffiths *et al.* 2005). It is therefore worth considering if the reasons for using group work identified above still hold true in an international context or whether it is possible that a heavy reliance on group work in a highly heterogeneous context creates conditions that prevent the above benefits from taking place. In other words, questions deriving from the theoretical perspectives guiding this study which need considering are:

* do the skills and values attached to the notion of group work favour some students and effectively exclude or distance others?
* Are the skills and competencies needed for doing group work in the MBA model based on western concepts of what makes for good management practice?

Such questions are addressed in this present study through the following analysis of students' experiences of international group working.

The group work experience: 'Ah groupwork, give six dogs a bone and tell them not to fight!'

(Research Participant 2 University One)

Analysis of the interviews conducted for this research revealed that group work was a contentious and an often uncomfortable experience for students as reflected in the quote above. The content theme analysis identified four main areas of emphasis in the interviews, which have been categorised as:

* the perceived benefits of group working;
* issues of representation and participation;
* survival strategies;
* working with difference.

These four areas are now discussed in turn.

Perceived benefits of group work

Firstly the benefits of international group working were recognised by many students, seeing it for example as good practice for working in multinational organisations and preparing for increased global interconnectedness:

> I think to be around as a manager in this day and age you need to understand the culture you are going to be dealing with internationally so to have a diverse group like we've got is really good (U1R5).

It was also seen as a good opportunity for developing understanding about others from different backgrounds in that:

> it certainly teaches you a lot about cultural diversity and you get to learn what's good and not so good about different cultures and you can adapt yourself (U2R5).

However, another element emerges which is that group work could help you to decide who (in cultural terms) you feel most comfortable working with in the future and who to avoid:

> Some people are really yeah that's really experience in tutor groups it's a culture thing and umm it was very useful because it made me discover what I do not like. Things I'll probably try to avoid if I want to try to get a next job I would probably try to avoid to work with a certain culture because

I know I can't stand it so it was useful it wasn't very much fun but it was useful (U2R1).

Students spoke about *recognition of dislike* or *discomfort* with different cultures but a *sense making* or *critical reflection* on why this may be the case was not identified in the interviews. Reasons for avoiding certain nationalities included differences in cultural norms, such as different attitudes towards time-keeping and perceived poor linguistic skills.

Overcoming or 'transcending' difference (Collin 1996; Tomlinson & Egan 2002) 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 (De Vita 2000). 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:

with different customer or some even if you hate them but you have to deal with them so I think MBA should make such an environment a real environment like working to us (U1R9).

A clear desire to acquire a toolkit of transferable skills applicable to (international) working environments also emerged from the analysis:

communication skills is very important for the managers… but it (group work) allows a different kind of voice and all kinds of ideas and arguments can compete each other. You should convince the other… you cannot just dictate you have to convince others (U1R11).

Such expectations are very much in line with the 'staff development model' of management education (Grey *et al* 1996). Currie and Knights (2003, *p.*42) argue that 'students appear to prefer a model for MBA pedagogy that privileges transfer of learning back to the workplace where they can apply knowledge and skills to their managerial practice'. Wider personal development in terms of the challenging or re-evaluating of one's own values and the setting of assumptions and values in wider socio-economic/socio-historic contexts was rare but did occasionally occur as a result of group work as highlighted in the following story:

like my tutor group, we've got an Iranian, we have an Italian, we have a British, we've somebody from Taiwan, so, myself from Nigeria, it's you know it's something more like a combination that probably if not for that tutor group, all of us wouldn't have really gotten that close but then because all of us we do the assignments and the thing about it is, your group work is going to contribute to your final score, so you want to get it done as much as possible you have to help you know, so it has and with time you see yourself actually discussing more with the other person trying to know more about the other person, you know like, I have to say it's not anything, let me give you this example, I'm from Nigeria, happen to come from the southern part which is Christian dominated and a typical Nigerian from the south looks at Muslims the majority are out to make trouble all

the time, but then having come to the class and really stayed with some Muslims and interacted with them I now see it's just a minority like that, you know that kind of thing, so it's really helped a lot I mean getting to know people intimately (U2R9).

Although some aspect of self-discovery or personal development through group work is evident in the data set, the scope for changing behaviour was seen, in other examples, as limited:

I got to know a lot of people more deeply…also what were my defects and I realised that I don't listen too much and that I tend try to dominate so with time I tried to you know make these changes I can't say I've been successful, mainly unsuccessful... (U1R8).

Examination of personal behaviour, as reflected in the last quote, and ways of treating others in the group work situation featured prominently in the interviews, as will be discussed in the following section.

Issues of representation and participation

One area where personal difference (for example in culture, gender and previous work experience) was shown to affect the group work experience was around issues of representation and participation, that is to say around the extent to which individual members succeeded in participating and getting their views and ideas represented in group outputs (e.g. presentations and assignments), and the extent to which they were able to benefit from group work by practising the skills in the ways described above.

Instances of marginalisation were identified through the group work process, as one Chinese student reports:

at first at the beginning of the group discussion the native student will talk about their idea and because my language not so good so I have to listen and I can have no contribution to that idea I have to accept that idea (U1R9).

Recurring reasons given for not having one's views heard and represented were a) language issues: '*it's easy to be dismissed if your language skills are not perfect…*' (U2R13) and b) cultural issues relating to teaching and learning:

I think it's because in our countries especially Asian, we have a different view about the education system and how it works because we are, we were mainly taught to listen to others, so we are very good listeners, and also sometimes I might not be so confident about my English, so I just let them talk and I listen (laughs) (U2R14).

Whilst data from both institutions demonstrate that processes of exclusion were in place, some students reported difficulty in trying to redress the situation:

I'm quite a loud and boisterous person and some of the Chinese people find it very hard to be like that when you have these syndicate meetings… it's often very easy to ignore those people and it's

not until you sort of realise they've got better exam results than you have that these are very able people but it's I like to think I haven't just rode ridden over them (U2R5).

Another strong theme identified through the theme analysis was the ways in which students developed strategies for surviving or getting through group work.

Group work survival strategies

In order to '*get through, get it finished*' (U1R7), survival strategies were developed which in some ways worked against the educational benefits of group working as described above. For example, the use of a native language, although not seen by students as a good practice, was used for purposes of 'getting through'. Even though students doing this acknowledged that it could serve to annoy or distance others:

> but in fact in the real group work all Chinese students can to still use Chinese to chat I think we think Chinese more fluent to understand to understand some topics but in fact I don't think it's a good behaviour… when we talk Chinese others really and don't understand what we're talking maybe they think you are talk about him or her too rude (U1R9).

Patience and tolerance of others were sometimes referred to as 'niceties' or 'luxuries' that could be allowed to slip when the pressure of the course started to bite, for example:

> …as the course gets nearer to deadline time the level of manners goes down and the level of patience people has goes down and people become more fraught so the niceties of that you know there's only so much you can enjoy that for a while and then some people start saying look we've got to get this done. (U2R5).

The ability to work with difference therefore emerges as quite limited and instead assimilation into certain cultural norms was regarded as an inevitable consequence.

Working with difference

The way in which students talked about and made sense of working with difference is interesting from both a critical education and postcolonial point of view. The ability to speak and participate was often equated with confidence, possibly downplaying or avoiding cultural issues:

> I think you kind of find that some people are a lot more outspoken and that's where you see the most difference really you know, and I do think that's two things I think one is culture and one is experience you know what I mean it's probably just it's probably another layer of just personal confidence (U2R6).

Confidence and the ability to participate fluently and assertively emerged as highly rated attributes in the group work context where possible cultural norms and cultural difference concerning participation were often

overlooked (see for example Chalmers & Volet 1997; Cortazzi & Jin 1996; Wong 2004; Qi 2005; Turner 2006). Some Chinese students, for example 'excused' their 'behaviour' by saying Chinese people are '*shy*' or that it is rude to '*shout out*'.

The hermeneutic analysis of the formal structure of the interviews, particularly the lexis and idiomatic language used, reveals some interesting insights into how group work is viewed. The recurrence of specific vocabulary around participation suggests existing norms. For example, the ability 'to pull your weight' seems to be measured by fluency in oral English, by the ability to participate in often heated discussions, to act quite aggressively. Lack of participation, quietness and different views on punctuality/timekeeping were often regarded as bad things, not conducive to the group work experience, and led to resentment against people who did not participate in a certain way and were therefore perceived as 'not pulling their weight' (U2R3, U1R6), being carried by others or just 'lazy bums' (U1R8) or 'free-riders' (U1R7) (see also De Vita 2001; Elliot & Reynolds 2005; Cathcart *et al.* 2006). Frustration, annoyance and anger were commonly reported emotions often directed against an 'other' (see also Griffiths *et al.* 2005).

Conversely, over-participation and dominant behaviour, although resented and perceived as not ideal, were generally not regarded as so bad as non-participation and were generally excused as being caused by the pressure of time and the necessity to 'get this done' even by those suffering as a result:

> In fact I don't think it's the fault of the native student because they just hope to finish as quickly as possible and er maybe they don't to pay too much attention to the Asian student (U1R9).

Discussion: towards an understanding the international group work experience

This section uses the research perspectives of postcolonialism and CME to make sense of issues emerging from these case studies. Analysis of the group work experience discussed above surfaced elements of sidelining and the inability of some to participate fully and, on the other hand, the over-dominance of other students. In postcolonial terms, such experiences could be framed by recourse to the concept of 'subalterns' (Gramsci 1992; Spivak 1988). These are subordinate groups who lack the organisation and voice of those in power and who are marginalised and effectively silenced. Parallels could be drawn with group work situations where group work participants who do not behave in accordance with the unwritten rules are effectively sidelined and marginalised and also effectively 'othered'. The concept of 'othering' is used by postcolonial writers (Said 1978, Spivak 1988) to criticise the past western imperial tendency to universalise people from other races in the former's own terms – a colonising tool to

disempower and colonise certain people. This is a means of affirming one's own positive identity by stigmatising an 'other.' The concept of otherness comes from the writings of Hegel (Inwood 1991) and was later developed by Lacan (see e.g. Nobus 1998) as difference to the image of self.

Instances of 'othering' were evident in the interviews, for example in practices of cultural stereotyping, which paralleled concepts of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' and led to practices of sidelining and self-exclusion. For example, being unable to put ideas across and to feel not to be participating and having ownership of the ideas can effectively lead to a type of self-exclusion or 'self-othering':

> we feel very bad we don't feel we are in the group we are just outside the group so yeah we cannot contribute much to that group (U1R9)

Doing or conceptualising things 'differently' (from the unspoken norms or conceptions of the 'right' way to do things) can lead to a type of 'othering', an infantilising, such as being seen as 'sweet' or 'not serious', as reflected in the following example:

> It was really sweet to see how this guy from Japan and he was just so sweet, he was quite funny, his view of the applications of e-commerce you know and we still laugh like if we think back we had put a little report together and it was all these cute little pictures… (U2R6).

Such attitudes have parallels to Said's work (1978) in which he argues in Orientalist discourses the other is feminised and infantilised.

Another form of 'othering' was reflected in some strong perceptions expressed about the orientation and preferences of others:

> ...this is China I'm talking about now there's such a cohesion between themselves about how they are going to present themselves that they don't to break ranks and one person say its different to somebody else (U1R5).

'Othering' is also established through displaying a lack of trust in 'the other':

> The other thing is if you don't present it and they make a hash of the presentation and then you get a bad mark then you are always going to think well if I'd done it we would have got a better mark. (U1R5).

Such behaviours are also strongly reinforced by the type of language used to describe the group work experience. Hermeneutic analysis revealed tendencies amongst some British or European students to see themselves as the organisers and/or facilitators of the groups. Their interviews revealed for example, fears that if they did not intervene and 'crack the whip' (U1R6) the process would 'go soft' (U1R6) and become unorganised or out of control.

Although many students used the language of celebrating diversity (Tomlinson & Egan 2002), as seen in the

'benefits from group working' section, much of the language used to describe the group work experience was also polarising, with much reference being made to different cultural/national groups: '*the Chinese*', '*us Brits*', '*the Asians*' and '*the Europeans*'. People were often described in terms of national blocks or '*pockets of nations*' rather than as individuals, and language around 'sameness' as opposed to 'difference' was rarely articulated by the respondents.

The content analysis revealed many instances of unpleasant encounters and dysfunctional groups but also highlighted an absence of reflection on why they were behaving in such ways and on how the group work experience could be improved. There was certainly a reluctance to discuss and review the group working process with fellow group members. Various reasons were given for this, such as lack of time, the possible pain such discussions could cause and the possible personal nature of some of the criticism:

> it is very difficult to raise your concerns you might try to raise them within the group but you never know how people are going to react (U2R1).

It is possible then that due to the lack of opportunity to address these concerns these feelings tended to fester and turn to resentment against fellow students (often different in some way: e.g., male/female, native speaker/non-native speaker). From a critical education perspective, which advocates reflection on political and social forces which can distort communication (Reynolds 1997), we could argue that the absence of discussion highlighted in this research is an area for concern in that a) participants show very little desire to engage in discussion around difference; b) there are very few perceived formal channels built into the course designs for doing so; and c) the role of lecturers in setting up, facilitating and monitoring group work was scarcely mentioned in the interviews.

What therefore can be learned from this study in terms of improving international group working in which students could learn from each other and from the experience and in which everybody could participate and be 'celebrated' (De Vita 2000)? We can learn both from general emergent points of similarity across the two institutions as well as from differences between the two cases. This study certainly revealed mixed feelings and reactions towards the international group work experience at both of the institutions studied. On the one hand there was an expectation from some students that group work should allow for the possibility of intercultural exchange and that although group work did also create tensions at times, it was challenging and ultimately a good learning experience. On the other hand many of the concerns and emotional reactions to group working were left unaddressed, sometimes resulting in cultural stereotyping and resentment towards the 'other'. Differences in the extent to which the issues affected the students' perceptions of international group working did, however, emerge between the two institutions. The groups at University One had particular difficulty in working together and retreated into national groupings

	University One	University Two
Induction	Main emphasis on externally facilitated outdoors activities	Internal induction concentrating on similarities and differences. Cultural presentations
Group work patterns	A new group for every course	Tutor course running throughout the year plus new groups for different courses
Group work facilitation	Students left to own devices	Group work organiser appointed for each assignment. Some support and debriefing from some tutors on an ad hoc basis.
Learning from difference	Some but also retreat into national groupings	Yes, especially within the long standing tutor groups
Attitude to others	Resentment in terms of domination and not pulling weight	Resentment in terms of domination and not pulling weight
Social activities	Organised by different groups of students.Declining interest/inclusively.	Encouraged by administration good participation e.g. Chinese New Year party. But lack of social space and reliance on bar/beer culture.

Table 4: Institutional approaches to group work

referred to as 'pockets of nations'. Whereas at University Two some groups managed to bond well and in some cases achieved cultural exchange and deep 'transformational learning' (Mezirow 1981) and challenging of embedded values and assumptions as reflected in the Nigerian student's story given above (U2R9).

Comparison of the differences and similarities in conducting and presenting group work from the two courses in the present study can be drawn on in considering ways of improving the international group work experience.

Several studies (e.g. Brockbank & McGill 1998; De Vita 2000, 2001; Griffiths *et al* 2005) have explored ways of making international group work more inclusive and beneficial to all involved. The following section, using the findings of this study, builds and expands on such work.

Towards international group working: making group work more inclusive

Comparison of the two courses highlights three areas which need paying attention to in *making the group work experience more inclusive* and which could benefit from further research. These are:

❖ induction;

❖ quantity and pace of group work; and

❖ ways of contributing.

Issues of induction

From the start of the academic year it is important to consider how group work is introduced and presented. At University One, for example, there was a lecture on group work but it was felt that this took place too late, after patterns of behaviour had been set. The role of induction week in preparing students for the international

group working experience emerged as significant as reflected in the following quote:

> In the introduction/introduce week I don't think we had such [induction about cultural differences] the tutor doesn't didn't mention that. The tutor just introduced the course and some activities to make others familiar with each other right. I don't think they mentioned that in fact I think they should mention it because at the beginning none of us noticed that difference we just think to be familiar with each other but when you consider the culture you will find it's very difficult. (U1R9)

At both institutions very few students mentioned 'induction' without being prompted, although both induction programmes included (to a certain extent) *working with difference*, *listening to others*, *respecting cultural differences* and so on. It was as if the themes mentioned in induction were suspended in separation from the lived experiences on the course. The fact that the reflection initiated at induction was never really facilitated again is also possibly significant. In University Two the structure for continuing the critical reflection process started at induction is in place with the concept of 'tutor groups'. However in practice whether this took place or not depended largely on the role and enthusiasm of the individual tutor: for example, some groups met regularly whereas some only met once.

Quantity and pace of groupwork

The timing and pace of group work was a particular concern of students from both institutions. Concerns were identified such as that there were too many different groups and that there was not enough time to get to know members in each new group and to build up a working relationship. As the year progressed the 'getting to know you' process in a new group was sidelined and the task was seen in instrumental terms: to get it done or '*off the tick list*' (U2R5), shortcuts were taken which allowed for domination by some and exclusion of others. The study revealed that those not confident of their

English in the first group work sessions that started right at the beginning of the first term fell into patterns of non-participation even after they felt that their English had improved. It is therefore suggested that thought needs to be given to *when and with what intensity group work is introduced into courses* and as to *what number of different groups would be most useful to the students* in terms of exchange and self development.

Ways of contributing

What then could be done to allow students to participate in ways they feel comfortable with or to give students time to reflect on and possibly to adapt their behaviours? Some practices did help this process. For example, University Two nominated a co-ordinator for each group work assignment, who had to get the group together and keep the group on task. This worked quite well as it was seen as a way of curbing over-dominance and giving others a chance to facilitate. Also at University Two one group ran throughout the year, allowing for the possibility of getting to know at least one group really well and giving more opportunity for reflexive and constructive discussion on the group work process and for substantial personal development. However neither institution experimented with alternative forms of group work or alternative means of participation, such as the use of an electronic discussion board or the making of videoed presentations. The model of 6-8 people in a non-teacher-facilitated group working toward a specific output, e.g. an assessed presentation, was the standard model.

Implications for course design?

A case study methodological approach was used for conducting this research because case studies are useful tools for educational practitioners in that they build 'a picture to help inform our practice or to see unexplored details of a case' (Creswell 1998, *p*.95). It is worth pausing to consider how this case study helped us to understand issues concerning international group work by reflecting on a) what are the unexplored details of the case/s which occur; and b) how can the picture built up help inform our practice?

This paper addressed three questions: (1) What different experiences do students have of 'international' group working? (2) How can these experiences be understood and what issues and tensions are emerging? (3) In what ways could group work be made more inclusive?

In addition the use of the theoretical perspectives of post-colonialism and CME raises the questions:

❖ Do the skills and values attached to the notion of group work favour some students and effectively exclude or distance others?

❖ Are the skills and competencies needed for doing group work in the MBA model based on western concepts of what makes for good management practice?

It has been argued that although universities offer, and students expect, an international experience which includes working with and learning about others, the lived experiences of students indicate that there is less international interaction and exchange than the diverse nature of the cohorts would suggest. Although, as illustrated, group work provides a forum for international exchange, it also allows for practices of exclusion and prejudice and the valuing of some practices and ways of behaving over others, which it could be argued are to an extent culture bound and value laden. That is to say the global inequalities and hierarchies have entered into the MBA group working machine. If an understanding of difference and the avoidance of the practices of 'assimilation' are vitally important in preparing students for the international workplace, then critical reflection on the group work experience, integrated into the activities suggested in the previous section, could help students to understand and work with difference rather than to ignore or sideline it.

Recommendations drawn from viewing the findings of this study through CME and postcolonial lenses, are that further review and research is needed on the following points relating specifically to induction, pace of group work and ways of contributing and a fourth emergent issue relating to international discussion and dialogue.

Induction

❖ The importance of induction and facilitation in introducing both group work and its pitfalls (sidelining, exclusion etc.).
❖ Training for students in running and organising group work e.g. minuting meetings.

Pace

❖ Creating opportunities to get to know some people well (enduring groups/intensive induction).

Ways of contributing

❖ The creation of agreed group behaviours (ground rules).
❖ Agreed group solutions for interruption and means of signalling a wish to contribute.
❖ Issues of facilitation and de-briefing; inclusive pedagogy – allowing student voices by different forms of contribution/participation.

Discussion and dialogue

❖ Consideration and discussion of the role and purpose of group work.
❖ The creation of a conducive (informal) atmosphere to debate on all areas of difference, values, assumptions.
❖ Building a coherent policy with university/school/ different modules.
❖ Questioning and defining what international/ internationalisation means.

- Videoing group work behaviours and opportunities for discussion and debriefing (see also Cathcart *et al.* 2006).
- Clarity and consistency (for all subjects) on the role of the teacher/facilitator in group work processes.
- Challenging stereotypes (see De Vita 2001)

Conclusions

Conclusions which can be drawn from conducting this case study are, first, that in order to meet the international learning needs of all the students, critical reflection and dialogue need to be taking place on the nature of group work interaction. As group work is an extension of teaching it also seems logical that teachers too need to engage in critical dialogue with each other, with the students and with course designers/directors, to assess the suitability of the existing models of group working and the assumptions of skills and behaviours that accompany them. In order to do this, critical reflection as to the nature of the MBA and the values and myths it embodies is also important. Sinclair (1995, p296) (writing in the Australian context) claims that: '[t]he values of MBA cultures are competition and individualism, instrumentalism and exclusiveness'. If this is the case it is worth reflecting on the extent to which such values are compatible with an internationalisation agenda, and what therefore can be done to make the MBA experience, including group work, open to all.

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