THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY ON STUDENT LEARNING INTERACTIONS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF RAPPORT MANAGEMENT IN AN UNDERGRADUATE PROBLEM BASED LEARNING GROUP

The aim of this research was to determine whether cultural diversity had any impact on the quality of learning interactions used in Problem Based Learning (PBL).

This qualitative, interpretive study followed one culturally diverse group of 11 students on their first year of an undergraduate Diagnostic Radiography programme. Data comprised video footage of 10 PBL tutorials, and individual and focus group interviews, collected over the period of one academic year between 2007 and 2008. A Grounded Theory (GT) approach was used to manage the data and construct the argument. Interactions were explored using Discourse Analysis (DA), employing the constructs of Face, Politeness and Rapport Management (RM) to understand how students managed the communicative demands of PBL to achieve their learning goal.

The study found that PBL requires students to engage in face-threatening behaviours to a greater extent than more traditional learning methods, because it expects the students to discuss subjects of which they have little prior knowledge and then puts student centre-stage for planning learning objectives and delivering the learning to others.

Members of culturally diverse learning groups may have difficulty in finding a common strategy of communication for PBL because their differences make it difficult to predict how they will be judged by others in the group. Furthermore, reducing social distance, which would overcome this dilemma, is more difficult in groups where the individuals are culturally diverse. Age diversity, as an influential factor, featured highly in the group studied. A Sociopragmatic Interactional Principle (SIP) of equity-autonomy predominated in the group's interactions as a result of these issues. This ethos meant that the students opted for superficial learning interactions which were confirmative rather than critical. It appears the strength of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) in PBL is extremely high for such a group and that the impact of socialisation for reducing social distance, inhibited because of cultural diversity, has an influential role in reducing the impact of face.

The findings of this study can be used by tutors to understand the communicative demands made on students in PBL. Face threat might be lessened either by giving students more freedom to feel they are in control of the PBL tutorial rather than being constrained by notions of the 'right' and the 'wrong' way to participate, or conversely, providing a more structured process to legitimise FTAs. The developing ethos of the group may help to identify which of these approaches is most suitable to the needs of

the group. The study also highlights the importance of promoting off-task social engagement for PBL groups, especially culturally diverse groups where members do not normally socialise outside the tutorial.

Thesis available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/14071/1/Leslie_Robinson_-_Final_Thesis.pdf

Papers from thesis

Robinson L (2015) Age difference and face-saving in an inter-generational Problem Based Learning group Journal of Further and Higher Education published on line 18/12/14 **http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/zmm5rDS5P7VnXTdCTDz7/full#.VO3YXfs09Ro**

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