# Techniques for Structuring International Student Group Work

Group work can provide opportunities for international students to develop a sense of belonging and establish peer relationships that extend beyond culturally-based social circles (Mittelmeier et al., 2018, 150). These benefits, however, may not be realized simply by creating opportunities for students to collaborate. Fortunately, strategies gleaned from the literature on effective group work also apply to intercultural group work settings, just slightly tailored to be culturally-responsive. The following are techniques to consider when structuring group work involving international students:

- **Intentionally configure student groupings**. Student self-segregation -- in the form of students choosing groups based on similar characteristics -- will likely occur if you allow students to pick their own groups. This can result in international students being bypassed or clustered together, requiring special consideration of students' international, gender, race, and socio-economic status during group formation. Shapiro et al. (2023, 54-55) suggest avoiding situations where international students are isolated from the rest of the class or their international peers. If you have six international students to assign across five groups, one option is to place pairs of international students in three of the five. The same would be helpful for classes where there are only a few domestic students.

- **Assign and rotate student roles to structure group collaboration.** Group roles provide structure and prevent situations where international students become "apprentices" to domestic students (Leki 2001, 48). For example, one student might be responsible for taking notes during brainstorming sessions, another keeps the group on task by keeping time, and another reports the group's discussion out to the rest of the class. Rotating these roles promotes an equitable division of group labor and prevents certain students from dominating group discussions or from disappearing in the group. As an added benefit, these roles provide you with an additional lens to evaluate individual student contributions.

- **Helps students establish structure and purpose.** Asking students to create a shared "group contract" establishing how often they will meet, for what purpose, and how their collective efforts will later be evaluated provides direction and ground rules for group interactions. Suggesting collaborative tools (e.g., Google docs or the collaborations tool in Canvas) helps keep them on task and compile group materials. Having well-defined instructions for what is expected of the work and how group work

is aligned with specific course learning outcomes assists students in conceptualizing what they're supposed to be doing and the purpose behind their collective efforts.

## Resources

Leki, I. (2001). "A narrow thinking system": Nonnative-English-speaking students in group projects across the curriculum. *TESOL Quarterly*, 35(1), 39-67.

Mittelmeier, J., Rienties, B., Tempelaar, D., and Whitelock, D. (2018). Overcoming cross-cultural group work tensions: Mixed student perspectives on the role of social relationships. *High Educ*, 75, 149-166.

Shapiro, S., Farrelly, R., and Tomas, Z. (2023). Fostering international student success in higher education. Alexandria, VA: TESOL Press.

*For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center by* <u>email</u> *or submit a* <u>consultation request form</u>*.*