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‘Participation’ in the internationalized Higher Education classroom: An academic staff perspective

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For universities seeking to promote internationalization, the development of an understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity among staff and students is a priority. Cultural and linguistic diversification of the student body can, however, present academic staff with challenges in the areas of curriculum, teaching methods and assessment. In this study, we take up the culturally variable notion of “participation” as a constituent of learning and draw on data derived from focus-group interviews to probe the participation-related challenges reported by academic staff in a UK university. Finally, we consider the implications of our findings for strategic interventions aimed at academic staff.

Keywords: diversity, student participation, higher education, intercultural competence, teacher training

Introduction

The internationalization of the student body that has resulted from the globalization of higher education presents opportunities for students and lecturers to broaden their engagement with linguistic and cultural diversity, interrogate knowledge and assumptions from fresh perspectives, and develop intercultural competencies (Messelink, Maele & Spencer-Oatey, 2015; Volet & Ang, 2012). Such competencies both underpin and promote notions of global citizenship and employability that sit high on universities’ agendas and which, consequently,

also frequently feature in their mission statements (Schuerholz-Lehr, 2007). However, while anecdotal evidence suggests that academic staff working in this changing university environment are often sensitive to linguistic and cultural diversity within their classrooms, and strive to use that sensitivity to construct a positive learning environment, the extent to which the cultural and linguistic diversification of the student body results in the realization of such favourable outcomes is highly contingent upon the generation of opportunities for students to voice their perspectives and interact with each other during classroom learning.

With increased emphasis now being placed on teaching quality and the student experience within the higher education sector, many lecturers strive to promote active engagement in learning and greater classroom dialogue through forms of participation such as group work, discussions, presentations, debates and interviews. These have the potential to create rich opportunities for deepening understanding of diverse cultural perspectives on the world and on the subject matter being studied. Yet, divergent assumptions amongst students and lecturers about what constitutes ideal 'participation' within a learning environment, and rooted in broader perceptions concerning learning, teaching, assessment and role relationships, can present challenges for lecturers and students alike (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Tange, 2010; Teekens, 2003). Those challenges can engender high levels of frustration among lecturers and leave students feeling excluded, marginalized, undervalued and resentful when expectations clash during learning activities, particularly group work (Popov et al., 2012; Volet & Ang 2012).

Much of the existing research on classroom participation and internationalization has focused on the student perspective, and far less is known about how lecturers perceive and interpret participation-related challenges in the internationalized classroom environment; yet, as Tange (2010) points out, it is they who are at the forefront of internationalization. If universities and their students are to reap the potential benefits that a culturally diverse

learning environment offers, then challenges associated with classroom participation and intercultural dialogue need not only to be acknowledged but also understood and acted upon via appropriately informed strategic interventions. In the study we report on here, we were specifically interested in the participation-related challenges faced by academic staff in a highly internationalized classroom environment, and how they deal with those challenges. Rather than focusing on lecturers' explicit definitions of participation, we were, instead, keen to explore their implicit assumptions about participation, as these were manifested in the various ways in which they interpreted and responded to issues of learning both within and outside of the classroom.

Participation as a Cultural Act

Although the notion of "participation" is frequently used in educational contexts, the meaning of this term is by no means universal, nor are the ways that willingness to participate are expected to be communicated to teachers and peers. Within any classroom context, the notion of participation is interpreted in relation to the main activities of teaching and learning which are expected to take place. The instantiation of these activities, in turn, depends on variable assumptions about participant roles, rights and obligations, the subject matter, interaction around the subject matter (including turn-taking conventions), ways of demonstrating competency, and more (Jin & Cortazzi, 2017). As such, what lecturers and students say and do in the classroom are not neutral activities but ultimately *interpreted* as having particular meanings and indexing particular attitudes and expectations within that context.

In Western universities, it is frequently taken for granted that students should be active participants in their own learning, and participation is often seen as something that manifests not only in students' attentiveness to information or ideas but also in particular communicative behaviors. Fassinger (1996), for example, sees participation as "any

comments or questions that the students offered or raised in class" (p. 27), while Bippus and Young (2000) view it as engagement in class discussion, and refraining from negative behaviors. This construction of participation as overt communicative behavior tends to reflect a culture of learning underpinned by the Socratic Method, a dialectic method through which knowledge and understanding is advanced through a process of critical thinking stimulated by argument and counter argument, question and answer (Scollon, 1999). It is by its very nature interactive and its value in creating knowledge and understanding permeates educators' beliefs about what constitutes appropriate teaching and learning behaviors (Li, 2012). The Socratic tradition is characterized in part by spontaneity of dialogue and commonly manifests in the classroom through lecturers' attempts to elicit comments from students in a whole-group format (Scollon & Wong-Scollon, 2001). Within a culture of learning shaped around this tradition, the ability to engage in dialogue – including spontaneous dialogue – comes to be a defining element of teacher and student roles. In essence, one instantiates the role of teacher by constructing opportunities for students to engage in dialogue around subject matter, and students instantiate the role of student by engaging. The act of speaking is seen as making a contribution to learning, as it is through the articulation and interrogation of ideas that phenomena can be better understood (Cazden, 2001). Within such a perspective, students who are active in asking or answering questions are more likely to be seen as participating than those who demonstrate their attentiveness and engagement in less overt ways. By extension, more outspoken students are able to use their verbal contributions not only to express ideas and opinions, but to position themselves as "good" or "competent" students. Conversely, this can mean that students who are less outspoken in classroom interactions are assumed to have difficulties with language skills, culturally derived personality attributes, or general competency (Straker, 2016). It can thus be said that participation is not simply a

neutral role-based communicative act, but rather a culturally contexted act that leads to social evaluation.

In fact, much of the literature on the internationalized classroom takes an interaction-centred view of participation for granted and thus frequently treats students from non-Western backgrounds in stark – and, we would argue, quite superficial – terms as "difficult" students, based on the (frequently ethnocentric) perception that they are reluctant to speak, offer opinions, be critical, or contribute to or take the initiative in group work activities (Ryan & Louie, 2007). Particularly salient has been discourse around the perceived lack of participation by students from East-Asian countries such as China, Korea and Japan. Such discourse has become clichéd and reinforces chauvinistic stereotypes of the 'shy Asian student' (Dervin, 2011; Holliday, 1997). Rather than scrutinize the notion of participation itself, perceived lack of participation by international students is framed as the problem to be explained, and emergent explanations inevitably involve recourse to stereotypes of Asian learners as passive, uncritical, teacher-dependent, and with a preference for rote-learning (Straker, 2016). Such characterizations have been questioned by scholars such as Cheng (2000), who argues that most Asian students actually wish to participate but are constrained from doing so due to "situation specific factors" (pp. 441-442) such as teaching methodologies (and students' lack of familiarity with them and the student roles they assume) and lack of language proficiency – something emphasized by Tsui in her 1996 study in which she found that language anxiety and a concern with being perfect and not losing face bred reticence. What is intriguing about commentaries such as Cheng's and Tsui's is that in the process of casting a critical eye over the positioning of Asian students in the literature vis-à-vis participation, they effectively validate Western-centric ideas of what participation is. That is to say, in criticizing scholars' lack of understanding of why Asian students tend not to speak out and express opinions, they appear to take it as given that participation *is* speaking

out and that other less overt, non-verbal forms of engagement do not qualify as participation. Furthermore, crude dichotomies such as “Western vs. Asian”, if they ever were legitimate, can hardly be considered so today given the frequently self-publicized ‘international’ credentials of universities and the unprecedented levels of student diversity that characterise them. Such diversity increasingly goes beyond simplistic binary distinctions when, increasingly, students’ perceptions and behaviors are a hybrid product of multicultural interactions, mixed marriages, direct experience of other cultures through travel, media etc., and other factors.

In order to move beyond ethnocentric judgments of the cultural “other”, it is important to recognise that participation can be construed in multiple ways, depending on the subject matter, the perception of teacher and student roles, and other variables that constitute the culture of learning in a given context (see, for example, Li, 2012). For instance, within educational environments in Confucian-heritage cultures, it is common for participation to involve a more teacher-fronted classroom dynamic, where verbal contributions by students are systematically structured around the reproduction of previously learnt material and the recitation of content. Participation is defined less in terms of spontaneous verbal production and more in terms of attentiveness to the ways in which the teacher orchestrates learning and the instantiation of relatively clearly defined interactions. Indeed, such a construction of participation reflects a broader cultural philosophy which shapes how students view themselves – namely as apprentices whose role is to learn from their masters/teachers, who are the repositories of knowledge and fulfil the role of intellectual and moral guides (Li, 2012). Within such a perspective, participation is closely aligned with values such as respect, patience, and self-cultivation (Lee 1996).

The fact that participation is a culturally constructed notion, and thus liable to contestation, has important implications for expectations and judgements regarding degree of

engagement in class activities, which, in turn, have consequences for how students' performances are evaluated by their lecturers and peers. It is important, therefore, that we understand the ways that lecturers make sense of the participation-related challenges they encounter when teaching in a culturally diverse classroom, and how they go about addressing them.

The Study

The data we report on below were generated in response to a set of research questions, prompted by the findings of a larger, more wide-ranging study focused on student diversity in the university classroom setting and in which participation emerged as by far the most salient theme. Our research questions thus sought to shed light on the way in which lecturers understand and experience participation in their everyday teaching activities, and were articulated as follows:

1. What participation-related challenges do lecturers experience in the classroom?
2. What strategies do lecturers employ in order to meet those challenges?

In exploring their perceptions, we were particularly interested in how lecturers' assumptions regarding participation influenced their interpretation of student classroom behaviors, and how this in turn influenced their decision-making vis-à-vis classroom teaching and learning. We were cognizant of the fact that the notion of participation is itself constructed relative to cultural, epistemological, and pedagogical assumptions, and since discourse on participation in the UK higher education context tends to draw mainly on constructivist theories of learning and emphasizes dialogical forms of engagement in the classroom, we were interested in whether lecturers reflected on the cultural construction of participation when experiencing participation-related challenges.

The study was carried out at a UK university business school the student demographic of which is characterized by considerable lingua-cultural diversity, although with a high proportion of Asian students – mainly Chinese and Indian – and a minority of British students. It was conducted in accordance with the university's guidelines and the necessary ethical approvals were sought and obtained. Lecturers within the school were invited to participate in the study via an email, attached to which was an information sheet and a consent form on which recipients indicated their willingness or otherwise to participate. Stated assurances of confidentiality were seen as particularly important in mitigating the possibility of participants feeling reluctant to voice opinions that could reflect poorly on the institution, the school, colleagues, students, and their own teaching practices.

Following the receipt of responses, two factors were taken into account in determining the composition of the focus groups. Firstly, in order to counter the possibility of a "hierarchical effect" caused by less senior academic staff feeling inhibited about expressing their views and teaching approaches openly in the presence of more senior colleagues who may be critical of them, those academics of higher seniority were grouped separately from their less senior counterparts. Secondly, two of the focus groups were comprised exclusively of local, native speaker teachers and two exclusively of international, non-native speaker teachers. The motivation for this was to minimize the possibility that academic staff from overseas might feel "spotlighted" in front of UK staff when recounting teaching challenges, potentially leading them to "filter" what they said. The five focus groups were, consequently, composed as follows:

[Insert table here please]

All focus group discussions were audio recorded using high-fidelity MP3 players. Included in the recording at the start of each focus group interview was participant profile information including: name, status/title, nationality, sex, courses taught to date, years of teaching experience in UK higher education, and languages spoken. All interview data was subsequently transcribed professionally and checked for accuracy by the researchers.

A grounded theory approach was adopted and a thematic analysis conducted manually on the qualitative data elicited from the five focus group interviews, with a view to identifying emergent themes from an initial open coding of the data.

Results and discussion

What quickly became evident from the data was that lecturers came to the classroom with clear assumptions about what constitutes participation and the ways that participation-related challenges impact on teaching quality, learning standards, assessment, and their pedagogical behaviors. Integral to lecturers' perceptions of participation were assumptions about ideal student contributions, understanding of/competence in the subject matter being taught, and their willingness and ability to learn – factors which, in turn, influenced the choice of pedagogical strategies adopted by lecturers and the ways in which they attempted to deal with conflicts around participation which arose amongst students.

Lecturers' expectations and interpretations of student participation issues

It was frequently in the ways lecturers identified and articulated students' *lack* of participation that assumptions and expectations concerning participation emerged. A

comment by one participant, Grace, typified a perception which, as she herself observed, was shared by her colleagues – including many of those who took part in the focus groups:

> *Grace: I mean, it's really a couple of weeks in, you have that feeling of here we go again, the blank wall, the lack of a dynamic. And it's not just me, that's across the whole teaching team.*

The lack of a dynamic, captured in Grace's metaphor of a "blank wall", implies not simply a paucity of verbal contributions by students but also of non-verbal responsiveness to her attempts to create an animated classroom. For Grace, the assumption appears to be that even when students do not speak up, they should minimally demonstrate to the lecturer some form of overt communicative engagement via facial expressions and other kinesic cues. The fact that the interpretation of non-verbal communicative signals can inform lecturers' perceptions of who is participating – and therefore, their judgements of who are/are not good students – has important implications for the internationalized classroom, as the ways in which students demonstrate attentiveness non-verbally are likely to be culturally variable (Lee, 1996). The focus group respondents confirmed that when students do not exhibit these kinds of non-verbal behaviors, it can lead to frustration on the part of lecturers as they struggle to determine whether students are experiencing language-related comprehension difficulties, or simply manifesting cultural predispositions.

> *Mike: I think it's basically impossible to distinguish between the two [language proficiency and cultural disposition]. If you are sitting in a class for one hour for eight weeks doing a tutorial you might get some sense towards the end, when the module is coming to an end, but it's practically impossible to do it.*

While it is, perhaps, natural for lecturers to interpret non-verbal cues within their own cultural frames of reference, the ability to suspend their own assumptions about participation and seek to understand behavior from alternate perspectives is key understanding and effectively managing diversity in the classroom (Teekens 2003). Comments from participants did indicate awareness of the need to recognise the potential for cultural variability in communicative signals, with many remarking that although they tried to interpret ostensible reluctance to participate from multiple perspectives before making judgments, this was a significant challenge. Importantly, in attempting to unpack the cultural issues at play, lecturers did not necessarily construct perceived lack of participation from a "deficit perspective", as the following quotation suggests:

> *Grace: I don't know if it's language. I don't know if it's cultural in terms of respect and hierarchy. I really don't know where it's coming from.*

Here, Grace exemplifies how lecturers may draw on understandings of particular cultural dimensions – in this case, notions of respect and hierarchy – in order to make sense of perceived lack of participation: while the students' behavior may not align with her idea of participation, rather than attribute this to a negative intention on the part of the students, she attributes it to a positive intention and appears aware that orientations to power distance can be culturally variable, and that students' participatory behavior is influenced by perception of teacher and student roles (Flowerdew & Miller 1995). The formulation here is thus not one of cultural "problem" but of cultural "difference", which she uses as a frame for interpreting observed classroom behavior. A slightly more elaborated formulation is proffered by another lecturer:

Moshdeh: I think the expectations come more in terms of how are we supposed to perform if we're not given discipline or given that, like in terms of like very high expectations in terms of what the lecturer has to do, and not necessarily what they have to do on their side.

Here, taking the student perspective ('we'), Moshdeh explores a link between participation and potentially different conceptions of teacher and student roles. Although she does not problematize her own expectations vis-à-vis participation, she interprets ostensible student passivity as emanating from a culturally derived expectation that one should defer to the teacher in the first instance rather than find ways to take the initiative. The nature of the characterization is thus not one in which "students from background X prefer to be passive", but rather one which recognizes the potential for culturally diverse assumptions about classroom roles to impact on participatory behaviors (Jin & Cortazzi, 2016).

In such ways, our data highlighted the fact that although lecturers did not necessarily abandon their own expectations regarding participation, many of them routinely reflected on the student behaviors they noticed and aimed to interpret them in cultural or linguistic terms which did not necessarily adopt the kind of deficit perspective referred to earlier. Lecturers showed awareness of the potential for norms of participation to be culturally variable even when they could not be sure as to whether such differences were necessarily at play in a particular instance. As will be explored below, such awareness shapes the pedagogical strategies lecturers adopt when confronted with perceived lack of participation in their classrooms. While, as we shall see, certain

strategies appeared to have a positive impact on participation, as construed by academic staff, the lack of insight into what was driving student participation behavior meant that those strategies were somewhat hit-and-miss.

Lecturers' strategies for promoting "participation"

Our respondents reported making efforts to adapt to the dynamics of multicultural classrooms by adopting various strategies which they believed would reduce students' affective barriers in the process of socializing them into "communication-heavy" modes of participation dominant in the local context. One strategy, described by Beth, was in response to a frequently-arising situation where students would be asked to discuss academic articles in class but showed little inclination to volunteer anything, with the result that discussion was either superficial or virtually non-existent:

> *Beth: We would talk about articles that were particularly relevant and try to apply it in some sort of way, trying to get a discussion going. It was like pulling teeth and I ended up giving the discussion questions ahead of time to try to help with that so then they could prepare a little bit more as they were reading through the materials. It still just didn't happen, they didn't do the reading, or they just … or they just were too shy to kind of say the answers.*

Beth is evidently surprised that despite scaffolding student participation by providing questions in advance, her attempts at eliciting comments within the format of whole-class discussion have been unproductive and likened to "pulling teeth" – an expression echoing Grace's metaphor of the "blank wall". Beth's response is to make sense of the situation by

attributing students' dearth of active verbal response to their lack of preparation or to personality traits (shyness), rather than to cultural predispositions. Indeed, she continues in this vein:

> *Beth: But I felt like all I can really do is give the questions ahead of time, because I was a very, very shy student. I understand feeling put on the spot when you're not ready. And so I try to be sensitive to that. And I feel like giving them the questions ahead of time there isn't a surprise about what they're going to be asked to do. And so I ask the exact question that is written there; they've had a chance to talk about it.*

Beth is clearly sensitive to "the other" and her strategies reflect this. By providing questions ahead of time, she reduces the number of unexpected variables in learning and thus provides a more transparent structure for interactions around the subject matter under attention. A similar strategy, adopted by Grace, was to assign students particular tasks in order to help ensure they are cognitively and affectively ready to present and engage in seminars etc. In addition to providing discussion questions and tasks in advance, experimenting with group size surfaced as an effective strategy. Some lecturers were attuned to the potential influence of group size on students' willingness to speak up and reported a notable increase in participation after encouraging students to discuss issues with each other in smaller groups before attempting to elicit ideas.

> *Chantal: … so I flipped the classroom which basically means that all of my lectures are delivered as online lectures with annotations on, and I made all of the classwork in a group work format … And everybody kind of splits themselves into*

groups and we have nearly an hour where in my sessions I was there and a couple of PhD students walking around chatting to them. And I found that they really opened up to me then on a kind of one-to-one basis without feeling that the rest of the class were watching them. And they could be in groups that they'd chosen to be in, so that went down really well this year… perhaps it's getting them working in smaller groups [that] is much more beneficial to them … But they will talk to you if you go up to them and you ask them questions and you don't get the silence then...

Both Chantal's online delivery of lectures and her use and choreographing of group work show a concern with affective factors in learning. Further, her comments reveal insight into the ways that adjustments to group size and configuration can scaffold participation by allowing students time to formulate ideas prior to elicitation. Whereas elicitation in a whole-group format can be difficult, approaching students as they collaborate in group work can produce unexpected results, with students who lecturers had assumed were reticent to speak due to linguistic or cultural factors, betraying the stereotype by showing themselves to be quite forthcoming. This is consistent with Cheng's recognition of the importance of situation-specific factors (op. cit.) as opposed to cultural predispositions, and is expressed by Ali as follows:

Ali: I've seen the students who are really silent in the large class discussions, then put into groups. I was really surprised because I thought maybe they didn't have the language skills. But actually they do, they speak really well, they present really well, but they just like to work in smaller groups.

This shift from a whole-group work format to a group format in which students discussed content with each other directly was a commonly-adopted strategy in response to perceived lack of participation, one which, reportedly, made the classroom environment as a whole less teacher-fronted. This, in turn, led students who otherwise appeared hesitant to speak, to open up, surprising lecturers with their capacity for working productively under these modified classroom conditions. Thus, although lecturers maintain a view of participation as spoken interaction, they reconfigure classroom dynamics in order to enable such participation to take place more easily.

The tension between participation strategies and educational standards and future workplace demands

Although, in some cases, adjustments to teaching practices were seen to have had a positive impact on participation as constructed by the focus group participants, there was an unshakeable sense among several lecturers that such adjustments were at the expense of academic rigour; that is, they felt that they amounted to a simplification or toning down of content, with implications for educational standards and their professional integrity. This compromising of standards was one of the strongest, most consistent themes to emerge from the interviews. Strategies such as providing analytical discussion questions in advance or moving away from whole-class elicitation and discussion represented a departure from their normal modus operandi and expectations of teaching and learning, and the extra scaffolding they provided was widely seen as amounting to a retrograde step:

> *Beth: I mean basically I'm having to lower standards, yeah. And it is uncomfortable and you feel like how much more spoon-feeding do we do here?*

Like I said, I scaled back readings, I give questions ahead of time. You know, I felt like I did all of these things to try to improve the situation, covering less content. And how far do we want to go?

Adapting to students' needs, whether cultural or linguistic, created other tensions for teachers, in addition to concerns over standards. Most particularly, it became evident that expectations of participation and the nature of its manifestation reflected a recognition by many participants of the need to create an authentic learning environment that anticipated and prepared students for the kinds of contexts of communication they would encounter in the business world. Thus, it seems that teachers, in part, rationalize their enforcement of participation patterns according to a range not only of epistemological and pedagogical assumptions rooted in their perspectives on teaching and learning, but also according to their discipline and their assumptions about the professional workplace and the associated practices, therefore, into which students need to be socialized:

Beth: *And my feeling is, to get a Master's degree that is part of it. You've got to learn how to express yourself. You've got to learn how to give your opinions. I feel like we would be doing them an injustice if we lowered that expectation or if someone was able to get by without having to do that. If you're in a boardroom and somebody goes around and says, "What do you think?" You can't just, you know, avoid the issue. You've got to ... you've got to develop, it's a skill and you've got to be able to develop that skill and I feel quite strongly about that.*

What is intriguing is that some lecturers were alert to the possibility of cultural differences in respect of workplace expectations and conscious of their own lack of knowledge concerning the business contexts in which their students would be operating in their home countries:

> *Sally: Well, it's interesting you say that because … a lot of our Chinese students will obviously return to China, the vast majority no doubt. And I don't know actually what their professional world is like quite honestly … and we're back to sort of the issue of the culture, it is ... we are told it's a very deferential society. So will they sit around a boardroom table and be expected to say something or will they all be* [unclear] *ultimately to the MD?*

While the notion of standards emerged most strongly in relation to participants' perceptions of the quality of education and its efficacy in preparing students for their future work contexts, it also arose in a somewhat different sense: teachers frequently found themselves conflicted over the question of the extent to which they should be requiring students to conform to local standards of classroom behavior, as a matter of principle:

> *Sally: One question I raised … was how much should we, as it were, bow to other cultures or accommodate other cultures and languages versus, look, you're in a UK institution and this is the way we do it? I know you can't absolutely go that way. But I do … you know … where on the spectrum should we be?*

Although the added value gained from a culturally and linguistically diverse student body is widely acknowledged by lecturers, they frequently struggle over the question of standards and continually mediate between, on the one hand, their own sense of appropriate academic

standards and expectations around forms of classroom participation that are essential for developing along a specified academic trajectory and preparing for future work contexts, and on the other, the realities of the multicultural classroom.

Mediating disputes around participation and issues of assessment

An important theme that emerged in the interviews was that the ways in which individual lecturers conceptualize and orient towards participation not only shape their interactions with students and the pedagogical adjustments they make, but it also influence how they deal with participation-related disputes that arise amongst students in classroom group work and project work. The issue of participation emerges in a particularly salient way in mixed-culture group work when there is the perception amongst students of inappropriate and/or inequitable allocation of roles or completion of tasks (Popov et al, 2012). Perceived linguistic and cultural capital influences how students allocate tasks and it can lead to some students feeling as though they are being unfairly burdened or "used". This can become a source of friction amongst students, which the lecturer is then required to manage as an arbiter of sorts, invoking his/her own sense of appropriate participation within a group-work context. One of the main issues that surfaced for lecturers was how to take a stance on the seemingly unfair, culturally/linguistically-driven division of labour:

> *Sara*: For me when the students complain about culture or language, it's when it comes to putting the assignment together and … in this most recent term a student said, you know, "I had to correct everybody's English. I had to spend hours rewriting the paper and that's not fair to me because I'm the English speaker."*

And it's true, like they shouldn't have to be the one that automatically gets put in the role of assembling the paper because they are the native English speaker.

Here, Sara faces the issue of the disproportionate workload of home students that arises when their perceived linguistic capital leads them to be placed in the role of language specialist. The data suggest that such positioning can lead to negative outcomes from the perspective of international students as well:

Beth: And then I had some other Chinese students tell me that they were really annoyed with some of the English-speaking students because they felt like they maybe weren't working as hard, because things were going to come easier to them. So they felt like they weren't as engaged with the group presentation because they felt like they could do it more last minute. And they realized, yeah, so they're English speaking, so they're not kind of taking it as seriously …

In a sense, these last two quotes illustrate different, albeit related, dimensions of the same problem. When international students perceive home students as having superior linguistic capital, this can force home students into the role of language expert with a "language-heavy" workload. On the other hand, home students can exploit this linguistic workload to reduce their contribution to other areas of the task. In terms of mediating participation-related disputes in a highly internationalized classroom, the fundamental question facing lecturers is whether it is legitimate and fair for students doing group work to anchor the division of labour in identity categories such as "home student" or "international student", based on the knowledge and skills that members of that category are assumed by default to possess. Such a situation presents quite a dilemma for the lecturer as it is never clear-cut how the division of

labour should be determined, and when linguistic or cultural issues become an intervening variable it can be difficult to guide students to task completion while mediating disputes which arise. What is clear is that animosity can surface amongst students, not only in project work but also in classroom interactions, presenting lecturers with challenges and dilemmas at both a pedagogical and ethical level, as Beth indicates:

> *Beth: I just said something like, you know, "I have an expectation that we have a good degree of participation in this class. And if it's something that you feel like you can't do then just ... I do have that expectation and you should ... I feel like I've done everything to prepare you, but if you feel like you can't do it then pass it on." Because I feel like it is ... I don't want to make it too easy but I also didn't want to see them getting bullied either.*

Beth faces a clear dilemma here in that she senses a pedagogical obligation to reinforce the importance of participation while simultaneously feeling an ethical obligation to protect students who might become the target of bullying due to being perceived as not participating sufficiently in group activities. While Beth does not problematize the notion of participation, she articulates the pedagogical and ethical assumptions that shape her attempts to mediate. In this case, the ethical dimension relates to the need to ensure harmony amongst group members by dealing with participation-related disputes.

Lecturers reported that variable levels of participation in assessed group tasks were frequently a cause of disaffection among students (particularly when those groups were multicultural), and this situation was deemed challenging by teachers who felt that group work and learning to work in teams was an important element of students' development given future workplace expectations. The ethical dilemmas around participation become

particularly acute when assessment is involved, and it is here that lecturers' perceptions of fairness come to the fore. The fact that assessment should have emerged as a key theme is unsurprising for it is in this domain that the stakes are highest from the perspective of students looking to achieve the highest grades possible, as Sara's* statement above indicates; it therefore takes on particular salience for teachers who have to deal with the fallout. One participant had found varying levels of contribution to group tasks so problematic that he made a decision to employ group tasks as a learning technique but *not* to assess them formally:

> *Simon: I take the view that the freeriding problem, the intimidation problem is so profound that I cannot actually deal with it … on the other hand, I believe that students working in groups is pedagogically an extremely powerful way of doing things, so I want a lot of that but it doesn't lead to an assessment … I just don't think that group assessment works. There's a very nice conversation taking place on the distance learning website amongst a group of students who are almost all opposed to any form of group assessment and … you can see that much of the anxiety that they express about this is motivated by the diversity in the groups and their inability to manage it.*

Another area of assessment that emerged as a cause of tension and presented significant challenges is that of peer assessment, ironically a practice introduced by teachers as a way of putting pressure on each student to contribute to the group effort. One of the main problems reported concerned students' inability to determine their peers' level of engagement and contribution:

Simon: It causes a problem because the interpretation of what people think is hard work and not hard work is difficult because some people will say I am working hard but if you do a peer assessment how do you know if somebody is working hard? You don't know because you don't see them working hard, all you see is whether somebody came to a meeting. You could have a group like this where I don't contribute any words at all but I went away and wrote some report and sent it to you … and that was very useful but the rest of you would say, well he didn't do anything, and so that can be a problem … They will then turn around and say, well look I was in the library until nine o'clock at night and so you do get a problem.

Perceptions of "hard work" may also be culturally determined, as we have seen. That is, when engagement is factored into any measurement of hard work there exists the possibility that perceptions of engagement are themselves culturally determined and that some group members may be participating in ways that are not necessarily recognised as such by others, particularly when they do not manifest overtly. Simon alluded to this, commenting that peer review is about what is and is not visible and that those whose contributions are less overt are disadvantaged – an ethical concern, although not articulated as such. It is, he stated, about "impression management", something of which teachers often fail to make students aware. In this vein, Ali sees academic staff as largely culpable:

Ali: Even … undergraduate students who have been here quite some time, know each other, they really struggle with group work. And I think partly the blames is on us because they come in and the first term they got lots of group work. And the second term lots of group work. But I think there's barely anything on how to

work in groups. We don't draw any guidelines … we don't provide a systematic approach to this. Every module assesses the group work in a different way ... So it's really complicated, I think we're causing this confusion ourselves … And it's not fair if the evidence is clearly suggesting the person never showed up, never contributed and they get the same mark …

Ali's suggestion of the need for participation guidelines if lecturers are to meet their ethical responsibilities and ensure that students are treated fairly and equitably is mirrored by Sara, who sees the provision of such guidelines not only as an ethical responsibility but a pragmatic necessity that can save the teacher time and frustration:

Sara: Well, I think if we can maximize services like I mentioned to the effect of having some sort of centralized instructions that are consistent for all modules, or some sort of training that they get early on at all program levels, so that we don't all have to lecture on teamwork over and over and over again, it should be incorporated. We should understand what good teamwork looks like and how to assess it. But I think, you know, if we can be efficient about the way in which they get that instruction it helps us. And to also know what the responsibility is on us to manage the drama in these teams. Because I've had situations where they're accusing each other, and I have to spend two days going through their communications to try to understand what the hell happened. And that puts a lot of work on us, and we're not here to be referees, we're here to instruct.

Sara goes on to suggest that one possibility for mitigating group tensions arising from differing student expectations and participation levels is a "teamwork firefighter"

trained in conflict management and able to serve as a mediator. This suggestion appears to emanate from her idea that it is difficult to know what response is appropriate when students complain of inequities, because “I don’t know what’s within my jurisdiction to say, you know, I’m sorry you had this bad experience” or “You don’t have to be the person that, you know, compensates for the rest of your team”. Sara’s caution in dealing with students’ dissatisfaction around peer participation due to feeling ‘unqualified’ resonates with comments made by other participants, underscoring the importance of lecturers being clear about what is to be understood, by both themselves and their students, as constituting appropriate participation in a range of teacher-student and student-student interactions, and the ability to clearly articulate this to students.

Summary and implications

Conceptualizations of participation matter because they shape lecturers’ perceptions of students, the way they evaluate student contributions and outputs, the way they adjust their pedagogy, and the way they manage disputes that arise in the course of student group work and other forms of classroom interaction. Our findings indicate that lecturers’ assumptions about participation shape the ways they make sense of and respond to participation-related challenges in the process of teaching and learning. These assumptions relate most closely to ways that students are expected to display verbal and non-verbal signals of attentiveness, interest and responsiveness during teaching sessions, as well as ways of engaging in peer tasks. Whilst often acknowledging a sense of frustration about perceived lack of participation, as well anxiety around pedagogical and ethical issues concerning standards and assessment, lecturers also revealed a degree of sensitivity to linguistic and cultural diversity within

the classroom and a desire to deal with issues so as to enhance the learning environment for all. In this sense, their responses suggested a willingness and ability "to work well across cultures and to manage and accommodate cultural difference and unfamiliarity, intergroup dynamics, and the tensions and conflicts that can accompany this process" (Murray 2015: 3). At the same time, it is clear from the data that reflection on participation issues tends to lead to a focus on the "other" – in this case, the student -- rather than a focus on the self and to a questioning of one's own assumptions about participation. In other words, reflection does not necessarily lead to reflexivity (McConachy 2018a). We believe that this point has important implications for intercultural education programs directed at academic staff, particularly in relation to the elements of intercultural competence that receive attention.

As has been underscored in this study, if lecturers are to enhance their sensitivity to and understanding of student behavior in the classroom, accommodate to cultural difference, and serve as intercultural mediators, they need the ability not only to reflect on factors behind student behaviors but also to question their own assumptions regarding what constitutes participation. Such abilities are unlikely to develop in intercultural training programs that see intercultural learning primarily as a matter of developing static knowledge of the cultural "other" – i.e. by drawing on essentialist notions of cultural difference that frequently embody stereotypes and, counterproductively, lead to overly simplistic conceptions of and responses to cultural diversity in the classroom (Dervin 2011; McConachy 2018b). Rather, what we would like to suggest is that issues of participation be explicitly addressed in intercultural education programs for academic staff, primarily through an experiential and reflexive approach that challenges lecturers to articulate a clear notion of what participation in learning means to them and why, and rooted in their own pedagogical experiences. Such an approach has the potential to generate analytical trajectories that open up opportunities for gaining

insight into the diverse ways that teachers and students negotiate their roles in the classroom and demonstrate engagement through various verbal and non-verbal behaviors. This can be a more effective catalyst for decentering (Byram, Nichols, & Stevens 2001), and thereby better prepare lecturers for interpreting behavior in flexible ways, while also helping them articulate to students their own expectations regarding participation when difficulties arise, whether between themselves and their students or between students.

If the international university is to truly benefit its students in the manner commonly purported in institutional mission statements and publicity literature, then it requires a nuanced and reflective educative process to be built into pre- and in-service teacher-training programs, and which enables teachers to understand the dynamics of diverse classrooms, to shape their strategies accordingly, and to educate their students in a way that transforms their expectations and behaviors. In this way, the internationalization of the classroom is seen less as a top-down process informed by a monolithic view of participation and more as a collaborative undertaking that supports a plurilithic one.
One obvious "site" via which a better understanding of cultural diversity and its operational implications can be disseminated to teaching staff is the kind of professional development program that is now compulsory for most early career academics on probation (Ginns, Kitay, & Prosser, 2008) and increasingly being adopted by universities, largely in response to the "student experience" agenda and pressure to increase institutional performance in this respect – again, with significant implications for university rankings. We suggest that these programs need to adopt a more reflective, reflexive and prescriptive approach, and to include content specifically relating to the nature of the international classroom, internationalization of the curriculum (Leask,

2015; Higher Education Academy, 2014), and pedagogical strategies that maximally exploit linguistic and cultural diversity.

We would suggest that this idea of raising of lecturers' awareness needs to extend to students, and as such would argue that it is incumbent upon institutions to actively encourage academic staff to engage in dialogue with their students regarding the notion of participation, not only in the superficial sense of "explaining" what expectations for participation are in a particular context, but in the more fundamental sense of helping students explore their own assumptions about what constitutes participation within learning and assessment activities and the implications of variation in those assumptions for effective and harmonious working relations in the classroom. In addition, lecturers might consider negotiating with their students early on a collective understanding of how participation is going to be understood and the basis on which it will be assessed, if at all. While an understanding of lecturers' perceptions of participation – the focus of this article – is clearly important, it needs to be complemented by a better understanding of how *students* experience participation in the classroom and efforts to encourage them to objectify that experience through reflection, if diverse classrooms are to be maximally effective and mutually rewarding learning environments. To this end, we would call for more empirical research that seeks to elicit the student voice with a view to providing a more comprehensive picture of participation in the internationalized classroom environment.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued for the importance of seeing participation as a cultural act that is variably constructed and interpreted by lecturers and students against the broader context

of the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. We have particularly focused on the participation-related challenges that lecturers face in the classroom and how assumptions around participation are implicated in the ways teachers interpret student behavior, make pedagogical adjustments, and attempt to deal with disputes that arise amongst students. These things point to the need for efficacious approaches to engaging and managing the increasingly diverse student body that characterizes higher education today; approaches which successfully harness the linguistic and cultural diversity of the classroom so as to most effectively ensure that rather than being a cause of division, frustration and failure to meet transformational potential, it serves real educational purposes that manifestly benefit all students and have currency in our globalized world. And this can be empirically established only when the realities of the classroom, as experienced by both teachers and students, can be made transparent. Only then can teachers and teacher trainers and educators use the insights generated to skilfully craft effective strategic interventions that account for the different expectations and learning cultures and styles with which students come to their studies, thereby helping ensure that learning is maximised and academic potential fully realised for all.

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Table 1 Composition of Focus Groups

Focus Group #	Composition	No. of participants
FG1	UK only – Lower seniority	4
FG2	UK only – Higher seniority	4
FG3	International only – Lower seniority	2
FG4	International only – Higher seniority	3
FG5	Mixed (reflecting actual proportion of non-native to native speaker staff respectively)	3