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A Case Study of International Business students' Experiences with Exploratory Talk Ground Rules in Online Group Work

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how students experience and describe group work in an online course in international business (IB) after being introduced to Barnes' exploratory talk ground rules (ETGRs) which promote norms for dialog that encourage participants to share ideas and information and to think together. This study examines the dialog in groups of fourteen IB undergraduates attending a four-week online course in International Management. Initially, the students received briefings about the ETGRs and wrote self-reports throughout the course, on which we conducted a thematic analysis. Our findings show that students who engage with and apply the ETGRs describe more shared responsibility for collaborative learning in the group work, a greater interest in exploring the perspectives of group members, and overall, more positive learning experiences. This implies that making the ETGRs transparent is considered beneficial for social interactions in group work. However, the teacher plays a key role in creating a class environment conducive for collaborative learning, and preconditions for productive group work, including a good assignment structure and proper technology preparation, must be met. The findings and their implications are discussed herein.

KEYWORDS

Exploratory talk; higher education; online teaching; collaborative learning; thematic analysis

1. Introduction

The value of international business (IB) education increases when graduates have the competence to manage effectively in organizations that are increasingly dependent on international markets, logistics, employees, and global supplies. Managing these tasks often involves collaborative efforts, where employees work together to identify the path forward. Therefore, there is growing international interest in the development of skills for collaborative learning that empower workers to build the knowledge required to deal with new challenges (Barnes 2008; Siddiq and Scherer 2017).

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Simultaneously, technological developments are affecting all aspects of our lives, including work, education, and socialization (Erstad and Siddiq 2023). Education systems and students themselves, in particular, inevitably undergo change over time due to factors related to technological advancements, and these changes have rendered the shift from traditional to online teaching unavoidable (Klarin et al. 2021).

However, “not all methods and approaches in IB education can be effectively adapted for the online environment” (Aggarwal and Wu 2020, 2). In fact, the move from in-person to online teaching formats is likely to necessitate changes to the pedagogical design, involving a thorough evaluation of the roles needed for an online vs in-person teaching practices portfolio (Aggarwal and Wu 2020).

Determining the best practices in pedagogical design can be challenging for IB classes that are typically composed of a diverse group of students who bring their entire selves, including their cultural backgrounds, personality styles, learning styles, and beliefs, to the learning environment (Aggarwal and Yinglu 2022). The purpose of IB education is to develop graduates who can think and act internationally and interculturally. Hence, “the construction of a shared understanding and shared world view is not identical for all who take part in it” (Biesta 2004, 11–22). Consequently, developing the ability to use social and interpersonal skills to adapt to diverse cultural settings is a key aspect of IB training in collaborative learning (Feng 2016).

Recently, IB educators have demonstrated a greater appreciation of how to use online teaching to expose students to international experiences (Aggarwal and Wu 2020). It is important for educators to understand the precise contributions of each technique when developing a portfolio of teaching tools and practices for IB education (Aggarwal and Wu 2020, 2). Therefore, continuous research is necessary to ensure the best practices are adopted to enhance students’ learning and experiences, especially in relation to collaborative learning in online classes.

A growing number of educators employ teaching methods that focus on the use of dialog as a teaching tool as it gives students the opportunity to express their personal viewpoints and to support and argue their perspectives (Calcagni and Lago 2018).

In this study, we explore how IB students experience collaborative learning in online group work in an International Management (IM) course. The students are encouraged to adopt the exploratory talk ground rules (ETGRs) to establish norms for engaging critically yet constructively with others’ ideas in online group work.

We aim at contributing to teaching practices in IB education through a better understanding of how to set norms in online group work to enhance participants’ collaborative learning. In addition, we will contribute to the

conceptual and empirical literature on the ETGRs by expanding their application to students in higher education.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Background

Founded on the principles of sociocultural theory, learning is considered a social process by which members of a community use written and spoken language as a cultural tool to create knowledge (Mercer and Howe 2012; Sawyer 2011). Success in achieving shared goals, such as learning together, depends often on how well people communicate with each other during the process (Littleton and Mercer 2013). However, students and pupils seldom know how to engage in collaborative work and are often more concerned with completing the task rather than collaborating (Hesse et al. 2015). Hence, given the increased importance of twenty-first-century skills, such as digital literacy, problem solving, critical thinking, and collaborative learning (Erstad and Siddiq 2023), scholars accentuate the critical role of educators in applying pedagogical approaches to facilitate and develop students' competences in subject-related and cross-curricular domains, such as collaborative skills for learning purposes (Siddiq and Scherer 2017). The ETGRs encourage students to develop the ability to think and learn together with others by using dialog as a tool for sense-making during interactions (Wegerif 2008). The focus on the collective sharing and evaluation of ideas, reasoning, the provision of justifications and elaborations, and the employment of evidence to support arguments renders dialog a genre of talk suitable for learning in academic settings (O'Connor and Michaels 2007).

Therefore, dialog has exciting potential as a learning tool, but the right circumstances must be present to support a social context in which dialog is effective at promoting learning. Scholars have identified three typical patterns of dialog: disputational, cumulative, and exploratory (Littleton and Mercer 2013), each of which is distinguished by personal orientations and identities that influence how participants respond to each other. Consequently, the dialog among participants varies in terms of the depth of focus, psychological perspectives concerning expressing an opinion, and communication culture, all of which influence students' ability to learn together (Littleton and Mercer 2013).

In short, the first pattern, called disputational dialog, centers on who is right rather than understanding why the other person said what they said. The second pattern, cumulative dialog, is concerned with maintaining harmony, so participants tend to accept the opinions of others uncritically (Littleton and Mercer 2013). Finally, exploratory dialog, the third pattern, focuses on a sense-making approach aimed at facilitating constructive engagement among

participants (Mercer and Lynn 2008). According to Littleton and Mercer (2013), the patterns of disputational and cumulative dialogs are likely to limit participants' ability to create a social context in which they can engage constructively with others' ideas. In contrast, the pattern of the exploratory dialog encourages participants to interact, question, justify, and reason together to reach a mutual understanding and create meaning together. Hence, how to create learning opportunities where students engage in exploratory dialog is key to our study.

2.2. Exploratory talk ground rules

Barnes (2008) argued that a better understanding of the role of dialog could inform pedagogical approaches that increase student engagement and improve learning outcomes. The dialog promoted by exploratory talk encourages students to use talk to understand new knowledge while their thoughts are at a formative level (Barnes 2008). Students think together, as they share knowledge for joint consideration, challenge ideas, deliberate alternatives, justify arguments, and focus on asking questions, and this verbalization helps them adopt new thoughts and ideas. A group of scholars developed a set of social norms called ground rules to operationalize Barnes' exploratory talk pedagogy. The seven ETGRs are listed below (Barnes 2008) and constitute the underlying theoretical framework of this study:

- Partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas.
- Everyone participates by offering the relevant information they have.
- Tentative ideas are treated with respect.
- Ideas offered for joint consideration may be challenged.
- Challenges are justified, and alternative ideas or understandings are offered.
- Opinions are sought and considered before decisions are jointly made.
- Knowledge is made publicly accountable and so reasoning is clear in the talk.

These ETGRs create a framework for dialog, where the sense-making process is visible for participants and becomes the foundation of constructive engagement. Successful implementation of the ETGRs depends on the willingness of all participants in the group to respect them as basic behavioral norms, as defined above (Mercer, Hennessy, and Taylor Warwick). Previous studies focusing on the use of the ETGRs in in-person teaching argued that they facilitate constructive engagement among participants, instead of other patterns of dialog that limit sense-making (Ludvigsen, Johanne Ness, and Timmis 2019). In addition, ETGRs contribute to determining the social order for learning in groups (Mercer, Hennessy, and Taylor Warwick).

3. Literature review

Preparing IB students for a workplace in which much interaction takes place digitally is an important and challenging responsibility of IB education, as emphasized by a recent systematic review investigating the themes on which future research in IB education should focus (Klarin et al. 2021). We conducted a scoping literature review primarily on studies having investigated the ETGRs in IB education. Unfortunately, studies concerning the ETGR framework explicitly were not found, but we expanded our search strategy to include studies on collaborative learning in (online) teaching in IB education specifically and in higher education more generally.

3.1. Collaborative learning in online international business teaching and learning

While we identified a number of studies dealing with a diversity of themes within the context of IB education, such as openness in global and other experiences, digital tools, group work, the teacher's role, and technology (Aggarwal and Wu 2020; Akdeniz, Zhang, and Tamer Cavusgil 2019; Chen et al. 2020; Howe, Sara, and Neil 2019; Kardes 2020; Kim, Heok Lee, and Wang 2020), few dealt with collaborative learning in particular, and none addressed how to enhance dialog among students in online group work to build their IB competence. This has been highlighted by other scholars, who emphasize that even though there is a critical need to develop IB students' skills, such as problem solving, communication, teamwork, and digital literacy, traditional IB education is mostly based on passive learning and teacher-centered pedagogies (Akdeniz, Zhang, and Tamer Cavusgil 2019; Kardes 2020; Kwok et al. 2022), necessitating a better understanding of the potential contributions of pedagogical practices and frameworks to creating a social context that promotes constructive group work among IB students.

3.2. Exploratory talk ground rules and collaborative learning in higher education

Even though little research has been published on collaborative learning in the context of online IB education, as shown above, a few studies on the ETGRs and several studies on collaborative learning in physical teaching and learning environments in higher education were identified. We will elaborate on this literature in the next sections, as well as showcase how it has informed the design choices in this study.

While previous studies demonstrate that under the right circumstances, group dialog in collaborative learning assignments grounded in the ETGRs has been successful (Ludvigsen et al. 2020; Mercer, Hennessy, and Taylor Warwick

2017), most have focused solely on use of the ETGRs among primary and secondary school students, particularly those involved in STEM studies.

Mercer, Hennessy, and Warwick (2019) used an ETGR lens to test teaching methods aimed at improving collaboration, reasoning, and academic outcomes, and the results suggest that although the application of the ETGRs is rare in the classroom, linking digital technology as a mediating tool to dialogic pedagogy can enhance the development of collaborative skills.

An exploratory study conducted in a Hong Kong primary school used an ETGR framework to investigate whether an internet-based educational program for primary schools called WebQuest cultivated critical thinking in assignments completed by students. The findings showed that the exploratory talk framework has constructive effects when integrated into technology-supported learning, and the program is tailored to incorporate teaching critical thinking and social aspects of dialog (Liang and Fung 2020).

Studies indicate that a metacognitive perspective of dialog has a positive effect on collaborative learning. In their “Thinking Together” research program, Mercer, Hennessy, and Taylor Warwick () found that making students aware of good practices achieved using the ETGRs was integral to their positive findings. On the other hand, Burkert’s (2015) investigation of student – student interactions and the use of language as a tool for thinking and learning together showed the extent to which student – student learning involves adopting language as a tool for learning. She observed how the complaints of one student had a negative influence on the quality of the group dialog. Thus, Burkert (2015) recommended a discussion with students at the beginning of each course about what constitutes good group work to enable more effective collaborative dialog and to discourage certain individuals from dominating the conversation. In addition, a classroom atmosphere based on cooperation and trust is a precondition.

Ludvigsen et al. (2020) used the ETGRs to examine peer discussions in group work as part of a study on formative feedback, indicating that most students engage in the ETGRs in collaborative problem-solving assignments. Findings show students being introduced to the ETGRs exchanged ideas and elaborated on peer perspectives according to the ETGRs in 68 of 87 peer discussions. Lai’s (2012) study also included students who used the ETGRs to engage in dialog during their online group assignments but who did not perform well on their overall learning assessment for the assignments, possibly because the learning in the group discussions may have been irrelevant to the final assessments (Lai 2012). This indicates that connecting collaborative learning that takes place in groups with the assessment of course learning outcomes is challenging. Mercer and Howe (2012) support this viewpoint, claiming that teachers who set up collaborative (group-based) activities, through which they believe students can co-construct new understandings and meanings, are often simply hoping

for the best. Researchers emphasize that the success of applying the ETGRs in teaching is dependent on several factors, including the overall design of the teaching style, the teacher's role, the preparation and development of students' collaborative competence, and the design of the assignments/tasks, all of which actually require collaborative efforts (Luckin et al. 2017).

4. Factors influencing collaborative teaching and learning designs

Overall, several systematic reviews and meta-analyses have shown that the use of collaborative learning in education has positive effects on students' learning outcomes, motivation, and well-being (Abrami et al. 2011; Bernard et al. 2009; Schmid et al. 2014). Further, student – student collaboration in well-designed assignments, including those using technology to support collaborative learning, and teacher-led classes using sound pedagogical approaches, are seemingly the most successful forms of collaborative learning (Borokhovski et al. 2016).

4.1. Role of technology

A growing body of evidence shows that combining technology with arenas for dialog in group work, with individuals, or in lecture halls can enhance collaboration, reasoning, critical thinking, creativity, academic outcomes, and learning leadership (Kim, Heok Lee, and Wang 2020; Ludvigsen, Johanne Ness, and Timmis 2019; Mercer, Hennessy, and Taylor Warwick). In addition, recent studies suggest that the interaction between and interdependency of a dialogic pedagogy and digital technologies extend the concept of thinking and learning together (Littleton and Mercer 2013) and expand the “dialogic space” (Wegerif 2019).

Technology can create a dialogic space, where exposure to a variety of voices and the opportunity to reflect can together stimulate the creative knowledge process. In a qualitative study about collaborative learning in higher education lectures, Ludvigsen, Johanne Ness, and Timmis (2019) concluded that a digital whiteboard contributes to opening creative knowledge processes and enables students to challenge each other, ask open questions, and explore different perspectives (Ludvigsen, Johanne Ness, and Timmis 2019).

A qualitative study conducted in 2020 concluded that various types of technology can be used to engage IB students, who are often otherwise distracted in the classroom (Kardes 2020). The study showed that active learning helped students master some of the more difficult-to-grasp abstract concepts that are foundational to IB. Another study concluded that active participation in online discussions is a key factor contributing to the emergence of online

learning leadership, defined as the potential to enhance the group performance by influencing others' learning (Kim, Heok Lee, and Wang 2020).

However, technology presents complexities from the perspectives of both users and teachers. For instance, studies show that introducing interactive technology to learning situations may not improve learning outcomes or even the quality of the pedagogical approach (Guðmundsdóttir et al. 2014). While technology may transform the dialog, “the changes might not be either unidirectional or productive (Major et al. 2018). A meta-analysis of designed vs. contextual treatments in collaborative learning conducted by Borokhovski et al. (2016) concluded that technology is simply a tool, the successful implementation of which requires the dedicated efforts of the teacher.

4.1.1. Role of teachers in facilitating collaborative learning

A study about how technology influences global openness and openness to new experiences concluded that the different teaching delivery formats were unequal in promoting changes to student attitudes. Communication and interactive activities to develop cultural competences that are readily conveyed in in-person formats may not be as effective in online formats, so IB educators must reexamine their courses and design new learning activities to compensate for the limitations of and opportunities in the online setting (Chen et al. 2020).

The teacher plays a key role in developing the quality of social interactions, the type of dialog, and the circumstances in which it occurs. However, learning in student-managed groups is not necessarily productive. A study examining patterns of peer interactions concluded that peer interaction and group work are not synonymous with group learning, and the findings highlight the importance of teacher engagement with students to understand how peer learning emerges from peer interaction (Havnes et al. 2016). Kelly (2009), investigated the influence of methods and techniques to create groups for teaching and learning in diverse IB classes. He concluded that to which groups students are allocated influences the means to develop transferable, multicultural skills for working in groups. Teachers have a key role in the formation of groups and determining goals for group work, and in their systematic review of the literature on classroom dialog, Howe and Abedin (2013) identified five reasons that teachers find it difficult to promote dialog in classrooms, including providing students with the freedom to explore viewpoints while maintaining sufficient control to deliver curriculum goals, determining the right timing to provide guidance, integrating group discussions in the larger educational context, helping students learn from a critical approach, and accepting dialog as an essential part of learning (Howe and Abedin 2013).

A study by Hennessy, Dragovic, and Warwick (2018) highlighted the need for the further development of general teacher skills in dialogic pedagogy, and the findings show that only 19% of respondents participating in their research

project demonstrated an understanding of dialogic pedagogy (Hennessy, Dragovic, and Warwick 2018).

In their study of student – teacher dialog, Howe, Sara, and Neil (2019) report that group work generates rich student contributions not observed in more traditional, teacher-centered teaching methods (Howe, Sara, and Neil 2019).

The dedicated and well-planned efforts of the teacher are responsible for creating the right circumstances for exploratory dialog, particularly in online contexts (Borokhovski et al. 2016), and the communication system a teacher adopts shapes the role of students and their engagement in learning. Successful organization of collaborative learning depends on teachers having a clear view of what works, the design of activities, the preparation of students for group work, and the composition of groups (Hattie 2015).

5. The present study

Given the limited access to studies applying the ETGRs in IB educational contexts, the present study aims to close this gap by investigating how IB students in an IM course experienced using the ETGRs in online group work. The following research questions guide our investigation:

What are the students' previous experiences with online group work?

What are the students' experiences with collaboration in online group work in IM?

What do the students suggest should change/improve to enhance online group work?

The students' reflection notes/essays were collected at three time points throughout the course (totaling 4 weeks).

6. Methodology

This study used a qualitative research approach to investigate how IB students experience working together in online groups. We selected this approach to study the participants in their natural setting so we could make sense of their experiences through an interpretivist, naturalistic approach (Bell, Bryman, and Harley 2019, 353; Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 3).

Our ontological assumptions are linked to relativism, which suggests that “scientific laws are not simply out there to be discovered but that they are created people” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson 2013, 19). Further, our epistemological assumptions are based on constructionism, which suggests that all knowledge is “contingent on human practices, constructed through interaction between people, and transmitted in a social context” (Crotty 1998, 42) rather than “phenomena ‘out there’ and separate from those involved in their construction” (Bell, Bryman,

and Harley 2019, 356). The qualitative research approach allows us to understand the multifaceted perspectives of the participants and to describe the “most likely forces at work” (Miles, Michael Huberman, and Saldaña 2014, 9).

Exploring the individual experiences of students is key to understanding group interactions, because learning is a negotiable process, while understanding is constructed individually (Biggs and So-Kum Tang 2011; Creswell 2014). This exploratory approach allows us to understand student experiences and perceptions based on our interpretations of the meanings of written words. The rich picture we form of what people think and feel can help us manage our teaching (Miles, Michael Huberman, and Saldaña 2014) and learning initiatives. As such, the constructivist theoretical perspective is consistent with an interpretive approach through which multiple perspectives emerge (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson 2013).

As researchers, we understand that our involvement with and role in relation to the participants can influence data accessibility in terms of the students' willingness to disclose their individual opinions. Therefore, we chose to consider the potential power imbalance between the teacher and their students by managing our relationship with the participants as “outside experts” (Blaikie 2007, 11). We provided expert knowledge about group work but remained distant from the participants during the actual research. Next, we will explain the processes of data collection and analysis used in this study.

6.1. Research methods

The research design is a sole case study representing a “phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (Miles, Michael Huberman, and Saldaña 2014, 28): a four-week course in IM with fourteen students. The study conducts a detailed investigation of how students experienced the use of the ETGRs to set norms in their online group work. Thus, the study functions as a means for understanding broader issues related to promoting constructive engagement in online group work. The next section will discuss the research methods.

6.1.1. Context

The study context was an online course called International Management, offered by the University of South-Eastern Norway (USN) School of Business. A description of the course is provided below in [Table 1](#). The structure of the teaching and learning activities is presented in [Table 2](#).

The IM course is usually offered in English to both international and domestic undergraduate students, but only domestic students enrolled in 2020 because travel for international students was restricted during the pandemic. The learning outcomes of the IM course introduce students to managing people and organizations responsively in a global environment (Cunliffe

Table 1. Course description.

Course	Description
International Management Online	Intensive, four-week course offered in June 2020 Originally in-person class changed due to health threats associated with the pandemic in June 2020
Gender division (8 males/6 females)	USN students enrolled in a third-year bachelor's in business administration program taught at different campuses; representative of a diverse USN student body in terms of age and ethnicity
Language	Most students are native Norwegian speakers
Time framework	Self-paced, four-week online study supplemented with weekly, four-hour meetings via Zoom videoconferencing

2016); thus, several learning goals concern the development of collaborative competences, where students learn to:

- Demonstrate effective communication and collaboration skills for group work,
- Understand how to adapt to cultural differences that influence global business, and
- Present and argue options related to global management practices.

In 2020, the IM course was taught in an online setting for the first time, the outcomes of which can be applied to innovative online learning activities, such as collaborative online international learning (COIL) and multicultural teamwork.

6.1.2. Teaching and learning activities for the international management course

The IM course combines synchronous and asynchronous teaching activities focused on active learning, where the latter involves students working on self-paced study modules to complete reading assignments, videos, quizzes, and cases. Meanwhile, the synchronous teaching and learning activities complemented these asynchronous modules, as well. Zoom (<http://www.zoom.us/>) offered functionality for the entire class to meet, as well as breakout rooms, where smaller groups of students could work together in digital spaces.

Groups posted solutions for cases on an electronic bulletin board called Padlet (www.padlet.com), and they worked together in breakout rooms guided by the principles of the ETGRs. Further, there were no direct observations due to COVID-19 restrictions.

6.1.3. Familiarizing students with exploratory talk ground rules

Students learned about the principles of the ETGRs, and they completed three different assignments related to their experiences with group work, as shown in [Table 3](#).

Table 2. Structure of teaching and learning activities in a synchronous class.

Lecture 45 min	Discussion in plenum 15 min	Group work in breakout room 30 min	Discussion in plenum 15 min	Group work in breakout room 30 min	Lecture 45 min
Teacher lectures	Student questions	Group work to analyze cases	Review of case	Group work in breakout rooms	Teacher summaries

Note: Students were encouraged to question and engage in dialog.

Table 3. Self-reports from individual students.

Date	Description
Week 1	Reflections on past experiences in group work
Week 3	Reflections on firsthand experiences with ETGR
Week 4	Reflections (anonymous) on online group work in the International Management course

7. Data collection

We collected three sets of written self-reports of the students' reflections, because the personal experiences of the students offer a solid foundation for reflective learning and teaching. The process of reflecting on experiences and consequences can encourage students to consider their actions and beliefs thoughtfully, facilitating their evolution into reflective practitioners (Cunliffe 2016; Feng 2016; Lew and Schmidt 2011). However, participation was optional.

The week 1 and week 4 surveys asked students the same questions to encourage reflection on their experiences with group work:

- What role did you play in your last group project?
- What did you like best about your group project?
- What did you like least about your group project?
- How would you change the working style adopted in your group project?

Open questions provided students with an opportunity to write about salient topics, underpinned by their own interpretations of the sociocultural contexts and structural conditions that influenced their experiences in the group work. Meanwhile, the final reflections were submitted anonymously to compensate for the power imbalance, which could potentially influence students' willingness to disclose data (Herman and Solarino 2019). All data collection processes are aligned with the ethical guidelines of the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research.

8. Data analysis

Our interpretation of the data was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) principles for thematic analysis as a "method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006, 80), and we

transformed recurrent data patterns into themes related to our research questions (Braun and Clarke 2006, 82).

Our analysis was based on an inductive approach, particularly words and phrases extracted from the original data transcripts (Braun and Clarke 2006). We started by familiarizing ourselves with the data, after which we used natural language to categorize the data in a set of first order, *n-vivo* codes. The natural language codes capture the students' experiences in short phrases of their own words as a way to "honor the participant's voice" (Miles, Michael Huberman, and Saldaña 2014, 74). We searched for recurrent patterns in the short phrases to organize related *in-vivo* codes into researcher-generated first-order categories. Then, we searched for relationships between and within the first-order concepts – in combination with our own reflections – to consolidate the first-order codes into seven higher-level second-order themes that "moved further away from what the interviewee said" (Bell, Bryman, and Harley 2019, 533). Finally, a third level of coding aggregated the themes into two groups at the highest level.

It was important for us to differentiate between our role as teachers and our relationships with the students from whom we collected the data. Our goal was to develop themes based on the students' understandings, not on our own subjective interpretations. Therefore, we wrote memos and adopted a critically reflexive mind-set throughout the research process to develop seven themes, as presented in Table 4:

Appendix 1 shows how the themes were developed from NVivo data, and the themes are described in Tables 5 and 6.

The next section uses the results of our analysis to explore the research questions.

9. Findings

9.1. *What are the students' previous experiences with online group work?*

Students answered the survey questions before their introduction to the principles of the ETGRs, so we assumed most of their previous experiences involved in-person group work, where the outcome was a written report and/or presentation. The desired outcome of the IM course group work differed from that of longer in-person projects. However, a comparison of how students experience working on collaborative learning assignments is relevant to both groups.

Our analysis identified a tendency for students to be more concerned with solving the task by working "on tasks individually" rather than working collaboratively "as a group." For example, one student reported that everyone "selected our topics in the group project and did their own parts," while

Table 4. Presentation of themes developed from the data.

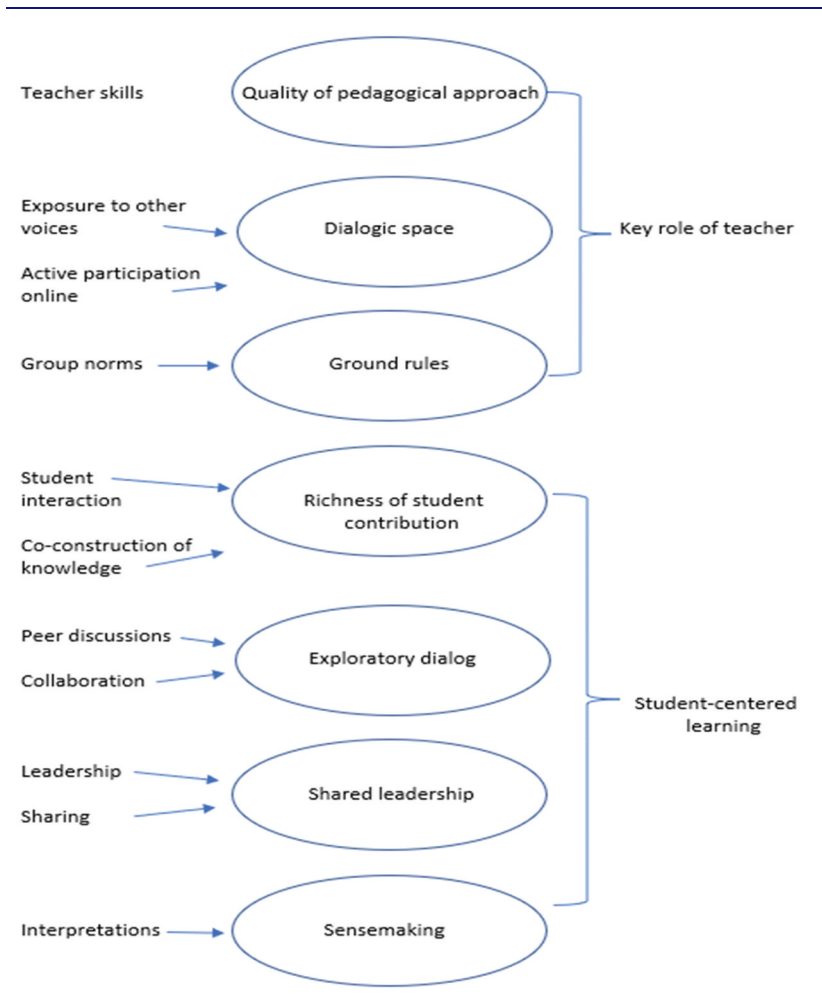


Table 5. Themes related to the key role of the teacher.

Theme 1: Quality of pedagogical approach

The data shows that assignments were unclear or subject to different interpretations by group members. This highlights the need for online assignments to be well-integrated into the IB curriculum, with clear guidance about how to complete the assignment.

Theme 2: Dialogic space

Several students mentioned feelings of being in their “comfort zone” and feeling safe while working online. This could represent the ability of technology to expand the dialogic space.

Theme 3: Ground rules

Some students reported great experiences, as everyone was prepared. Group preparation is an example of how ground rules can set normative standards for behavior in an online group.

Table 6. Themes related to student-centered learning.**Theme 4: Richness of student contributions**

Several students indicated a preference for not only interacting with their group, but also expanding their learning circle to the rest of the class. Negative comments about group work were often preceded by issues with technology.

Theme 5: Exploratory dialog

In general, students reported feeling safe and comfortable with engaging in group work in breakout rooms, which is one of the goals of exploratory dialog. Students described their group work using many of the terms that characterize exploratory dialog, such as “active listening,” “asking questions,” and “seeking justification.”

Theme 6: More than one person leads the group

Implementation of the ETGRs means that everyone contributes and listens. Many students in this case use the opportunity to exercise leadership skills, usually sharing the overall responsibility.

Theme 7: Sense-making

Learning in groups is a messy process that requires time to make sense of others’ perspectives. Students identified time management as one of their biggest concerns.

another reported that their work process consisted of “no specific roles, (they) split the work between every student.” When asked about their roles, most students described that the responsibilities for various parts of the group work, such as checking the report or doing the research, were allocated to various group members.

Data suggest that a lack of trust was a significant issue for some group members, and this may be related to working cooperatively instead of collaboratively as a group. Students expressed concern about ensuring that “everyone did the same amount” of work, and there was discomfort about “not being in full control,” especially in relation to other group members’ ability to follow time schedules. Students fear that “one needs to sit and do all the work” when other group members do not contribute. Not least, working in groups “can often lead to disagreement where students need to agree to disagree” which sounds like cumulative or disputational talk (Littleton and Mercer 2013). These patterns of dialog tend to limit students’ abilities to engage constructively with each other’s ideas. Thus, given their feelings about the uncertainties involved in group work, it is not surprising that one student expressed dislike of “working on a group project with strangers.”

The time-consuming nature of the sense-making process is another area of concern for students, particularly the “uncertainty of what idea is best,” as “we are all different with different ways of solving the project.” Students agree that “the decision-making process takes time,” but it is possible for students to split the work because “working in a group is time consuming.” While splitting the work likely renders group work more effective, collaborative work hampers the richness of student contributions, thus inhibiting the co-construction of knowledge (Hesse et al. 2015).

However, despite concerns about the degree of trustworthiness among group members, the time-consuming nature of group work, and the need for control, students prefer “positive collaboration between other group members,” and they like to “see the knowledge viewpoints, and insights” of their

classmates. Further, they “like that each and every one of us are different” with “different levels of creativity.”

The next section of this study addresses the research question about how students’ experience group work that took place in Zoom breakout rooms in the IM course. Data about their experience in IM group work was collected in a survey at the end of the course.

9.2. What are students’ experiences with collaboration in their online group work in the international management course?

The students began their online group work in the IM course with a thorough introduction to the ETGRs after completing the first assignment about previous group work experience. Data suggest that about half of students seem to have adopted the principles of the EGTRs in their group work, and we observe the ETGR norms reflected in the descriptions of their experiences with online group work.

Students described online group work in breakout rooms as “social and engaging,” where they “listen[ed] to each other” and enjoyed “hearing the different opinions from people I never had talked to before.” One student reflected on “not being shy to point out ideas because of the environment we created,” indicating a high degree of trust among the group members. The data supports the findings of Mercer, Hennessy, and Warwick (2017) concerning how digital tools can enhance the skills that form the foundation for thinking and learning together with other students.

These students seemed to have applied the four principles of the ETGRs in their group work, where everyone participates, opinions are sought, and ideas are treated respectfully and are open to be challenged. Students described the social norms of the groups as open, respectful, and inclusive. They also mentioned ETGRs related to justifying opinions and joint decisions, though there were fewer reflections on these rules. Students in groups that adopted the ETGRs described norms that encourage rich contributions from students.

However, the remaining students reported contrasting experiences with social interactions in their group work, stating that “our group did not pay much attention since we did not know each other.” The students were “uncertain about what other group members did,” because the “group members are lazy.”

Reflections from this group of students suggests their dialog fit the pattern of cumulative talk, where students “agreed with the last answer because it is built up by all group members suggestions.” Students reported that the group did not engage in any discussion, because “we all had almost the same opinions.” Unfortunately, these students missed the critical but constructive engagement that is considered the main benefit of the ETGRs.

The analysis suggests that ETGRs related to participation, inclusion, and respect must be in place before students will engage constructively and critically in exploratory dialog with their peers. Problems with technology is one possible explanation for the lack of engagement of some students with the ETGRs, though the data showed that students spent time on other issues that had a negative impact on their interaction in group work. Some groups “wasted time on technology problems” instead of engaging constructively and critically in exploratory dialog. The reflections further identified several factors such as poor time management, technology problems, finding information, and lack of preparation, interfered with their ability to engage constructively with other members in the group.

The reflections indicate that little, if any, co-construction of knowledge took place among these students, demonstrating the importance of the quality of the pedagogical approach adopted in online teaching, where the teacher prepares the students well to complete the assignments in online breakout rooms.

When asked to report their roles in the group work, nine of the fourteen respondents reported having held a leadership role, which was surprising, as there were only four groups. In addition, three students reported that their groups did not have a leader, because they “worked together every step of the way.” Further, five of the nine self-reported leaders reported having shared their leadership role with others in the group, while the remaining four respondents considered themselves the sole leader.

A closer look at the data provides insight into why students reported differences in their approaches to group leadership: students who perceived their role as a shared leader reported more positive experiences with group work than students who perceived themselves as the sole leader of their group. Students who shared leadership reported their work in breakout rooms to be a “great experience,” where the group “discussed together.” The data also suggests that collaborative learning satisfied the aims of the ETGRs to create an open and inclusive framework for students to share work.

In contrast, the students who considered themselves the sole leader discussed their overall experiences with group work in a more negative light. Some students took on the leadership role out of necessity to “get people to work,” because their group members were lazy and/or unprepared. These students considered the sole leadership role to be “awkward, (but) it got results” and “got the group going.” However, the data suggest that the groups with sole leaders did not establish open and inclusive collaboration, as achieved by the students who engaged with the ETGRs. Students who did not engage with the ETGRs appeared to prefer to divide the work or work alone, possibly because it was a more effective use of time.

9.3. What do the students suggest should change/improve to enhance online group work?

Students responded to this question in their first and last assignments. First, students suggested changes based on their previous experiences with group work and, second, changes to the online group work in the IM course. Based on the answers, the students had different perspectives about their experiences with collaborative learning.

The feedback with suggestions for changes to previous group work was mainly related to gaining more control over other members of the group. Students suggested that “group work should be often checked up on by the teacher” to “make sure everyone contributes and gets their viewpoints across.” In fact, a student recommended to “write down a set of guidelines on how we are going to handle this groupwork,” much like the ETGRs applied in the course.

In contrast, the suggestions for changes to the IM online groups focused more on making the breakout rooms function more effectively as dialogic space to promote collaborative learning (Ludvigsen, Johanne Ness, and Timmis 2019). The data shows the importance of allowing enough time for students to get to know each other. Students would prefer “longer time on online group work” because they “barely got to know each other.” The students also expressed a need for more clarity in the assignments so they could “manage the time they had with their group.” Several students reported they would not change the format because “the group project worked great this time.”

10. Discussion and implications for pedagogical practice

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how educating IB students about the value and purpose of the ETGRs could influence their collaborative learning in an online IM course to prepare the students for future work in IB such as virtual teams. This section discusses further reflections on the findings and their implications for theory and pedagogical practice, indicating that preconditions should be present to establish a teaching and learning environment in which the ETGRs facilitate exploratory dialogs.

The data suggests that when students have clear ground rules for their collaborative learning assignment and have a dialogic space that functions, they enjoy peer-to-peer learning. The model in Figure 2 illustrates the teacher’s key role in creating a learning environment conducive for student engagement in exploratory talk in online group work. The student reflections were foundational to the development of this model, which shows how the teacher is responsible for such preconditions for establishing the dialogic space

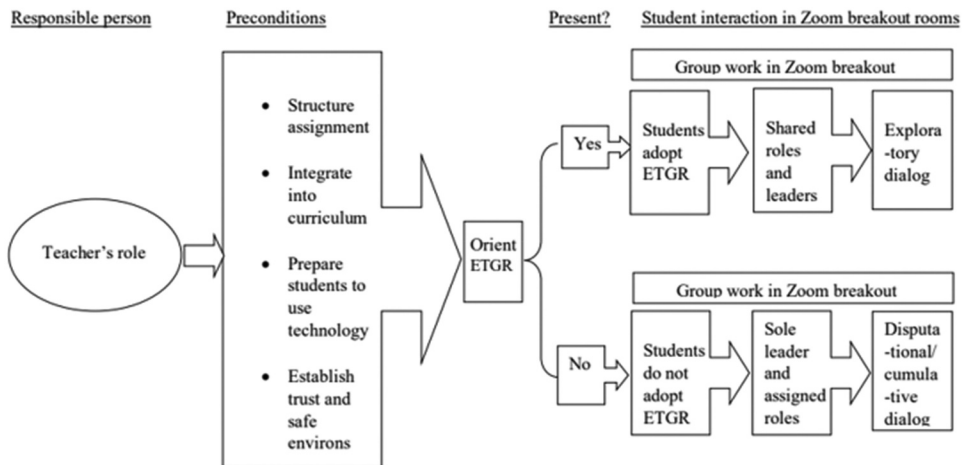


Figure 1. Preconditions for adoption of the Exploratory Talk Ground Rules.

such as structuring a suitable assignment, explaining how the assignment is integrated into the curriculum, preparing the students to use technology, and establishing a safe learning environment. When these conditions are present, students are more likely to engage with the ETGRs as a framework for collaborative learning. Conversely, when these conditions are not present, students are likely to avoid engaging with the ETGRs because they are distracted by other factors, such as trying to learn the technology or understand the assignment, as shown in Figure 2:

10.1. The teacher plays a key role in creating a safe environment

In this study we followed the advice of (Mercer, Hennessy, and Taylor Warwick) to raise students' awareness of the good practices achieved by using the ETGRs to encourage students to adopt the guidelines as a social norm to direct their dialog. However, the variability in the adoption of the ETGRs suggests that IB students need more than just education about the ETGRs to gain the full benefits of using dialog as a learning tool. The deciding factor appears to be the "way in which a teacher works with the affordances of a tool that defines whether it is used effectively in teaching and learning" (Hennessy, Dragovic, and Warwick 2018).

This study suggests that students are more likely to adopt the ETGRs in breakout rooms when they feel comfortable with the technology, culture, assignment, and – not least – each other. As Säljö (2010) observed, "Technologies do not merely support learning; they transform how we learn and how we come to interpret learning" (Säljö 2010, 63).

Our model in Figure 1 illustrates the key role of the teacher in creating a context for online group work. More importantly, the teacher is responsible

for creating a classroom environment in which students are motivated and socialized to feel safe enough to engage with each other, especially in relation to the ETGR framework. The ETGRs encourage students to establish norms for group work, where they can think aloud together, with the dialog centered on thoughts that are not yet complete.

Until students feel safe in their learning environment, thinking aloud with peers can be a risky choice (Mercer and Lynn 2008), especially for diverse IB classes, where students may come from diverse cultures. Therefore, trust is an important antecedent, because sometimes discussing incomplete thoughts can lead to debate, disagreement, justification of opinions, or simply being wrong (Sawyer 2011).

10.2. Learning in a breakout room requires space for reflection

This research shows that students consider time management an issue in group work, though it is possible that the time management problem can be attributed to a poorly structured assignment. Thus, teachers must structure the groups and assignments so students can focus on their dialog, not on finding information, rushing to post answers, or learning technology.

Further, time management problems could be rooted in the nature of the ETGRs, where asking each other open-ended questions, listening with respect, and challenging opinions are the guiding principles of interactions between students. Engaging constructively with each other's ideas can be a time-consuming process, where the co-construction of knowledge requires reflection and thinking together requires a space of dialogic reflection. These must be considered when structuring the assignment (Wegerif 2008); thus, students must be well-prepared for an assignment that allows the dialogic interactions that open space for reflection and enable the ETGRs to be an effective learning tool at the university level.

10.3. Exploratory talk ground rules can empower the co-construction of knowledge

Gert Biesta stated, "Education is basically a relationship between an educator and the one being educated" (Biesta 2004, 12). As such, when students move their collaborative learning assignments to breakout rooms, they assume the roles of both the educator and the educated in this dialogic space, where talk is the primary learning tool. There is little doubt concerning the value of peer learning when students use dialog as their primary tool to share opinions and reinterpret their existing viewpoints to assimilate added information (Biggs and So-Kum Tang 2011). However, we cannot assume that the "development of social and collaborative skills is something that will occur naturally and without further facilitation" (Hesse et al. 2015, 37).

Our analysis suggests the ETGRs can empower students to interact with each other as learning leaders in synchronous settings. Learning leaders can influence others by facilitating learner interactions through online conversations (Kim, Heok Lee, and Wang 2020). Previous research demonstrates that “transformational leadership and active participation in online discussions were significant factors that enabled students to emerge as learning leaders” (Kim, Heok Lee, and Wang 2020, 1), and the results indicate there may be a connection between the social norms promoted by the ETGRs and their ability to influence group members during critical conversations in synchronous, as well as asynchronous online environments.

10.4. Limitations and future directions

This study has several limitations. First, the IM course was short and intensive, and we have established that co-constructing knowledge is a process requiring time for reflection. Therefore, the results might change if students are followed over a longer period that allows them to become better acquainted with the ETGRs. A future study focused on the time dimension could follow up on students’ work during the semester.

Second, self-reported data from three assignments were used for the analysis. Although the data were submitted anonymously, the students submitted their answers to their teacher. Thus, this power imbalance could influence their willingness to share their opinions and may have biased their answers. In addition, the students understood their teacher had a positive attitude toward the ETGRs, so we suggest that future studies utilize different data-collection strategies, such as interviews or observations.

Third, the participants in the study were domestic students; as such, social interaction and the processes surrounding the co-construction of knowledge could change with the addition of international students to the study, while including students with diverse cultural perspectives could add more depth to the ETGRs.

11. Conclusions

This exploratory case study contributes to the research on how to help IB students develop skills in collaborative learning. We argue that when the right circumstances are in place, the ETGRs can enhance collaborative learning in online assignments. Further, a comparison of students’ previous and current experiences indicates that students are often more concerned with completing the task rather than collaborating. Encouraging students to adopt the ETGRs in their online group work will help students establish norms for communicating constructively with others and experiencing positive outcomes and rewarding collaborative experiences.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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