



Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc

# Critical Visions

Thinking, learning and researching in higher education

*Proceedings of the*

## 29<sup>th</sup> HERDSA Annual Conference

10-12 July 2006

Perth, Western Australia

Caspersz, D., Skene, J. & Wu, M. (2006) Managing cultural diversity in student teams: A proposed conceptual framework, in *Critical Visions, Proceedings of the 29th HERDSA Annual Conference, Western Australia, 10-12 July 2006: pp 73-80.*

Published 2006 by the  
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc  
PO Box 27, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia  
[www.herdsa.org.au](http://www.herdsa.org.au)

ISSN: 0155 6223  
ISBN: 0 908557 69 8

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# Managing cultural diversity in student teams: A proposed conceptual framework

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**Abstract:** Managing cultural diversity in teams is a pressing challenge given the preponderance of teamwork as a tool to manage work in organisations whose workforces are increasingly becoming culturally diverse. The aim of this paper is to present a conceptual framework that may guide future research that focuses on managing cultural diversity in student teams. The discussion confirms that enhancing student satisfaction with the experience of working in culturally diverse teams is related to the development of an 'embedding context' that promotes diversity values and benefits for both the individual and the individual working in a team. The paper extends previous contributions using a teaching-research nexus: an ongoing research project into staff and student attitudes and experiences of teamwork combined with the development of teaching resources aimed at integrating teamwork into the curriculum. The conceptual framework presented here is reflected in the HERDSA publication *Managing Student Teams*.

**Keywords:** cultural diversity; student teams; teaching-research nexus.

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## Introduction

The challenge of preparing students to work in teams in post-university employment is one that has preoccupied us over the last few years and led to an ongoing research programme examining aspects of managing student teams. An earlier paper (Caspersz, Skene, Wu and Boland, 2004) described an approach developed from this research to managing cultural diversity, along with describing some of the strategic interventions used and student response to those strategies. These findings confirmed that students not only recognised the importance of raising their awareness about cultural diversity; many also stated that they preferred to work in culturally diverse teams because cultural diversity helped improve their creativity in problem-solving because 'there were more points of view to solve the problem'. The implication arising from these findings was that student satisfaction in working in culturally diverse teams was greater rather than less. In more recent unpublished research conducted with student teams before and after they were exposed to some of the same strategies described in our 2004 paper, initial analysis suggests that not only did students perceive that their skills in managing diversity improved as a result of working in culturally diverse teams; they also felt that their team project outcome improved as a result of cultural diversity (Caspersz *et al.*, 2006). In summary, student satisfaction with working in culturally diverse teams again appeared greater rather than less.

However, contradictory empirical findings about the effects of cultural diversity on teams emerges from current research. For instance, some studies suggest that culturally diverse teams may suffer 'process loss' arising from inability to communicate clearly, frequent disagreements on expectations, and attitudinal problems such as dislike, mistrust and lack of cohesion (Adler, 1997; Watson & Kumar, 1992). Culturally diverse teams can increase conflict, reduce social cohesion and increase turnover (Jackson, Joshi & Erhardt, 2003). An outcome of these difficulties may be what Smith, Fisher and Sale (2001) refer to as a 'homophily effect' in team member selection and operation, whereby team members form relationships with others who mirror certain attributes such as culture, stimulating possible adverse effects on trust, communication and ultimately overall team performance. However, other research portrays a different picture. Watson, Kumar, and Michaelson (1993) found that culturally diverse teams outperformed homogenous groups under certain conditions. Studies expounding the positives to be reaped from using culturally diverse work teams confirm that such teams can contribute to improved workforce productivity, if they are effectively managed (Cox & Blake, 1991; Adler, 1997; Richard, 2000; Distefano & Maznevski, 2000). As already described, our own research confirms that students prefer to work in culturally diverse teams and can see the 'value' in being part of these teams.

Martins, Milliken, Wiesenfeld & Salgado (2003) propose that one explanation for these inconsistent findings is that there are variables that have been inadequately examined in research thus far, but which modify the effects of cultural diversity on team members' experience. Jackson and Joshi (2004) clarify this as the 'embedding context' where the social and organizational context in which the team operates is viewed as having a moderating influence likely to be associated with positive or negative effects. Research subsequently suggests that the nature of the task (Pelled, Eisenhardt & Xin, 1999) team decision-making and conflict management approaches (Simons, Pelled & Smith, 1999) have been found to moderate the effects of diversity on team performance at many levels including team-level processes (Pelled, Eisenhardt & Xin, 1999; Simons, Pelled & Smith, 1999), group composition (Elsass & Graves, 1997) or organisational outcomes (Brickson, 2000).

In assessing the effects of cultural diversity on student teams we have retained the focus grounded in earlier research (Caspersz *et al.*, 2002, 2003) that confirmed that both individual and the individual-in-team-level processes were significant in affecting student satisfaction with team performance. Similarly our principal foci in assessing cultural diversity has again been on trying to understand the 'satisfaction' of team members at an individual and individual-in-team-level towards working in culturally diverse teams. This has been through unravelling their response towards an approach that sought to permeate the embedded context in which students conduct teamwork with a cultural diversity climate. Kossek and Zonia (1993, p 63) describe the word 'climate' as the influence of work contexts on employee behaviour and attitudes that are grounded in self formed perceptions. Thus, our aim in engendering a cultural diversity climate was to influence the behaviour and attitudes of the individual and individual-in-team-level to enhance student satisfaction in working in culturally diverse teams.

Our research confirms that we may be gradually achieving some success in this direction. However, rather than focus on describing these research findings given that most of these can be found elsewhere (see Caspersz, Skene & Wu., 2002, 2003; Caspersz *et al.*, 2004); the aim of this paper is to present a conceptual framework that may begin to explain these dynamics. In other words, how can we conceptualise these findings? Much of this framework has been borrowed from management research. The reasons for this are two fold. Firstly, a substantial

percentage of research conducted on culturally diverse teams stems from this body of literature; and secondly, the research with students as reported in this paper and elsewhere (see Caspersz *et al.*, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005) has been conducted in a Business School mainly with students completing a management major. While acknowledging the specificities of this environment, it is nonetheless suggested that these ideas may be generalisable beyond a Business School environment and could be fruitfully engaged with by those from other discipline areas who are seeking to enhance graduate attributes in managing (and surviving) culturally diverse teams.

In summary, the framework presented in the next section of the paper combines social identity theory, the resource based view of the firm (RBV) and finally contingent RBV theory. The logic in linking these frameworks is that we suggest that social identity theory helps in understanding why the individual may hold negative attitudes towards cultural diversity in teams. However, an opportunity arises to speculate whether changes in the embedded context may change these self based perceptions; in other words, whether changes in the embedding context may stimulate attitudinal change at the level of the self. We suggest that theory on resource based view of the firm (RBV) and a subsequent adaptation referred to as contingent RBV, provide a framework to understand how a conducive context may be 'created' to stimulate a more positive response by the individual towards managing cultural diversity in their team and teamwork.

### **A proposed conceptual framework**

Research emphasizing the interpersonal level of analysis has traditionally referred to social identity theory. According to this theory, belonging to a cultural group creates a psychological state within an individual that confers a collective self-identity or social identity (Tajfel, 1982): the individual comes to know him or herself by self-categorizing using particular social attributes that lie external to the self within social and organisational contexts, but interact with the self to help form an identity. Thus, in reference to teamwork, this body of theory helps unravel why individuals form team memberships on the basis of their similarity to others, and hence distinguish themselves from others on this same basis. Richard *et al* (2003) subsequently suggest that social identity theory serves as a foundation for explaining the negative effects of cultural diversity on teamwork. This is because while social identity generates group solidarity and conformity, at the same time it can also produce negative outcomes as individuals attribute a negative social status to those 'outside' their social group, stereotype behaviour and identify only with those individuals who share the same social identity (or as Elsass & Graves (1997) term engage in similarity bias). As a result, a phenomenon known as sub-group formation may emerge in teams; that is the formation of groups within a team where individuals form teams with others who share similar attributes such as culture (Hinds, Carley, Krackhardt & Wholey, 2000). The effect of sub-group formation by individuals on team performance can be two fold: it can create a potential for relationship conflict, which in turn affects intra-group trust and ultimately team performance. Secondly, sub-group formation can restrict access to communication and information and thus affect communication and co-operation in the team. Sub-group formation may also affect interpersonal work group processes and leadership emergence (see Caspersz *et al.*, 2003 for an explanation of these terms).

However, the interaction of the self with external forces also facilitates an opportunity for alternative social identities to be formed. It is therefore proposed that where an embedding context does exist that promotes a cultural diversity climate, the opportunity arises to alter

social identity or the individual's attitudinal and behavioural patterns. It is suggested that when teams operate in an embedding context, the satisfaction of the individual towards working in culturally diverse teams may be enhanced. However, the converse can also hold true; that is when the embedded context in which teams operate does not proactively promote a climate that is conducive to assist individuals alter their attitudinal and behavioural patterns, the potential for negative effects such as sub-group formation and other individual-in-team-level processes arises. As a result individual satisfaction towards working in culturally diverse teams is negatively affected. How can this be avoided?

In contrast to social identity theory, resource-based theory predicts a positive relationship between diversity and performance. The resource-based view (RBV) of the firm (Barney, 1986, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984) suggests that firms can attain a competitive advantage by developing firm resources. Barney (1991, p 101) defines these as being 'all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge etc' and then goes on to suggest that these resources fall into three categories: physical capital resources such as the firm's plant and equipment; organizational capital resources such as a firm's controlling and co-ordinating systems; and finally, human capital resources that include the training, experience, judgement, intelligence, relationships, and insight of individual managers and workers in a firm. Barney (1991, p 102-3) then distinguishes the conditions under which these resources can act as a source of competitive advantage and more importantly, as a source of sustained competitive advantage. In the case of the former, a firm's resource has the capability for competitive advantage when it is implementing a strategy that is not being implemented simultaneously by other competitors; sustained competitive advantage on the other hand is achieved when a firm does this but also when other firms are unable to duplicate the benefits of this value creating strategy.

It is suggested that the RBV framework unravels the opportunity for human resources and human resource management (or human resource practices) to be a source of sustained competitive advantage for a firm. This is because both human resources and human resource practices are generally path dependent, rare, non-substitutable and difficult for others to imitate (Barney, 1991). Yet for firms, human resources and human resource practices can improve a firm's ability to respond to market trends in a more expeditious and flexible manner (Wright, McMahan & McWilliams, 1994). It is these arguments that frame the 'business case' for cultural diversity in human resources, that is, that cultural diversity in the workforce provides several opportunities for a firm to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage (Richard, 2000). Empirical studies suggest that along with other diversity variables (for example, age and gender) cultural diversity can lead to improved creativity, flexibility, better decision-making, problem-solving and critical thinking skills amongst the workforce (Elsass & Graves, 1997; McLeod, Lobel & Cox., 1996; Hurtado, 2002). Studies further suggest that cultural diversity can enhance firm performance (Hartenian & Gudmundson, 2000; Richard *et al.*, 2003; Von Bergen, Soper & Parnell, 2005), improve firm marketing activities by enabling firms to better unravel market trends through having quality human resources (Cox & Blake, 1991); and increasing the willingness of employees to share and appreciate different perspectives (Terenzini, Cabrera, Colbeck, Bjorkland & Parente, 2001; Hurtado, 2002). Richard *et al.* (2003) conclude that as a result, cultural diversity may be a source of sustained competitive advantage that may not even be obvious to other competitors. In summary, RBV provides a framework for conceptualising a 'space' or scenario whereby the attributes of the self (as in cultural diversity) become valuable. The remaining question is how can we harness this value to 'add value' in an arena such as teamwork?

Like any theoretical framework, RBV has of course attracted its critics. A major criticism has been that external factors have not been duly considered in this literature (Aragon-Correa & Sharma, 2003), leading to RBV being portrayed as a somewhat static rather than dynamic theoretical framework (Priem & Butler, 2001). In a debate between Priem & Butler (2001) and Barney (2001), it was recognised that greater attention should be paid within RBV to the influence of the conditions under which a resource may be valuable, that is, a resource becomes rare, inimitable and non substitutable *contingent* upon the context in which the resource is embedded. Thus, empirical studies using a 'contingent RBV' framework have sought to explain how characteristics of the general environment influence the operation and management of a firm's resources to facilitate the attainment of sustained competitive advantage (see Aragon-Correa & Sharma, 2003, p 75 for an overview of these studies). The general argument here is that cultural diversity in human resources can confer sustained competitive advantage upon the firm when human resources are properly aligned with external variables. As Jackson and Joshi (2004, p676) note, 'Apparently, hiring a diverse workforce does not guarantee organizational effectiveness'; however, by facilitating a mediating process the opportunity arises for a firm to realise the potential advantages of culturally diverse human resources. In our view, this mediating process is the promotion of a culturally diverse climate or embedding context in which teamwork operates that does not only seek to add value to the individual, but also to the efforts of the individual-in-team level. By permeating the embedding context in which students operate with a cultural diversity climate that affirms the benefits of cultural diversity for both the individual and individual-in-team level processes, the potential for positive effects of cultural diversity on team performance arises. This is because this embedding context may shape the individual's social identity and hence attitudes and behaviours of the individual to their participation in culturally diverse teams. As a result, individual satisfaction towards working in culturally diverse teams is positively affected.

In summary, social identity theory suggests that there is a conceptual space to influence the attitudes and values of the individual. RBV and contingent RBV subsequently suggest that under certain conditions both the individual and organisation may benefit from culturally diverse human resources. The concept of an 'embedding context' that promotes diversity values and benefits for both the individual and the individual working in a team may meet these conditions as where this embedding context is facilitated, the behaviour of the individual may be altered towards being more positively disposed towards working in culturally diverse teams. The research challenge lies not only in untangling *how* to facilitate this embedding context; there remains a challenge in understanding how to ingrain the individual with the values framing this embedding context so that attitudes and behaviour towards participating in culturally diverse teams is positively altered - permanently.

## **Discussion**

It has already been noted that recent research findings confirm the influence of the embedding context in enhancing the satisfaction of individuals towards working in culturally diverse student teams. Not only did students affirm that they felt their team project outcome had improved as a result of cultural diversity in teams; they also positively affirmed that they gained high levels of satisfaction in working in culturally diverse teams. The significance of the argument about the influence of the embedding context is reinforced when re-calling previous research that sought to understand the effects of cultural diversity on individual and individual-in-team-level processes (Caspersz *et al.*, 2003). For this research, students were not exposed to a cultural diversity climate. Following Riordan and Shore (1997) three separate

groups were formed for analyses: teams with non-indigenous Australian team members, teams without non-indigenous Australian team members and teams with an equal percentage of non-indigenous Australian members and other cultural groups. It was found that the team with only non-indigenous Australian team members exhibited the highest levels of team member satisfaction, followed by those teams with an equal percentage of non-indigenous Australians and other groups and then finally those teams without any non-indigenous Australians.

While these findings imply that homogenous teams can improve team member satisfaction, they also confirm that homophily can dominate when the embedding context in which teams operate remains unchanged. Retention of this status quo is unacceptable for two reasons: firstly, the use of culturally diverse teams is becoming more commonplace as work organisations become more global rather than local in nature (Jackson & Joshi, 2004; Nagar, 2005) and workforce diversity increases (Kirkman & Shapiro, 1997). Therefore, our students need to understand that this is the context in which they will operate once they gain employment. Secondly however, students face the reality of cultural diversity everyday on campuses as student communities become increasingly diverse as a result of internationalisation strategies on the part of universities. For instance, in the recently released Australian report 'Messages from AUQA Reports' by the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (Stevens, 2005), 'cultural acclimatisation' was one of the 'eleven messages for action' facing Australian universities, with the report stating that 'internationalisation is an established dimension of Australian higher education learning and teaching'. Of equal significance was the comment that 'many international students are not adequately acclimatised to the Australian culture. This lack of cultural acclimatisation possibly impedes academic progress' (Stevens, 2005, p 4 & 5). In summary, facilitating an awareness of, as well as the ability to manage, cultural diversity in teams is becoming yet another graduate attribute that universities must seriously foster.

## **Conclusion**

Both the literature and research results reinforce the finding that cultural diversity in itself is not enough: creating a climate that values cultural diversity is also vital. Implementing teamwork and managing team selection so that teams are culturally diverse is an effective solution if, as this paper argues, care is taken to create a 'climate' where the benefits of culturally diverse teams are understood. Whilst this may be easier in a Business School where theoretical frameworks such as those discussed in this paper can be included in the unit curriculum, it is not impossible to create a similar 'climate' that supports culturally diverse teamwork in other disciplines.

In summary, it is suggested that positive findings of student satisfaction with working in culturally diverse teams in a context where diversity is valued supports the conceptual framework presented here that argues for the development of a positive 'climate' conducive to enhancing cultural diversity. As educators, we must also be mindful of our students' context: the majority of them want to acquire skills and attributes that will aid them to gain employment in their chosen field. Being an effective team member in a culturally diverse team is an important skill and we can aid this skill acquisition by providing opportunities for teamwork and creating a climate where diversity is understood and valued.

Finally, both this and previous papers have been shaped by the nexus between our teaching and research; that is, research informing teaching and teaching facilitating research. We

believe that this methodology has helped us to refine, reform and hopefully make our teaching approach more effective. This experience leads us to suggest that others should give serious consideration to using this approach in managing student teams and the particular challenge of cultural diversity effects on student teamwork; in other words, assess the response of our students and refine our strategies accordingly.

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