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# Tribes or Nomads:
# A Comparative Study of Collaborative Learning Frameworks

**Lauren Miller Griffith, Cameron S. Griffith, and J. Hunter Peden***
**Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Hanover College**
***Independent Scholar**

**Abstract**

This paper explores the relative value of "permanent" working groups versus "ad hoc" groups in large introductory level anthropology courses. The aim is to manage tutor workload while simultaneously enhancing students' attainment of the learning objectives. In addition, a main learning objective was for students to practice critical thinking and develop an understanding of cultural relativism. We argue that one effective experiential approach to teaching such concepts is collaborative learning with others in diverse learning groups. We explore the factors enhancing such learning experiences.

Based on our survey research we conclude that ad hoc groups are better for exposing students to diverse perspectives and permanent working groups are better for fostering an intimate learning experience within a large class. Although our original goals for using groups were mainly pragmatic, our research on teaching methods shows that it exposes students to diverse perspectives. We find this particularly appropriate for courses in anthropology aiming to teach the meaning of diversity and other related concepts. Therefore, we recommend that tutors/instructors choose their collaborative learning strategy based both on their intended learning outcomes and their learning environments.

## Introduction

In spite of the national trend in the US towards larger college class sections, introductory courses with more than fifty students remain challenging for students and faculty alike. For students, these courses often encourage passivity and anonymity, allowing at-risk learners to fall between the cracks. For faculty, developing rapport with students is difficult and grading can become a logistical nightmare. As "contingent faculty" in residence for one year at a mid-sized, regional comprehensive university in the American Southwest, we sought alternative pedagogies that would make introductory anthropology courses more engaging for the students and help us manage our collective six classes per semester with 100 students in each. Most of the students in these courses were non-majors in their first or second year of study at the university. Most students were of traditional college age (18-21) and represented an approximately equal mix of males and females. Though identified as a "Hispanic-Serving Institution," this institution is still predominately white, as were our classes.

At this university, as is the case at many U.S. institutions, students are allowed to select from a list of approved courses that fulfil certain distribution requirements. Anthropology courses often fill both the diversity requirement and the global cultures requirement, allowing students to save time and money by "double-dipping," meeting two requirements with a single course. Knowing this, we understood that not all of our students would find the topic inherently interesting.

This is why we sought to make the subject matter personally relevant to them by using various field exercises, active learning techniques, and discussions. We believed this would help create new pathways in the students' mind that would give them more ready access to this material for later use (either on an exam or in real life) than would be possible if we adhered to the *banking model* of education (Freire 2006[1970]:72). To facilitate this very active mode of classroom participation, we opted for a collaborative learning format. Our quandary was whether to use permanent working groups throughout the semester or to create ad hoc groupings as the need arose throughout the term. Essentially we wanted to know whether or not students learn better as nomads or as part of a tribe.

Our goal in this study was to evaluate the efficacy of working groups in two different introductory level anthropology courses that focused on cultural anthropology and linguistic anthropology, respectively. We compared the efficacy of "ad hoc" groups in classes that met three times per week for fifty minutes versus "permanent" working groups that met two times per week for seventy-five minutes. We approached this study with the hypothesis that the courses with permanent working groups would have two advantages over the course with ad hoc groups: 1) it would allow the instructor and teaching assistant to interact more frequently with students via group folders and 2) students would have more potential for developing intellectual community with their peers.

In this paper we suggest that our results show that both permanent and ad hoc working groups make a large introductory class an active and engaging learning experience, but also that the majority of college students actually enjoy working in groups. We found that using permanent working groups for the duration of the semester creates a more intimate classroom environment where students become more familiar with their peers and the instructor is more able to get to know his or her students. There were some scenarios, however, where we found that ad hoc groups were more effective. Thus, we ultimately recommend that instructors consider how the specific goals of their anthropology course fit into the broader intended learning outcomes for students before determining which of these two cooperative learning methods to employ.

**Current Perspectives on Collaborative Learning**

In their classic article on effective practices within undergraduate education, Chickering and Gamson (1987) recommend using techniques that encourage cooperation and peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Subsequent research continues to support this position; for example, one project defines collaborative learning as "a small group of students who cognitively and cooperatively engage in a common task to achieve a shared goal" (Nihalani et al. 2010:503). Collaborative learning exposes students to multiple perspectives, which is a necessary component of cultural relativism. Both courses included in our study, *Exploring Cultures* and *Culture in Communication*, stress cultural relativism as key components of an anthropological perspective. We focus on this because while it might be easier to teach some of these disciplinary modes of thinking in small upper level courses, students need these skills from the outset of their engagement with the discipline (Pace 1993). This is particularly true for us because many of the students in our study were taking their first, and sometimes only, anthropology course.

At present, collaborative learning is an approach that lacks substantive pedagogical cohesion and has shown mixed success in research studies. In the current literature on collaborative learning, there are myriad ideas on how groups should be constituted, what types of projects should be assigned, and how group work is to be assessed. In their cognitive psychology research, Nihalani and her colleagues have articulated that three conditions must be met in order for learning outcomes to be maximized in a collaborative environment: 1) students must feel "positively interdependent" yet accountable for their own work; 2) students should support one another in completion of tasks; and 3) students need to be reflective about their group's progress (Nihalani et al. 2010:504). These are indeed good guidelines, but

like most current research endeavours on collaborative learning, the parameters of collaborative learning are not well defined. For example, the label *collaborative* is frequently used to refer to everything from relatively simple discussion techniques like "think-pair-share" to semester-long projects that culminate in group presentations or papers. We believe there are important differences in many of these commonly used techniques and hope to ultimately identify specific manifestations of collaboration that are best suited to particular learning objectives.

Interest in collaborative learning has been slower to attract attention in higher education than in K-12 programs, where it has been used successfully for quite some time, and as such much of the research on group learning has been conducted in K-12 classrooms. For example, Shacher and Sharan (1994:313) conducted a study of 351 eighth grade students in Israel in which they found that students using cooperative learning "expressed themselves more frequently" and more verbosely than their peers who did not use group learning techniques. Furthermore, in the collaborative classrooms, responsibility for discussion was more evenly distributed across ethnic groups, whereas students with a Western background dominated discussions in the other classrooms (Shacher and Sharan 1994). Even the possibility that students from populations that have traditionally been muted by structures of dominance benefit from collaborative learning is justification enough to test its efficacy among college students.

Shimazoe and Aldrich also argue the benefits of collaborative learning. For students, working in groups affects the individual's growth and development in terms of social skills, civic values, and "positive attitudes toward autonomous learning" (2010:53). The cognitive benefits for students include deep learning, improved grades, and higher order thinking skills (Shimazoe and Aldrich). Particularly important for anthropology is that "[s]haring their views with peers allows students to reflect upon taken-for-granted assumptions held before taking the course" (ibid:52). In the course of small-group discussions, students are challenged by peers' thoughts and experiences, which often makes a greater impact on them than does the professors' articulation of her or his beliefs.

Linda B. Nilson discusses the challenges of teaching a large introductory class in the social sciences, where most of our students are more interested in fulfilling university requirements. Indeed, many of our students took these introductory level anthropology courses because they count as both diversity credits and as liberal studies credits and not because they wanted to learn about our discipline or to challenge their own long-held assumptions about society and the world around them. Nilson notes that such students, "come in with low motivation, low interest in the material, and little personal or educational investment" in what we have to teach (Nilson 2002:299). Their heterogeneity in terms of major, class standing, and personal identities makes it even more difficult to create a coherent pedagogical approach (ibid). And as if that were not enough, Nilson further notes that students often have preconceived ideas about the social sciences as lacking legitimacy and being "no more than common sense and/or relativistic opinion (Nilson 2002:299). Those of us who teach anthropology seek to change our students' orientation to the world, which demands going beyond content delivery and engaging students on critical, emotional, and ethical dimensions (Nilson 2002). While lectures can be effective in some situations, they often fall short when we are trying to support higher-order cognitive abilities, inspire affective change, improve social abilities, and influence ethical change (Nilson 2002:301). If these are our goals, then we will be far more effective asking students to engage with the material in an active way, and collaborative learning can be one component of this approach.

The heterogeneity of our classes in terms of such factors as age, gender, race/ethnicity, intellectual maturity, and interest in the discipline raises significant questions about how groups should be structured. Researchers tend to disagree about whether groups should be homogeneous or heterogeneous. There is some concern that when groups are comprised of individuals with differing ability levels, the more advanced student, "leverages those resources to obtain even more" (Nihalani et al. 2010:505). If one person seems to have a greater level of comprehension than the others, and the group defers to this person during discussion, he or she will probably continue to accrue benefits by

virtue of putting more work into building upon his or her initially high starting point. The rest of the group members may derive some benefit from the high-achiever's output, but there will still be a widening gap between the advanced member and the lower performing members, so any test scores or other measure of success will more likely be a reading of the super star's achievement and not the group as a whole (ibid). The group's true level of mastery or lack thereof can be masked by the superior performance of a single member. One possible solution is to make groups more homogeneous in terms of ability level, equalizing the playing field within each group so that the whole has a chance to grow together rather than be left behind by a superstar who is ratcheting to superior levels of success and understanding (ibid:506).

In other scenarios, however, there appears to be a benefit to having groups of mixed ability. In an article highlighting the problems students often face when advancing along Perry's continuum of intellectual development, Kloss suggests that less intellectually mature students can benefit from observing their slightly more advanced peers work through highly ambiguous problems (1994). This can be a useful tool in anthropology courses. Because our ability to study other cultures demands a high degree of relativism, students need to be able to break out of the dualistic mode of right and wrong. Creating heterogeneous groups, such as we did in the sections of these courses with permanent learning groups, has the potential to help students tolerate ambiguity and begin thinking like an anthropologist.

Embracing such new ways of thinking can be stressful for students (see Nuhfer 2010:185). Historian David Pace makes this clear when saying, "[s]tudents can experience great anxiety as they leave their old mental universe in which there were always right answers and enter a new one in which they must decide which position is most convincing and, then, systematically defend their choice" (Pace 1993:216). This recalls an instance in LMG's class when she reminded the students that in anthropology there were rarely right and wrong answers. One student, always talkative and sometimes hostile to the discipline, shouted out, "I want to go back to biology!" While sincerely hoping that he was being playful and not getting ready to storm out in frustration, LMG silently sympathized with him as he waded through a river of ambiguity into which he never asked to be thrown. This discomfort extends to many situations in which we ask students to generate knowledge instead of imposing it on them. Many of our students are comfortable with the banking model of education: they know what is expected of them, they know how to memorize the information we impart, and they enjoy the passivity and anonymity it enables. Others, such as anthropology majors who have an interest in internalizing rather than memorizing these lessons and individuals who have not been socialized into the role of passive and quiet student, jump into these activities with more enthusiasm.

In the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) community, we have a wealth of data to support the hypothesis that active learning is a highly effective strategy (e.g. Meyers and Jones 1993); however, our students often need to be eased into this process through particular facilitation approaches. This is one of the many reasons we use group work for our courses. As instructors, we can provide some scaffolding through our modeling of the thought processes we want students to engage in, but group work enables them to build their own scaffolds by interacting with peers, asking for clarifications, and refining their own ideas through low-risk conversation.

**Our Courses**

During the Fall semester of 2010 we implemented and assessed two different models of group work at a mid-sized public institution in the Southwestern United States. The university has been recognized as a "Hispanic-Serving Institution" and also has a significant number of first-generation students. We (LMG and CSG) were both new faculty members at this institution and JHP was a first-year graduate student who had been assigned to work as LMG's teaching assistant. LMG was assigned a teaching load of four sections with approximately 100 students in each section. Two of these sections were part

of an introductory course in cultural anthropology and the other two sections were part of an introductory course in linguistic anthropology. CSG was assigned a teaching load of two sections with approximately 100 students in each section. The section involved in this study was part of the same introductory course in cultural anthropology. The other section, part of an introductory course in archaeology, was not involved in the study.

LMG taught one section of each course (cultural and linguistic anthropology) on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, at a length of 50 minutes. This is the same format in which CSG taught his section of introduction to cultural anthropology. The remaining two sections were taught on Tuesdays and Thursdays at a length of 75 minutes. As is stated on all course syllabi, instruction in these two courses would not rely on lecture, as is typical in most large introductory level courses. In lieu of this, each session was to be broken into smaller blocks of time, often beginning with a micro-lecture of twenty minutes or less, after which students would be engaged in discussion, writing and other active learning exercises, as both groups and as individuals.

Our design philosophy rested upon the essential nature of active learning. We believe that whoever works the most, learns the most. With that in mind, we intentionally designed hands-on activities for nearly every class to either reinforce the readings and lecture material or push students to create a hypothesis about a novel situation, which would later be linked with existing anthropological knowledge. For example, during a unit on Magic, Religion and Worldview, we wanted students to articulate for themselves the defining features of myth. LMG created a lesson that would scaffold their learning by asking them to complete a three-column worksheet while watching several short video clips. The first column lists various myths that they are about to encounter via these clips. The second column provides a space to record concrete details about each specific myth. The third column provides a space where they can create abstractions out of the specific detail. For example, in the Norse creation myth, a specific detail is that new gods are born from the armpit of an existing mythological figure. We would then model abstraction for the students by discussing how this concrete detail can be generalized as "new characters are created from the body of an existing one." Students were then able to better understand this general feature in the other creation myths we discussed (and often spontaneously commented upon its prominence in the Christian creation story as well, which we intentionally did not include in our instructional plan).

Presented with the opportunity to teach multiple sections of the same course, we saw this as the ideal opportunity to implement an experimental research design that is becoming more highly valued and demanded in SoTL. Having a longstanding interest in the optimal usage of cooperative learning, we decided to test the relative value of permanent working groups versus ad hoc groups. We were doing the same activities in both classes, so what we were investigating was whether or not using permanent groups (with the continuity and community this implies) would make students more successful at achieving the learning objectives than their peers who were thrown into ad hoc groups for each activity.

**Methods**

On the first day of the semester, students were informed of the research conditions and the purpose behind the study. Because the surveys were anonymous and grades would be discussed in aggregate rather than attributed to individuals, the need for students to document their consent was waived by the Institutional Review Board. The students were provided with a statement of informed consent that articulated the potential risks and benefits of their participation in the study. This document was also posted online for them to refer to if they lost or misplaced their hard copy. Students were then given the opportunity to take a pre-course survey in class, which collected basic demographic data such as major and class standing. It also surveyed their general attitudes towards group work. The research protocol was nonintrusive and could be applied in virtually any anthropology classroom.
During the course of the semester, the lesson plans were nearly identical for the ad hoc version of the course and the version with permanent learning groups. The only variations came from practical

concerns of translating three fifty-minute sessions into two seventy-five minute sessions per week. Though total time in class remained the same, the different configurations demanded slight adjustments in the name of practicality. To minimize the impact on our study, LMG tried to design all class sessions into twenty-five minute blocks that could be assembled to fit either the fifty-minute or the seventy-five-minute sessions; however, this remained an ideal that was not always attainable.

Forming groups in the ad hoc sections was relatively easy. Before each hands-on activity, students would be given simple instructions such as "form small groups of 5-7 students each" or "relocate and nucleate," which meant that students were to move about the room and intentionally find new partners with which to work. Both of the rooms in which these courses were taught were traditional lecture theaters with fixed seating. Despite these constraints, students were able to either turn around in their seats and work with the students behind them or stand and walk to a new section of the room. Unless explicitly instructed to move about the room, students tended to form rather stable groups because they sat in more or less the same seats during each session. However, although group formation in the ad hoc sections was rather predictable, one student who was enrolled in an ad hoc section of the cultural anthropology course as well as the permanent learning groups section of the linguistic anthropology course told LMG that she greatly preferred the permanent working groups in linguistic anthropology because in cultural anthropology she always felt a moment of panic when asked to form a group on the spot. Even though she frequently worked with the same students, she was always anxious about being left out of a group and having to ask to join another group of students. She much preferred to be in a permanent group where she always knew with whom she would be working. Although anecdotal, this seems to be strong evidence in favor of permanent groups because this particular student sat in the same seat throughout the duration of the semester and worked with a relatively stable group of peers during in class activities yet still admitted to feeling anxiety when asked to form a group on the spot.

Forming permanent working groups was slightly more complex. On the first day of class, after receiving information about the study and completing their pre-course survey, students were asked to form groups of 5-7 students. By allowing students to form their own groups, we introduced many complicating factors. For example, some groups were comprised of students with preexisting friendships or romantic relationships. We also created the possibility of "go-getter groups" (those who opted to sit towards the front) and "slacker groups" (those who gravitate towards the back of the classroom). However, very few problems stemmed from giving students this freedom and we were never asked to adjudicate any disputes arising from preexisting relationships. This may be in part due to the fact that students were always graded as individuals and there were no 'group projects' in the traditional sense.

Once the groups had been formed in our section with permanent learning groups, we engaged in some minor team-building efforts. Students we instructed to introduce themselves to one another, exchange contact information if they felt it would be useful for them, list their names on a group roster, and come up with a mission statement for their group. They were then told to create concrete steps that their group could take in order to achieve that mission. Many groups struggled with this activity and we found it necessary to coax them to come up with more discipline specific goals, such as understanding multiple perspectives, rather than general academic goals, like getting an A. The sheet of paper containing the roster, mission statement, and goals was then stapled into a plain file folder with their group number on the front. This folder served as a means of communication between the student, LMG, and JHP for the entire semester. Students would submit work via the folder; LMG and JHP would periodically return work, distribute handouts, or submit memos on group progress via the folder.

At the end of the semester, the students were asked to complete a nearly identical survey to that they completed at the beginning of the semester. Again, it collected basic demographic data such as major and class standing as well as general attitudes towards group work. Our goal was to determine whether

or not students' opinions towards group work had changed as a result of taking these courses and whether the changes would be more marked in the sections with permanent learning groups than in the ad hoc sections. Because the students completed the survey anonymously, we have no way of connecting individual pre- and post-surveys and must look at the data in aggregate. Furthermore, we have a 22% attrition rate between pre and post surveys, which is due to both a small percentage of students dropping the class and lower attendance towards the end of the semester.

To analyze our survey results, we immersed ourselves in the data to familiarize ourselves with typical student responses. We wanted to start by looking for emergent themes in the data to prevent ourselves from imposing our own impressions of the group work on the student's responses. We then created a codebook to be used in a more formal deductive analysis. We were most interested in Q7, which asked about the positive aspects of working in groups, and Q8, which asked about the negative aspects of working in groups. After creating a unique coding system for each question (one codebook for Q7 and another for Q8), LMG and JHP each independently coded 15% of the pre-course surveys. This sample was selected using random serial sampling on the larger of our two data sets (the pre-course surveys versus the post-course surveys). We used Cohen's Kappa to test our interrater reliability and ensure that our codebook was reliable enough to use with one coder on the entire data set. Following this initial trial, JHP coded the entire set of 448 pre-course surveys and 351 post-course surveys.

| | Liked Group Work | Undecided | Disliked Group Work |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cultural Anthropology | | | |
| Permanent groups | 60% | 25% | 15% |
| Ad hoc groups LMG | 60% | 26% | 15% |
| Ad hoc groups CSG | 55% | 28% | 17% |
| Linguistic Anthropology | | | |
| Permanent groups | 53% | 27% | 20% |
| Ad hoc groups | 52% | 33% | 15% |

**Table 1. Pre-course survey results**

| | Liked Group Work | Undecided | Disliked Group Work |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cultural Anthropology | | | |
| Permanent groups | 75% | 16% | 10% |
| Ad hoc groups LMG | 64% | 26% | 10% |
| Ad hoc groups CSG | 71% | 18% | 11% |
| Linguistic Anthropology | | | |
| Permanent groups | 65% | 20% | 15% |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ad hoc groups | 63% | 30% | 8% |

**Table 2 Post-course survey results**

**Results and Recommendations**

One of the questions on the survey asked students to simply state whether or not they liked group work. They were given the chance to answer yes, no, or undecided. Figures 1 and 2 provide the number of student responses gathered in the pre- and post-course surveys by course and section. Based on these data, the difference in attitudes towards group work between the permanent learning groups and ad hoc groups are not great enough to make a recommendation for or against permanent working groups over ad hoc groups. Greater differences, of course, might have been seen in a study that juxtaposed permanent groups with a complete absence of group work. In our study, designed as it was, it may be the case that students enjoyed working in groups no matter the configuration because they were not asked to give a comparative perspective. This would have been unfair since each section only experienced one style of group work during the course of the semester. It may also be the case that different group configurations have different benefits, and an instructor should choose the model that best fits the learning objectives of the course.

It appears that a small minority of students will always dislike group work. The reasons for this are explored below in our content analysis of open-ended responses to a query about the worst aspects of working in groups. We can also conclude that a majority of students enjoy working in groups, the reasons for which are also explored below. There does appear to be marked improvement in overall attitudes towards group work between the pre and post course surveys; however, it also bears repeating that these surveys were anonymous and there was significant attrition. There is a possibility that those students who most disliked the course simply dropped out or did not attend on the day during which the final survey was administered. We do not believe this is the only factor that contributes to the shaping of our data, but we would be remiss in not recognizing the limitations of our research design.

While only 351 students responded to the post-course survey, the open ended nature of Q7 and Q8 make it possible for there to be more than 351 responses to each question. We counted 431 different responses to Q7: *What are the best aspects of working in groups?* Our content analysis of these responses revealed three significant themes: the pragmatic value of being able to rely upon peers, enjoyment of sociability, and appreciation of diverse perspectives.

Students in the sections with permanent learning groups mentioned the pragmatic benefits of being able to rely upon their peers for access to lecture notes, clarifications, assignment information, etc. more so than the students in the ad hoc sections (21% and 12%, respectively, in the cultural and linguistic anthropology sections with permanent learning groups as compared to 4% in both ad hoc sections of cultural anthropology and 3% in the linguistic anthropology ad hoc section). Students in the sections with permanent learning groups had a stable peer set upon which they could rely. If they missed class they were able to get the notes from their group. They also had ready-made study groups whether or not they chose to make use of such a resource.

There is some degree of sociability that occurs in all group settings, but it appears that this is not one of the primary benefits from the students' perspective. The frequency with which this theme occurred is relatively low across the board, though the linguistic anthropology section with permanent learning groups showed significantly more sociability than the other four classes (15% of students referenced sociability in this section as compared to the 5-8% of students mentioning it in other sections). This matches our (LMG and JHP) experience in the classroom, as students in this class would often protest if we asked them to answer a question without first discussing it with their group. We suspect their willingness to converse was related to the rapport they had built within their groups. Discussion often

fell flat in the ad hoc section of this course. This could have been related to the unique makeup of each group but could also suggest that discussion focused courses would benefit from permanent working groups.

Interestingly, appreciating the diverse perspectives of others was most pronounced in the ad hoc groups in which students were asked to form groups at the spur of the moment in class. In the ad hoc sections of cultural anthropology, nearly 9 students out of 10 made reference to appreciation of diversity in their surveys. This stands in contrast to just three-quarters of students in the cultural anthropology section with permanent learning groups that made similar comments. In the linguistic anthropology course, 97% of the students in the section with ad hoc groups mentioned appreciation of diversity whereas only 61% of the students in the permanent learning groups did. This suggests that if one's goal is to have students learn from a diverse group of peers, then there may benefit to using a significant amount of group work in class, but making sure that students are constantly working with different colleagues.

Our second open-ended question asked students to reflect upon the worst aspects of group work in these courses. We counted 357 different responses to this question. The responses in this category were much more difficult to categorize than were the responses to what students liked about group work, which suggests that fears and dislikes tend to be much more idiosyncratic than students' likes. Nonetheless, there were some notable themes in the students responses: concern about slackers, trouble having one's voice heard, difficulties coming to consensus as a group, social awkwardness when working with peers, and the tendency to become distracted.

The most significant concern in all classes was about students who do not pull their own weight on group projects. This is not a surprising finding as social loafing often deters both faculty and students from eagerly engaging in cooperative learning (Maier, McGoldrick, and Simkins, 2010, pg. 160). These concerns were lowest in CSG's ad hoc section of cultural anthropology (37%) and highest in the ad hoc section of linguistic anthropology (56%). What makes these findings particularly perplexing is that we intentionally avoided any "divide and staple" group projects that would allow students to assign individual tasks and then cobble together individual work without really creating a cohesive product (Barbara Millis, Personal Communication, 2011). In fact, none of the group assignments were to be conducted out of class nor were they graded in a formal sense.

A relatively common theme in the open ended responses regarding the downside of working in groups was the difficulty students sometimes had in claiming a voice or having their voice heard by the rest of the group. This was a more significant issue in the two ad hoc sections of cultural anthropology (18% in LMG's section and 17% in CSG's section) than it was in the section with permanent learning groups (3%). In this course, it appears that students working in permanent groups were more successful in having their voice heard than their peers working in ad hoc groups. This concern about having one's voice heard was relatively low in both of the sections of linguistic anthropology. It is possible that the content of the linguistic anthropology course, which is about communication, lends itself to making sure that all participants are heard. Alternatively, it may be the case that the students in linguistic anthropology are self selecting, because it is considered a more difficult course than cultural anthropology, and would be more willing to give others voice regardless of the content. This suggests that in a high draw course where students may not initially be interesting in hearing from all members of the group, permanent working groups could be a useful tool.

In all classes there was some mention of difficulty in gaining consensus among group members. In four of the five classes, nearly 10% of the students mentioned having this challenge. The number is surprisingly low in the section of linguistic anthropology with permanent learning groups (4%), which may have more to do with the personalities of the students than the nature of permanent working groups. Recall that a high percentage of students from this course rated sociability as a prime benefit of group work. Knowing that this might be a potential barrier to successful group work, instructors using

this approach might consider providing their students with a set of tools to use when students arrive at a conversational impasse. This follows Duffy and Jones's recommendation that faculty distribute a handout covering expectations for groups, interpersonal skills that contribute to successful group work, and lists of roles that individuals within the group are expected to take (1995:153).

A few students mentioned that they felt awkward working with peers on some group assignments. The good news that this category, while prevalent enough to catch our attention when creating the codebook, was extremely low in all sections. However, it may be worth noting that none of the responses from the students working in permanent learning groups referenced awkwardness during group activities. This reinforces our belief that permanent working groups can improve rapport among students, which may be more important in certain classes depending upon the content matter, the role of discussion in class, and the total enrolment.

Within each course, between 6% and 9% of students reported distractions as a drawback of group work. The structure of the group work does not seem to be a factor in predicting how distracted students would be. Our personal experience with these classes tells us that these numbers are probably significantly underreported and we do not have any measure of time spent on task during this study. The potential for students to get off task during group work is ever-present and instructors might consider preparing additional "sponge" or "extension" activities for groups to work on if they finish an assigned task or discussion before the rest of the class (Millis 2002). However, students also become distracted during traditional lectures and one of the goals of CL is for more students to be actively engaged in the course material, which in turn limits incivility and "off-task" behaviour (Johnson & Johnson, 2010, pg. 72).

**Conclusion**

At the beginning of the term, we asked ourselves what we wanted our students to be able to do with their knowledge by the end of the semester. A main objective was for them to practice critical thinking and reflect on the ethical tensions within cultural relativism. We believe that the "felt" meaning of such concepts can be done best through collaborative learning. Cultural and linguistic anthropologists thrive on the ambiguity of interpretation where there is rarely a straightforward answer to any given question. For the majority of our discipline's history, anthropologists have been considered lone ethnographers, an appellation which conjures up a romantic, if dangerously outdated, notion. This was why we wanted our students to work in groups in our anthropology classes. Although our original goals for using groups were pragmatic, our research showed that it exposes students to diverse perspectives, which we found particularly appropriate for courses in anthropology.

We believe that the use of permanent working groups had a valuable influence on our students' classroom experiences. Perhaps even more important than changing students' feeling about group work itself was how using permanent working groups influenced the climate of our classroom. LMG and JHP found themselves looking forward to the sections with the permanent groups more so than those with the ad hoc groups because they had more of a community feel to them and the discussions tended to be more lively, peppered with running jokes and shared understandings. The other sections did not have the same feeling of engagement in a shared learning experience. This subjective assessment aligns well with the survey findings that permanent working groups are beneficial when trying to create an intimate learning environment within the context of a large lecture hall.

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