

FACILITATING COMPARATIVE GROUP WORK IN ADULT EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this chapter is to describe and reflect on scholarly-based practices that can help facilitate comparative group work within the international and transnational¹ context of adult education. The first section of this chapter situates comparative group work within the larger context of comparative adult education, followed by a focus on how to facilitate a group of diverse learners with different societal and cultural experiences. The chapter emphasizes an outcome-based approach, describing how to set up incremental learning outcomes to enable comparative group work to be successful; a team-based approach, elaborating on coaching strategies to facilitate comparative work group; and a strength-based approach about adult learner-centered strategies for engagement, empowerment, mentoring, collaboration, fun, and accountability when facilitating comparative group work.

1. Introduction

Comparative group work is one of the signature features of the International Winter School at the University of Würzburg, Germany. The Winter School is the ‘heart’ of the Erasmus+ partnership² *International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning* (INTALL) for master’s students, PhD students, and practitioners. Since 2012, INTALL has taken place every winter, for two weeks, at Julius Maximilian University in Würzburg, Germany. After a successful first strategic partnership

¹ The distinction between international and transnational has been broadly discussed. For an initial understanding, ‘international’ might be defined as the more superordinate term, including all processes of collaboration, cooperation, networking, and interrelations worldwide and beyond national and cultural borders. ‘Transnational’ relates to collaborations within these structures by different actors and providers of adult education, leading to multinational and relational interdependencies (see Schmidt-Lauff & Egetenmeyer, 2015).

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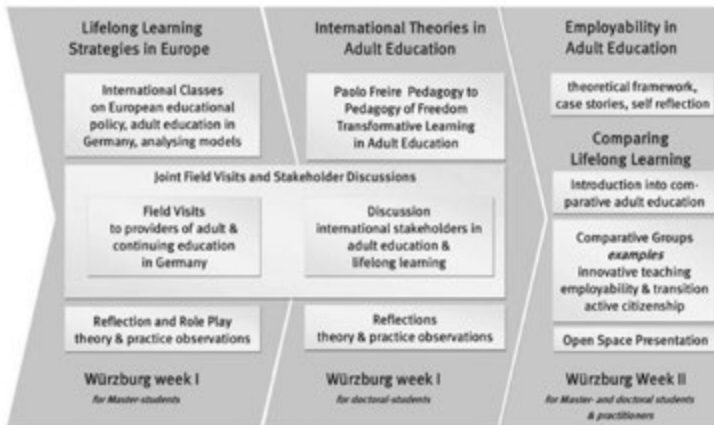
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Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning (COMPALL), which developed the joint module and exchange programme, (Schmidt-Lauff Semrau, & Egetenmeyer, 2018), the objective of the new strategic partnership INTALL is to build a professional network for adult education and learning between the two largest European Adult Education Associations and eight European partner universities (Universidade de Lisboa, Dublin City University, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Pécsi Tudományegyetem, Università Degli Studi di Padova, Helmut Schmidt Universität/ Universität der Bundeswehr Hamburg, Deutscher Volkshochschulverband DVV International, European Association for the Education of Adults). Julius Maximilian Universität Würzburg coordinates the overall programme. Furthermore, the project brings professionalization activities in adult education and lifelong learning in academia and practice together in a systematic manner to train both students and practitioners in international comparative competencies during the online preparatory phase and the Winter School gathering. Figure 1 illustrates the structure of INTALL.

Figure 1 – Structure of the INTALL programme. [Source: INTALL, 2019, <<https://www.paedagogik.uni-wuerzburg.de/lifelonglearning/programme/>> (07/2020)]



The programme has a two-week structure: In the first week, students learn about international and European policies in adult education and lifelong learning. During the second week, practitioners join the programme. Then, both students and practitioners work together on their employability skills and conduct their own international comparative studies. All partners support the intensive phase during the Winter School through diverse *comparative groups*, working on changing contents related to key transnational questions (e.g. market crisis and employability, the accelerating erosion of structure and lifelong learning practices, professional identity in a global

modern world) with respect to national and local specificities (monitoring, continuing education providers, and target groups).

According to Bormann and Henquinet (2000), group work is «an assignment of two or more people interacting with each other and interdependently working together to achieve specific objectives» (Bornann & Henquinet, 2000:56). Comparative group work provides individuals with a unique opportunity to produce a deliverable that reflects multiple and diverse ideas with a collective identity. Comparative group work, especially in an academic setting, can be challenging to facilitate, especially when such comparative groups include participants from different countries approaching the same topic based on their different societal and cultural experiences. The purpose of this chapter is to describe and reflect on scholarly-based practices that can help facilitate comparative group work in the context of adult education.

2. Comparison, comparative group work, and cooperative learning

Facilitators from various disciplines, including comparative education, use comparative group work to enhance their students' learning. In comparative group work, students work on an activity or project in pairs, small or medium-sized groups by interacting, coordinating, collaborating, and learning from each other. On the one hand, it is a form of peer-to-peer instruction and support. On the other hand, comparative group work is an intended, didactically arranged form of (methodically) controlled understanding. It uses the fact that our daily life is generally full of comparisons and that «our reasoning is always guided by comparison, whether we intend it to be or not» (Palmberger & Gingrich, 2013: 94). According to K applinger (2017), «comparison is a daily operation» (K applinger, 2017:31). However, the sense of academic professionalization leads further with the idea of a «systematic and well-founded knowledge about the other beyond the limits of single experiences, social media, or public media hypes» (K applinger, 2017:31). Otherwise, comparison may easily lead to prejudice and problematic interpretations. In a sense, comparative group work is a form of cooperative learning, which Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (2014) define as an instructional practice that uses small groups to facilitate peer-to-peer instruction. A cooperative group can be informal. For example, an instructor may have a small group of two or three students to work briefly on a prompt or develop an answer to a question. Cooperative group work can also be formal, as in the case of the Winter School in INTALL. Such cooperative group work is formal, because it is part of the overall design of the programme, and students work in various groups during a period of four days during the second week of the Winter School to conduct comparative analysis on a topic and share the findings from their comparison with an audience.

Obviously, in the case of formal cooperative work group, the facilitator identifies the topic and defines the learning outcomes prior to the formation of the working group. Then, diverse students with specific interests in the topic join to share their individual case studies and work as a group to perform a cross-national comparative analysis. In other words, the group work enables the students to develop their own knowledge by linking new ideas to their prior learning and experiences. Such a process empowers students to perform beyond their current level, using the support provided by the facilitators and peers.

The overall background of learning in cooperative groups mirrors comparative approaches. There is «a great deal to be gained by learning about the experiences of others» (Slowey, 2016:4). As expressed by T.S. Eliot (cited in *ibidem* 2016:4):

- And the end of all exploring;
- will be to arrive where we started;
- and know the place for the first time.

Although comparative group work fosters peer-to-peer instruction, instructors still play a vital role as facilitators communicating the ground rules, helping students assume specific roles, monitoring progress, and encouraging students to continuously reflect on the process and focus on achieving a common goal. Existing literature suggests that cooperative group work carries many positive benefits for students. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (2006) performed a meta-analysis, which found that cooperative learning contributes to producing greater academic achievement, self-esteem, and positive attitudes about learning. Similarly, Kuh, *et al.* (2007) also asserted that cooperative group work contributes to greater academic performance and student engagement. With regard to the Winter School in INTALL, some findings from the mid-term evaluation about the ‘development of competencies induced by participating in the programme’ illustrates that

all ratings are considerably high, especially concerning aspects that refer to ‘international’ competencies and knowledge. For example, almost all participants (93%) claimed that their understanding of adult education and lifelong learning in other countries has increased very much or much 78% of the group have ticked a 4 or 5 when being asked if their intercultural competencies have improved (RiB, 2019:22).

3. Comparative group work as part of comparative studies in (adult) education

When Field, Künzel, and Schemmann (2016) – after decades of comparative research and discourses – asked, «How can we move on to make

a case for CAE [Comparative Adult Education] that goes beyond learner participation and individual competences?» and K applinger³ replied one year later (2017), he referred to Roby J. Kidd’s list of seven points of «why compare» (Kidd, 1975:10 cited by K applinger, 2017:29):

- To become better informed about the educational system of other countries.
- To become better informed about the ways in which people in other cultures have carried out certain social functions by means of education.
- To become better informed about the historical roots of certain activities and thus to develop criteria for assessing contemporary developments and testing possible outcomes.
- To better understand the educational forms and systems operating in one’s own country.
- To satisfy an interest in how human beings live and learn.
- To better understand oneself.
- To reveal how one’s own cultural biases and personal attributes affect one’s judgment about possible ways of carrying on learning transactions.

Taking all aspects seriously, comparative (adult) education is a highly challenging and risky, complex undertaking. According to Wilson (2003), comparative education involves «an intersection of the social sciences, education and cross-national study which attempts to use cross-national data to test propositions about the relationship between education and society and between teaching practices and learning outcomes» (Wilson, 2003:3). Comparative group work that looks at trends, similarities, and differences related to aspects of adult education across several nation-states is definitely engaged in a comparative (adult) education study.

At the Winter School on *International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning*, comparative groups are demographically diverse. As a result, they include graduate students (MA and PhD) and practitioners with different societal, cultural, and academic experiences. The diversity of comparative group work requires the utilization of inclusive teaching strategies, which can help the group reach its maximum potential. When individuals work in groups and feel a sense of belonging, they tend to be more engaged, and potentially more productive with respect to their contributions to the group.

³ K applinger (2017) answers by compressing the seven points into five, with critical reference to contemporary trends and challenges such as historical, global, social, political, methodological, and modern dynamics (e.g. nationalism, populism).

A sense of belonging makes it easier for participants to build relationship quickly with members from different backgrounds. Interestingly enough, positive interactions with other members of a group contribute to increasing one's sense of belonging (Locks, *et al.* 2008). Obviously, the opposite is also possible in the sense that a diverse comparative work group can quickly become toxic, demoralising, dysfunctional, and less productive if members are anxious about their sense of belonging or the genuineness of the level of inclusiveness. For example, confirmation bias can quickly grow in a cross-national group (Scott, 1993). According to Scott (1993), confirmation bias refers to a tendency to search for, interpret, or recall information in a way that confirms one's pre-existing stereotypes or beliefs about another individual, group, culture, or society. An example of confirmation bias is when members of a group are aware of the stereotypes concerning the social and cultural backgrounds of other members and then start observing their behaviour during the activities in order to confirm such stereotypes. Spencer and Castano (2007) showed that stereotypes and confirmation bias of that nature can contribute to significantly reduced performances. In that context, the role of the instructors is vital in making every member of a comparative work group feel included in a genuine way and valued as an indispensable contributing member. The instructors or facilitators also have a responsibility to quickly, firmly, and politely challenge stereotypes and confirmation biases that may emerge while facilitating comparative group work.

Obviously, facilitating an inclusive kind of comparative work group requires a comprehensive approach, including a positive mindset and a cheerful disposition on the part of facilitators. Consequently, facilitators of comparative group work should:

- Examine their own identity development and self-concept and reflect on the extent to which bias may have affected their teaching without them even realising it.
- Foster a classroom atmosphere that embraces diversity by acknowledging the identity of each member, giving them an opportunity to share the best of who they are, continually stressing the opportunities offered by the diversity of the group, and highlighting students' valued identities to do well.
- Create an interactive and fair classroom environment that uses diversity as an asset (e.g. intentionally invite each member to contribute something to the discussions).
- Encourage the group to select categories that allow for comparisons that include the inputs of all members.
- Specify to every comparative group member some valued characteristics, skills, and assets that they hold based on their individual work and their contributions to the group interactions.

Furthermore, it is important for facilitators of comparative group work to understand that an inclusive classroom works best when it involves active learning strategies. An active learning classroom not only encourages learners to do things but also to think about what they are doing. In other words, the focus is not on the facilitator transmitting knowledge but on the participants reading, discussing, writing, and making decisions to progress towards achieving the goal of the comparative group work. This approach has the benefit of not only challenging learners to use a higher order of thinking but also for participants to hold each other accountable with the ultimate goal for the group in mind. However, it is important to understand that a goal is an aspiration or vision, which may not be attainable at times. Nonetheless, it is important to set a goal and strive to achieve it to the best extent possible.

4. An outcome-based approach to comparative group work

Facilitating a comparative group may be more efficient and productive when the facilitators use a comprehensive outcomes-based teaching and learning approach. In simple terms, outcomes-based teaching and learning consists of aligning the teaching activities with the learning outcomes to ensure a systematic instructional experience for the learner. According to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP, 2014), learning outcomes are intended «sets of knowledge, skills and/or competences an individual has acquired and/or is able to demonstrate after completion of a learning process, either formal, non-formal or informal» (CEDEFOP, 2014:164-165). Rather than focusing on what the teacher intends to teach, outcomes-based teaching and learning emphasises the intended learning outcomes for the learner as a possible result of the teaching. Therefore, in an outcomes-based teaching and learning process, everything starts with the articulation of the intended learning outcomes. Then, the curriculum content, the teaching methods and strategies, and the assessment process are aligned to achieve the intended learning outcomes. However, the facilitator of comparative group work in adult education should keep in mind that adult learners are agents of their own learning, enjoying their autonomy or even independence of conventional forms of knowledge, contents, and traditional pedagogical techniques and methods. Therefore, the expected learning outcome is only an intended outcome that should take into account the autonomy of the adult learner in educational practices.

Nevertheless, facilitators or instructors in comparative group work should approach their assignment as a systematic instructional process that aims at increasing instructional efficiency and facilitating a transformative learning experience for the learners. In planning a module,

the facilitators should be intentional clear about the instructional goals related to the intended learning outcomes, define specific learning objectives to incrementally reach the goals, adopt appropriate instructional strategies, and develop a plan to monitor how the learners are progressing towards achieving the learning objectives, and ultimately the intended learning outcomes. In a nutshell, the facilitator should clearly articulate incremental learning outcomes for the group work, which are related to both the academic objectives for the participants to achieve and the comparative analytical skills for them to develop. For example, the facilitators may develop the following outcomes to monitor during the comparative group work process. Upon completion of comparative group work, the participants will:

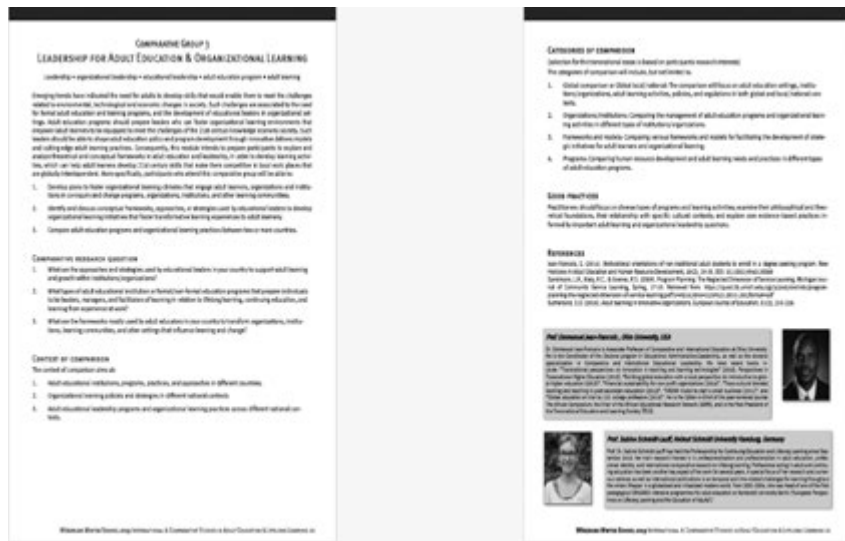
- Develop individual briefs about themselves and the national contexts of their countries in relation to the topic or theme for the group.
- Write a clear and concise purpose statement that includes the contextual units and categories or focus of the comparison.
- Write at least two research questions about the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of the transnational comparative analysis.
- Identify and define/operationalize the key variables in the research questions.
- Graph a diagram of the conceptual framework for the comparative analysis, which includes the categories of comparison.
- Describe a step-by-step process for the transnational comparative analysis.
- Describe how the contextual units and the categories will be used to analyze and interpret the findings.
- Outline a plan for the presentation of the transnational comparative analysis.
- Deliberate on the roles and responsibilities of each member to perform the transnational comparative analysis and present the findings to an audience.
- Make a creative presentation of the transnational comparative analysis to an audience.

5. A team-based approach to comparative group work

A comparative working group performing transnational comparisons over an extensive period of four successive days (during a two-week intensive Winter School programme including many more comparative theories, and approaches) operates almost like a team that was given the task to present their comparative findings to an audience at the end of the fourth day. Like a team, there is an inherent context to cooperate to achieve a common goal but also to perform well during the presenta-

tions of the findings. With that in mind, a team-based approach can be helpful to assist in facilitating comparative group work. In fact, team-based learning is simply a structured small-group learning approach that is rooted in the preparation of students before a class period so that they can work together more efficiently during the class period. The Winter School on *International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning* is basically designed that way. In the Winter School booklet, different topics and comparative groups are described so students can choose in advance (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Example from the 2019 Winter School. [Source: INTALL, <https://www.paedagogik.uni-wuerzburg.de/fileadmin/06030230/2019/INTALL_Winter_School_2019.pdf> (07/2020)]



Prior to the face-to-face meeting at the University of Würzburg, each student has to work with the facilitators to develop an individual essay or case study and upload it to WueTeams (a Moodle platform of the University of Würzburg open to all participants). The key aspect is that all students in a comparative group work on a similar topic, addressing similar research questions but using the contexts of their countries. Prior to their meeting as a comparative group, all participants use a common conceptual framework to develop their essays, read the same basic texts shared by the facilitators, and receive feedback from the same facilitators. Therefore, prior to their meeting, there is a preparatory phase in terms of content and group interaction designed to increase participants' inclination to work as a team towards the common goal of performing a transnational comparative analysis.

Svinicki (2004) explained that in a team-based learning process, the «focus is on the mental representation of information by the learner» (Svinicki, 2004:242). Hrynychak and Batty (2012) argue that team-based learning is based on the main elements of constructivist learning in the sense that the instructor serves as a facilitator and learners develop new understandings by confronting their preconceptions with their new experiences. In other words, the interactions in a team can contribute to opening up questions, creating (self-)reflective space, and developing new knowledge. Obviously, the facilitator serves as a coach to help the learner focus on the goal, the objectives for each day, the efficient use of time, and a constant reflection on the team-based learning process. In a sense, a team-based learning approach is similar to a flipped classroom or at least helps achieve what Hake (1998) asserted about students' interactive engagement in a flipped classroom, which is «heads-on (always) and hands-on (usually) activities which yield immediate feedback through discussion with peers and/or instructors» (Hake, 1998:65). In a nutshell, a flipped classroom consists of exposing learners to new materials or content prior to coming to class, using various support materials such as lecture videos, podcasts, or readings, and then use the class time to apply/problem-solve, discuss, and reflect on such materials or content.

6. A learner-centered approach to comparative group work

The Winter School on *International and Comparative Studies in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning* at the University of Würzburg includes not only master's and PhD students but also practitioners working in adult education or continuing education or lifelong learning activities. Therefore, they are all adult learners, and the facilitators of their comparative group work should consider the facilitation principles available in andragogy by using a learner-centered approach. The learner-centered approach has its foundation in the constructivist and subjectivist theory. According to Krause, Bochner, and Duchesne (2003), constructivism asserts that learners construct knowledge for themselves. Maypole and Davies (2001) argue that learners construct knowledge through their interactions with their environment (cognitive constructivism) and their facilitator and peers (social constructivism). The key factor in a constructivist approach is that learners are the architects of their own knowledge creation and hence in control of their learning process. In the context of comparative group work, a learner-centered approach means that the participants – who are adults – are given autonomy and control over their choice of topic, the way they organise the group work, their deliberation strategies, task delegation, and peer-to-peer accountability.

The subject-theoretical perspective on learning stresses the relation and interaction (social, cultural, environmental) of each learning process. «The subject's point of view is a social position from which the learning subject – guided by interest – relates to the possibilities of participation, i.e., the ability to act in society» (Ludwig, 2017:49). In addition to the constructivist approach, learning is understood much more as a «process that always encompasses a relationship between the individual and society and which relates to social contradictions» (Ludwig, 2017:51). As adult learners, participants of comparative group work bring a wealth of life experience to the classroom. Consequently, the facilitators in comparative group work should use andragogical strategies to facilitate a transformative learning experience for such adult learners. Some examples of key andragogical strategies include but are not limited to the following.

Integration: As indicated earlier, the adult learner comes to the classroom with prior knowledge and experiences. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) asserted that the integration of life experience and academic work is rooted in the fact that adults learn best from their own experience and prefer learning that is immediately relevant to their lives. It is important for the facilitators of a comparative group to account for such experience in a comprehensive manner. First of all, the facilitators should allow for sufficient time to invite and allow the members of a comparative group to share their prior knowledge and experiences. If the group is not aware of these experiences, it is impossible to incorporate them as assets for the group work process. Then, it is important to refer to specific aspects of participants' prior knowledge and experiences when illustrating how each member can contribute to the comparative analysis. The integration of group members' prior learning and experiences into the facilitation process may contribute to building better relationships both between the facilitator and the learners and among peers.

Collaboration: Most adult learners like active and collaborative learning, especially if it is structured to be productive. Kasworm (2014) referred to an active and collaborative classroom for adult learners as a *connected classroom*. In a connected classroom, the adult learner is given the opportunity to connect their current adult worlds with the activities in the comparative group. For example, inside the comparative group, participants may be assigned to work in pairs on specific aspects of the project; then, they are asked to report their work to the rest of the group. Pairs may be formed based on similar prior knowledge and experiences, and the ability of members to complement each other. Price and Baker (2012) argued that it is possible for adults to develop meaningful relationships simply through the shared classroom experience. This means that even without extra-curricular activities, students can develop meaningful relationships inside the classroom. In other words, even if adult learners do not socialise outside of the classroom, it is possible to develop meaning-

ful relationships simply by interacting and working together in class. As Donaldson *et al.* (2000) asserted, adult students may engage in meaningful peer interaction «both before class, in class, during breaks, and after class» (Donaldson *et al.*, 2000:8).

Self-direction: Adult students are self-directed learners. Obviously, self-directed learning is a key element of andragogy (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005) and should be taken into account when facilitating comparative group work that includes diverse adult learners. Merriam (2001) explained that the adult learner does not necessarily come to class with an innate self-directedness, but the potential is there. Therefore, the facilitators should help the adult learners develop the ability to direct their own work. In other words, just because adult learners are self-directed does not mean that the facilitator should be passive. The facilitators should instead tap into learners' potential for self-directedness to gradually help them direct their own work. In other word, the facilitators provide (and ensure) the space and then gradually transfer the responsibility for the learning outcomes to the comparative group through modelling (i.e. showing how to do it by example), communications (i.e. communicating the incremental self-directed process), and feedback (i.e. providing feedback on progress towards self-directedness). A premature transfer may have a negative effect on the group, making it feel unguided, unsupported, and lost. This would definitely not be conducive to a productive group environment.

7. Strategies for learner engagement in comparative group work

Learner engagement is essential for a successful facilitation of comparative group work. This last section (in lieu of a conclusion) provides ideas on how to develop and implement a strategy. Jean-Francois (2018) shared twelve principles of innovative teaching, which include but are not limited to empowering additional ownership of learning, novel student engagement experience, glocal-minded pedagogy, built-in fun in learning, and reliance on fair/adjustable accountability.

Empowering additional ownership of learning: In comparative group work, participants should be empowered to take the maximum level of ownership of their learning. Empowering the learners starts by valuing and validating their previous experiences. It is important not to single out student identities, because this can lead to marginalization. Instead, students' experience can be called upon when there is a clear connection between a student's experience and a given activity. Empowering also means providing individual feedback that acknowledges the strengths of a given participant. Such empowerment can help create a sense of belonging, consequently affecting student engagement. Ultimately, a group is empowered when members have the time, space, and autonomy to use the frameworks and guidance

given to them and start organising their work on their own. For example, this can take the form of ensuring that the group deliberates on clearly defined roles for each member, key deliverables, and a timeline to monitor individual and group progresses towards the completion of their tasks.

Novel student engagement experience: In intensive comparative group work, student engagement requires the utilization of novel strategies that are different from the routine participants are used to. As Jean-Francois (2018) argued, a «novel student engagement experience brings passion for learning a subject matter, because of a deeper connection that is created between the learner and the engaged learning experience» (Jean-Francois, 2018:9).

Glocal-minded pedagogy: As mentioned in previous sections of this chapter, comparative group work includes participants from various countries. A facilitator should therefore be mindful of and use pedagogical frameworks that account for both the global and the various local (i.e. national) contexts involved in the comparative group. The facilitator should inquire from participants and conduct one's own desk research about the dominant teaching practices in the various societal and cultural contexts represented in the group and conduct additional desk research of their own. This may enable the facilitator to reconcile facilitation practices with those of the various national contexts represented in a group.

Built-in fun in learning: Being too rigid and conventional when facilitating comparative group work is a constant temptation given the pressure of time and the unpredictable nature of working with a transnational group for the first time. Fun is a great equalizer that can help overcome that temptation. Jean-Francois (2018) argued that «if a teaching strategy can help a learner associate learning with fun, this association becomes a great motivator» (Jean-Francois, 2018:11). It is important to stress that fun does not mean chaos but an atmosphere that allows participants to feel safe being themselves and laughing at themselves while taking seriously the quality of work required to achieve a common goal for the group. When participants work in a nurturing and fun but purposeful atmosphere, they produce a lot of work without feeling the anxiety that could come with it.

Reliance on fair/adjustable accountability: A productive comparative group effort is one in which everyone is accountable to everyone. Jean-Francois (2018) argued that «when accountability is linked to learning outcomes, it becomes not a regulation to punish the learner, but a guide to monitor progress toward the achievement of objectives, goals, and outcomes» (Jean-Francois, 2018:12). Accountability requires that a role is assigned or assumed by each member of the group. Not only does this help everyone take responsibility, it may also help eliminate a common problem in group work, namely dominance of a single student or conflict avoidance by others. The facilitator should explain to the group the role of positive interdependence and individual accountability, and how

any group member can help keep the other on task. Also, the facilitator should circulate around during group work, to acknowledge and praise partial progress, observe issues or potential issues, and intervene to help move forward on a task.

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