

Student Diaspora and Learning Style Impact on Group Performance

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ABSTRACT

The study examined diaspora (team culture) and learning style of 700 international students from 19 countries, enrolled at an accredited Australian university. The research focus was to explore online pedagogy by measuring student diaspora and learning style impact on group performance. To accomplish that, a generalized least squares regression model was developed from survey responses, homeland culture, and team project performance, during a flexible learning course (part online, part face-to-face). Teacher reflections were reviewed for additional pedagogical insight into learning style and diaspora interaction.

Keywords: Culture, Diaspora, Learning Style, Pedagogy, University Students

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

In this study we build on earlier culture-learning-style research by examining how group culture interacts with learning styles in university student teams (Strang, 2010, 2009a, 2009b, 2008). Diaspora is the culture of cohorts in a group as compared to the culture of a whole country or region (the latter is known as national or global culture). A survey and reflective teacher comments are analyzed to evaluate the interaction of culture and learning style. The sample consisted of 700 undergraduate business students at an Australian university. This research situation was unique because although Australian universities apply western-oriented materials, learning objectives and pedagogy for education,

the majority of students in the study (95%) were international (not from Australia). The course was delivered in flexible learning mode which means that it was online (Blackboard via Internet) with occasional classroom-based lectures.

Mixed research methods are used. While the study is generally classified as action research, this manuscript reports on the quantitative data gathered in surveys developed from *a priori* constructs. Learning style and culture are analyzed using group performance as a dependent variable. The purpose is to determine if culture and learning style impact group performance. Teacher reflections are provided to explain how group culture and learning style interacted.

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Importance of Studying Diaspora in Contemporary University Education

There is usually a rationale behind research questions. In this case, although our research team is multicultural, most of us are from western-oriented societies, yet we have all gone through the difficulties of trying to learn second languages, and studying in universities outside our home countries. We now recognize our students are struggling with their learning (as we also did). As we look around us, in the literature and in practice, we see ‘contemporary’ universities advertising to, and enrolling, more international students. From experience and based on student feedback, people love to travel abroad for a ‘multicultural learning experience’. In Australia we anticipate an increase in demand for ‘multicultural-friendly’ teaching. Even if the demand for multicultural education were to decrease, to be fair to international students, we suggest teaching can improve. To respect our readers, we offer arguments below to articulate our rationale for this research.

A proposed moral rationale for improving university education delivery to diaspora groups is to respect international students by recognizing their learning styles and team performance are being impacted by cultural differences. Fitch and Surma (2006) imply from their Australian case study universities have an ethical duty to observe the diversity of multicultural students if unilaterally applying western pedagogy models and theory. “If we fail to review the programs we offer to international students, we are arguably guilty of assuming that Western education and Western public relations values are superior” (Fitch & Surma, 2006, p. 106).

An educational psychology theory perspective is that behavior and learning differ across cultures therefore teachers should at least be aware of this potential impact on pedagogy (Hofstede, 2007; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Strunk & Chang, 1999; Oxford, 1995). Factors beyond teaching pedagogy, student intelligence and study strategy, affect learning (UNESCO, 2005; Schunk, 2004; Mayer, 2003). However,

these factors have not been measured together. A global meta-analysis of learning styles complained there was “no extensive research in the UK on learning styles and social class, or on learning styles and ethnicity” (Coffield et al., 2004, p. 84).

The diaspora dimension in educational psychology arises because homogeneous cultures tend to cluster in universities, and it is argued here this creates groups having similar learning styles, which professors could be aware of to improve teaching. As Shi (2005) and Wahlbeck (2002) warn, diaspora groups can have propensity for negative actions. Brinkerhoff (2008) also highlights the psychological and sociological need for awareness of diaspora, and while her research focused on ethnic identity and violence, it is argued here that her rationale for government to appease ethnic minorities would also apply to universities. The relevant theoretical argument is: “individual and collective identity, including a sense of meaning and purpose, are fundamental psychological needs... [institutional policy] cannot create these for individuals, but policymakers can strive to ensure that society enables individuals to pursue these aims constructively...” (Brinkerhoff, 2008, p. 85).

From a methods standpoint, better models and statistical techniques are needed. Criticisms in the literature suggest learning style studies rely on small samples or a single statistical method (Hedeker, 2005; Freedman, 2005). Even when empirical evidence is given, there is a “bedlam of contradictory claims” (Reynolds, 1997, p. 116). Going back to basic educational theory, some writers rhetorically ask if there is a right learning style for multicultural students (Valiente, 2008; Carroll, 2005). Other researchers argue learning styles are not measurable or predictive (Mitchell, 1994; Curry, 1990). Thus, the catalyst for measuring diaspora using *a priori* models arose from contemporary studies of multicultural learning that suggest culture is very relevant as a latent factor but it needs to be further proven through empirical studies (Strang, 2010; Toledo, 2007; Abril, 2006; VanOord, 2005) and meta-analysis re-

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