

Intercultural Team Projects – Faculty Tip Sheet

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Intercultural team projects can help students develop both teamwork and intercultural skills. Achieving these goals requires careful planning and ongoing facilitation. This Tip Sheet draws from Camosun’s Assessment LibGuide, published research, and suggestions from Camosun Business faculty members.

Contents: (1) Intercultural teams (2) Starting strong (3) Ongoing facilitation
(4) Assessment options (5) Useful resources

Some Principles

- Every group is diverse; tips for intercultural groups are relevant for all groups (Shapiro et al., 2014).
- Intercultural teams increase the challenge but also the potential for growth and learning (McAlister & Perron, 2019).
- Look for cultural influences but see the person first (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009).

Intercultural Competence in Teams

“Intercultural competence” can feel abstract and complicated to students. Unpack the term with a manageable definition and concrete, attainable skills.

Intercultural competence definition: A combination of cultural knowledge, facilitative attitudes, and communicative skills (Byram et al., 2001).

- In practice, intercultural competence means effectively “mediating between perspectives” (Byram et al., 2001, p. 5).
- Attitudinal features: ambiguity tolerance, empathy, flexibility, respect for difference, willingness to learn (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009).
- Communicative features: negotiating meanings, creating shared understandings, repairing misunderstandings (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005).

Where Might Culture Show Itself in Team Projects?

Identify the aspects of team projects where cultural differences are likely to emerge – and where care is needed to avoid trouble.

- **Unfamiliarity:** Expect trepidation from students unfamiliar with team projects. Explain why the team format is necessary and how it aligns with outcomes and professional needs. Be clear about goals, expectations, deadlines, and grading.

- **Group vs. Individual Work:** Some students will expect to do project work together; others will want to divide up the project and work on parts individually. Encourage flexibility in balancing collective and individual work.
- **Meetings – Inclusion, Comprehension, & Decision-making:** (1) Differences in turn-taking norms can isolate speakers. Raise awareness and consider a “Mediator” role who ensures equal participation. (2) For comprehension, unstructured meetings, fast talkers, and slang/idioms can disadvantage EAL students. Encourage slowing down, allowing processing time, and checking understanding/comprehension. Recommend agendas to structure meetings and allow students to prepare. The “Mediator” role can take and share notes; share info multi-modally (e.g., written and audio). (3) For decision-making, majority vs. consensus expectation differences may emerge. Raise awareness; include this issue in initial team-development discussions.
- **Peer Feedback:** Some students are used to the instructor being the only source of feedback. Expect resistance to giving/receiving peer feedback. Explain the benefits; train students to provide it positively.
- **Going to the Instructor:** Some students won’t hesitate to go to the instructor for help. Others will worry that bringing problems will expose them as incompetent. Encourage students to see you as a resource. Include this issue in initial team-development discussions.

Starting Strong

You can’t plan away all trouble. But careful design, planning, and organization will give the project the best chance at success.

Design

- Consider topics that require cultural learning, reflection, and/or empower EAL members by tapping into their cultural knowledge.
- Design projects requiring all members’ participation and varied strengths (e.g., writing, organization, technology, creativity); offer flexible delivery options if feasible.

Introduction

- Justify the need for a team project; promote the benefits, including intercultural competency building.

Group Formation

- Identify essential team needs to guide your selection (e.g., matching availability, diverse abilities, technology skills).
- Select teams yourself but incorporate student input (e.g., survey(s), mixer(s), application letter).
- Start drafting groups from the start of the course – aim for 3-5 members; draw on initial needs assessment, assignments, and observations of students.
- Consider a “language bridge” (i.e., two EAL students with the stronger speaker explicitly asked to support the weaker speaker).

Clear Instructions

- Explain goals, project components, instructions, and deadlines.
- Clarify grades: weighting, individual vs. team, and process vs. product.

Team Building

- Start with project-relevant icebreakers (e.g., discuss team project experiences and expectations; do role-focused personality survey).
- Create a team contract; include key commitments (and consequences for non-compliance), communication methods, decision-making protocol, upcoming meetings, conflict-resolution process.

Facilitating Ongoing Work

Keep teams on track by allocating class time, structuring check-ins, and timing mid-project reflection and self/peer evaluations so there's time to improve dynamics.

Mid-project Reflection

- Include early-to-mid-project reflection and peer evaluations (i.e., before high-stakes work begins).
- Use reflection to revisit team contract, team processes and roles.

Allocate Class Time for Projects

- Monitor team dynamics.
- Include structured check-ins with instructor and inter-group updates (e.g., among same-role members).
- Teach effective meetings communication; provide agenda/minutes templates; ask teams to submit minutes and/or task management plans

Teach Peer Feedback Best Practices

- Encourage members to ask before providing feedback; unwilling members can share drafts with the instructor or Writing Centre.
- Frame the goal as “improving” not “criticizing.”
- Encourage: balancing positive (keep) and negative (change) feedback, being specific, and tying feedback to task goals.

Dealing with Team Conflicts

- Encourage individuals to share concerns with the instructor; however, avoid taking one side; be mindful of team contracts and agreed-upon conditions.
- Walk softly as mediator: asking for an update or helping members connect is often enough to get teams back on track.
- Prioritize team-mediated resolutions before instructor intervention.
- Removing a member is not always punitive; also, if teams need to be disbanded, consider inviting stronger members to go solo (rather than removing non-contributing members). Have a back-up plan: what alternative project will removed members do?

Assessment Options

A fundamental issue: If a goal is developing team skills, then give weight to process-focused components (e.g., self/peer evaluations and reflections; team-building tasks).

Balance Group/Individual Contributions

- Consider assigning individual components (e.g., research summary).
- Include mid- and end-project process-focused components (e.g., reflection, self/peer evaluations).
- Capture individual contributions (e.g., include both individual and team grades; consider team/individual weighting: 70/30? 60/40?).

Transparency

- Make expectations clear (e.g., goals, components, deliverables, deadlines).
- Make rubrics, templates, and possibly samples available.

Ease into Project

- Begin with low-stakes components that allow for team building.

Useful Resources (with links)

D2L

- Consider setting up: Private Groups; anonymous Discussions forum for questions; always-open Zoom rooms for each group

Start-Up

- Groupwork Skills: [Validated Questionnaire](#) (Cumming et al., 2014).
- Icebreakers: [50+ icebreaker ideas](#) (Cserti, 2023).
- Role-focused surveys: [Fisher's personality survey](#) (Anatomy, 2023); [five-minute personality survey](#) (Smalley & Trent, 1999); [123 Test – Team-building surveys](#) (123 Test Team, 2023).
- Team contract: [from Camosun's Groupwork LibGuide](#) (Camosun College, 2023).

Ongoing Support

- Self/peer evaluations: [from Camosun's Groupwork LibGuide](#) (Camosun College, 2023).
- Self and team reflection: [from Carnegie Mellon University](#) (2024).

Assessment

- Rubrics: [from Carnegie Mellon University](#) (2024) and [from Camosun's Groupwork LibGuide](#) (Camosun College, 2023).

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