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Chapter IX

The Open Ended Group Project: A Way of Including Diversity in the IT Curriculum

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Abstract

Modern societies are now beginning to accept that their citizens are diverse but, arguably, have not yet faced up to the challenges of diversity. Schools and universities thus have a role to play in equipping students for the diverse society in which they will live and work. IT students in particular need to appreciate the diversity of society as they specify, design, build and evaluate systems for a wide range of people. This chapter examines the concept of the Open Ended Group Project (OEGP)

and uses examples to demonstrate that OEGP forms an effective technique for encouraging students to work together in diverse teams. The appropriateness of OEGP as a means of addressing diversity in the curriculum is examined, and it is concluded that OEGP offers a suitable means of enabling students to develop strategies for accommodating diversity in both their future working life and the wider society.

Introduction

Diversity is a very important topic in the education of IT students since they, more than most others, will need to be concerned with considering, and accommodating, a wide range of diversity (cultural, social, physical, cognitive) in possible users when specifying, building and evaluating IT systems. As more and more people use computers in their work and for pleasure, this aspect of IT will inevitably increase. Students may also be expected to work with very diverse groups of people in teams which can span continents and cultures as well as include people with physical disabilities. However, of its nature, "diversity" is difficult to "teach" and cannot be fully covered in a normal curriculum (in both cases because it comes in so many different guises).

This chapter proposes the use of open ended group projects (OEGP) as a means of both introducing aspects of diversity and of providing a way of integrating students from diverse backgrounds. It also examines some misconceptions about the use of OEGP and shows how they can be overcome. The discussion is illustrated with examples drawn from the experiences of the three authors in using OEGP successfully at the university level over many years as a vehicle to reinforce more conventional teaching and introduce new ideas (Daniels & Asplund, 2000; Daniels, Faulkner, & Newman, 2002; Last, Almstrum, Erickson, Klein, & Daniels, 2000; Newman, Dawson, & Parks, 2000). Since the authors all work in different institutions, two in the UK and one in Sweden, they each bring a different perspective and have different tales to tell, but they are united in reporting that the OEGP method is very effective in making students consider issues that they would otherwise not think about, in motivating them to do well and in offering excellent learning opportunities, i.e., it is ideal for both introducing diversity issues and for accommodating diversity among the students.