



# Briefing Note

## CHINESE GROUP LEARNING VERSUS WESTERN GROUP LEARNING

### Information on learning in group settings

This is one of those areas where there is a lot of conflicting information both in terms of the academic literature and also through how learning and teaching experiences are reported by Chinese students and also by Australian academics.

Mixed messages abound – Chinese students like working in groups and Chinese students don't like working in groups. So what is the story here?

It is really about defining the concept of learning in groups and what this then means to different people and in different contexts.

Group work, team work, group learning, cooperative learning, collaborative learning – these terms are often used indiscriminately and interchangeably. To try and sort out the confusion, three different ways of describing 'working together' are discussed below.

### Chinese learning in group settings

*Long before Kurt Lewin tinkered with group dynamics in the 40's at MIT, Lao Tzu (Confucius) and his assistants over twenty-six centuries ago were already extolling the virtues of collaboration and group effort complete with a veneration for life, nature and space.*

(Phuong-Mai et al, 2009, p.123)

As is suggested from the quote above, Chinese students can excel when working in group settings because of the collectivist orientation of Chinese society and the importance of relationships and in-group cohesion (Biggs, 1990; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Park, 2002; Tang, 1996).

However, the group settings referred to here may well look different from the group settings that are familiar within Western educational contexts.

Two distinct types of group settings that Chinese students are familiar with are:

### **Group learning in study groups**

Chinese students have a long tradition of study groups that meet outside the classroom. They use these to do homework and other tasks. Group learning in this way is informal. It is not a prescribed part of any learning process (Nield, 2004; Rajaram & Bordia, 2013; Tang, 1996).

### **Cooperative learning**

This term is being used here to highlight the notion of a group working harmoniously together. Intra-group relationships in such situations will ensure that participants 'play nicely' and in accord with pre-determined roles and status in order to maintain cohesion (Zang, 2001).

Phuong-Mai *et al* (2009) articulate a number of principles that apply to group learning that is enacted in this cooperative way:

- Actions of the group are underpinned by the belief that the lecturer is the holder of knowledge and this will not be brought into question.
- Group learning will be quiet and orderly.
- Hierarchical / interpersonal relationships (expectations and experiences) will be respected.
- 'Face' will not be threatened.
- Activities or tasks undertaken will be structured rather than open-ended.

### **Western learning in group settings**

*Ever since high school I know how to but the group with European, Indian and South America students it is different...*

(A Chinese postgraduate student)

## Collaborative learning

In reference to working in an Australian group learning setting, this Chinese student identifies the requirement to go beyond the Chinese group as being different from his previous experiences. Relationships (and one's place within them) are not immediately identifiable and there is 'fuzziness' and uncertainty with respect to what is demanded and how the group will work. Because of this many Chinese students are not immediately comfortable with this type of group learning.

In addition, the Western model of group learning draws from different philosophical traditions and applies a different theory of knowledge. Group learning, from a Western perspective, means working within a social constructivist environment. Without going into too much detail, this means that groups engage in the joint construction of knowledge. They do this through a process of collaboration – working together to achieve shared goals or outcomes. Some key features of this type of group learning are listed below:

- Learners construct knowledge together so that in the end it may exceed the knowledge of the lecturer.
- Collaborative learning groups often feature the role of facilitator rather than lecturer. The facilitator helps the learner to get to his or her own understanding of the content.
- Collaborative learning is not didactic.
- Classes very often are not quiet and do not necessarily appear orderly.
- Argument and debate are encouraged.
- Disagreement in collaborative learning groups is not associated with loss of face.
- Activities or tasks are often open-ended, discovery oriented, project-based or experiential.

### Note

Not only are there significant differences in the fundamental beliefs and values that underpin the disparate practices associated with group learning in the Chinese and Australian contexts but also, and importantly, Chinese students are asked to engage with these differences in a foreign language. This adds an additional layer of complexity for Chinese learners who have limited experience of oral interaction of this type using either their first language or English.

## At a glance

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Group learning in China</b> (Cooperative Learning)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Group learning in Australia</b> (Collaborative Learning)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Actions of the group are underpinned by the belief that the lecturer is the holder of knowledge and this will not be brought into question</li> <li>○ Group learning will be quiet and orderly</li> <li>○ Hierarchical / interpersonal relationships (expectations and experiences) will be respected</li> <li>○ 'Face' will not be threatened</li> <li>○ Activities or tasks undertaken will be structured rather than open-ended</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Learners construct knowledge together so that in the end it may exceed the knowledge of the lecturer</li> <li>○ Collaborative learning groups often feature the role of facilitator rather than lecturer. The facilitator helps the learner to get to his or her own understanding of the content</li> <li>○ Collaborative learning is not didactic</li> <li>○ Classes very often are not quiet and do not necessarily appear orderly</li> <li>○ Argument and debate are encouraged</li> <li>○ Disagreement in collaborative learning groups is not associated with loss of face</li> <li>○ Activities or tasks are often open-ended, discovery oriented, project-based or experiential</li> </ul>

## Key things to remember about collaborative learning

How **not** to do collaborative learning:

Tell students to get into groups. \* (see endnote)

How to do collaborative learning:

Use the pointers below:

- Classes that include international students will benefit when the processes and expectations associated with working collaboratively are articulated in detail and demonstrated at the beginning. This should include some form of icebreaker / getting to know you strategy.
- Collaborative learning that involves Chinese students will need to involve relationship restructuring / building / creating so that they can feel as if they have a place within this style of group work. This is best done explicitly and empathetically.
- Start small (as in short tasks not those where students need to meet regularly, often outside of class time and over a long period of time) and build up.
- Groups should be instructor selected so that:
  - Chinese students can work together initially but that groups are then reconfigured so that they do not become isolated (See notes on 'Face')
  - cliques don't form within the class as a whole
  - groups can be changed and reshaped in response to issues and also to build cohesion and broaden relationships with the class
  - roles students undertake can be rotated
  - tasks / activities can accommodate 'same strength' groups and on different occasions diverse groups (range of talents, backgrounds, first language, learning styles, experiences)
- The optimum size of a group is 4-5.
- Every group member needs to have a designated role (initial experiences in this form of group learning should target a known personal strength of each group member). Examples of possible roles include the following:
  - Facilitator
  - Recorder
  - Summariser
  - Mediator
  - Timekeeper
  - Researcher
  - Editor
  - Spokesperson
  - Technical (ICT) expert

These roles might initially be assigned by the lecturer and then later through in-group discussion and self- or group-selection.

- Every group member needs to be accountable for their role and for their part in managing / being engaged in the collaborative process.
- A 'management plan' should be in place to deal with group members who either dominate or do little. This should be devised before the start of the group activity.

### **Note**

Googling 'Collaborative Learning' will swamp you with information – too much in fact to be really informative or useful. You will need to be judicious in your searching and also aware that much of the information available pertains to collaborative learning in schools (some of this is useful, and some not). You will also find that terminology may be confusing (e.g. cooperative, collaborative, teamwork, etc. are often used interchangeably).

Many Australian universities provide useful information on collaborative learning, for example:

Griffith University's Teamwork Skills Toolkit:

[http://www.griffith.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/290870/Teamwork-skills.pdf](http://www.griffith.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/290870/Teamwork-skills.pdf)

Australian Catholic University Strategies for Cooperative and Collaborative Learning in Large Lecture Groups:

[http://www.acu.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/405768/Large\\_Group\\_Lectures\\_LTC.pdf](http://www.acu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/405768/Large_Group_Lectures_LTC.pdf)

\* **Endnote:** There will be occasions when you don't need to specifically manage who is in what group. On these occasions you can use simple strategies like the ones below to organise your groups.

- People born in particular months.
- People wearing the same coloured shirts.
- Use a deck of playing cards to designate groups - e.g. use jacks, queens, kings, and aces to create four groups of four.
- Cut up different coloured pieces of paper to be drawn from a box (e.g. there will be 4 green slips of paper).
- Draw student names randomly from a box or bag.
- Count off participants 1, 2, 3, 4 etc (This could be done in another language).
- Cut up the article that you want your students to work on – all students with the same bit will work together or students form groups by finding people who have the other bits of the article.

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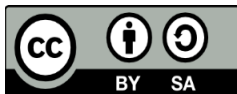
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Additional materials and resources are available from  
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