Facilitating group work skills in online environment: experiences from developing a course assignment

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Abstract

Online environments have become a major study environment for universities in the past years. This has put teachers in a new challenging position where they need to teach skills such as groupwork and collaboration in new types of virtual working environments. As the working environment has become increasingly virtual, the ability to communicate and work together also in virtual environments has become more important. This paper presents experiences from developing a groupwork initiation assignment to facilitate online groupwork skills and neighbourness competencies of university students. The findings indicate that although the assignment was experienced positively by many students, care needs to be taken on how the assignment is instructed and motivated, to promote the development of self-reflection and groupwork skills.

Keywords: Online environment, groupwork, inter-cultural groupwork, qualitative research

1. Introduction

Improvements in information technology solutions have resulted in a surge of online working environments resulting in a significant rise in their popularity during the past two decades (Carter et al. 2020; Allen & Seaman, 2014). However, the importance of online environments in teaching faced a surge in popularity owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. In many universities the normal mode of study has transitioned from a mostly face-to-face mode to a mostly online mode.

While the increase of online teaching environments has created new opportunities, enabling students to participate in courses and study programs all around the world regardless of living location (e.g. Cogburn & Levinson, 2003, 2008), the new environments have also resulted new challenges (e.g. Kebritchi et al. 2017, Li & Irby, 2008, Hung et al. 2010, Romiszowski & Mason, 2004; Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005; Kebritchi et al. 2017). The barriers to participate tend to appear especially in the context of group work activities, where online environments can create additional challenges, which include issues in engagement, community building and gaining support (Gillet-Swan 2017).

Meanwhile, the importance of group work in working environments is growing (Fay et al. 2015), emphasizing the need for teaching the requisite skills. Owing to the possibilities online environments create, such as the ability of students to participate in courses and study programs regardless of location, teachers need to take into consideration the diversity of student groups (Alsubaie 2015). It is no longer enough for the teachers to encourage students to work together in online environments, instead teachers need to acknowledge that students need additional help to develop intercultural skills and learn to successfully work in multicultural working environments (DiMauro & Bolzani 2020), where they can face challenges such as language barriers, misunderstanding of cultural dispositions towards others, asymmetric communication, and differences in cultural behavioral norms governing interactions (Williams 2021).

Thus, teachers face a growing pressure to come up with new ways to facilitate group work in online environments to minimize the challenges and create positive experiences. Various facilitation tools for this are available, but while many provide guidance on how to facilitate online group work and many provide teachers ways to help students to succeed in multicultural teams, few combine these two (DiMauro & Bolzani 2020). In this paper we approach the challenge of coping with the difficulties of online environments and the challenges of intercultural group work through a process of developing and evaluating a group work facilitation assignment focused on fostering neighbourness competencies.

Previous research has identified that planned instructions by teachers that aspire to improve group learning experiences is important (Cogburn et al. 2010) and can have various benefits, which can result in students achieving deeper learning, and buildup of confidence and skills (Brindely et al. 2009).

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This paper reports experiences from three rounds of a groupwork initiation assignment that was designed to **facilitate group work and neighbourness skills of student**s. The assignment was given to groups with a common national background as well as international groups.

The results show that with good and motivating instructions from the teachers many students can benefit from an assignment such as the one used in this study. In addition to the role of the teacher and assignment instructions, the attitude and motivation of the student are major factors on perceived benefits from the assignment.

2. Theoretical background

Online environments have developed a lot in the recent years, and become an essential part of work and study, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Although new technologies have enabled the increased use of online learning tools, their use is not in itself a new phenomenon. Online working environments and especially computer supported cooperative work (CSCW) have been of interest in IS research for almost forty years, after the concept was first introduced during 1980s (Bannon & Schmidt 1989). While the tools enabling online collaboration have improved, so has our understanding of the various factors impacting the collaboration. For instance, while initially online working environments were defined with taxonomy acknowledging location and time (Ellis et al. 1991), meaning that work can either be conducted simultaneously, face to face, from different places but same time, or at different times from same or different places. Recently this taxonomy has been expanded, as research has understood that also the number of participants, the nascence of the work, the duration of the performance and the turnover of the participants can influence the way group work is conducted (Lee & Paine 2015), showing that there are multitude of factors that can impact the way individuals engage in various working environments. This has an impact on the way these tools are used in education and online group work as well.

While the increase of online teaching environments has created new opportunities, enabling students to participate in courses and study programs all around the world regardless of living location, new skills are also needed regarding collaboration with students from other cultures (Kebritchi et al. 2017). Online collaboration is identified equally social activity as in person one (Kearsley 2000), meaning that cultural barriers can similarly exist in online environments and teachers need to take into consideration the interculturality of student groups (Alsubaie 2015, DiMauro & Bolzani 2020).

Technical capabilities

In online environments students can for instance feel isolated from others, especially if there are major differences on the competence level of the students in regards of using the online tools, or big differences on the technological equipment that are available (McInnery & Roberts, 2004). On the other hand, students can struggle with mismatch in reality and expectations (Li & Irby, 2008) and suffer from lack of readiness for online teaching that requires independence and motivation (Hung et al. 2010).

This underlines the challenges to categorize challenges depicted in Figure 1, as all the three challenges, technical capabilities, expectations and groupwork skills affect each other. Some students can be very comfortable with online communication while some experience communication without a face-to-face contact to be difficult and the technology hindering learning (Muilenburg and Berge 2005). Some of these difficulties have been overcome in recent years by many students as online participation has become routine for them and recent studies indicate that technical challenges are among smallest challenges in online learning (Barrot et al. 2021). Yet, being an active participant in group conversation is different from being a passive listener in Teams or Zoom, so assuming that everyone is by now familiar and comfortable with the environment is not encouraged.

Neighbourness competences

The neighbourness competences model by DiMauro & Bolzani (2020) examines neighbourness as a complex two-dimensional construct and is developed for the research project that this study was one part of, and thus was used as the guiding idea behind the data collection for this study. They observe the competences of neighbourness as referring to feeling being part of a community, share a sense of belonging, identity or values; either if the community is real or virtual, and independently of how close or proximal the relations among community members are. The model examines competences in two spheres: (i) the sphere of self-identity or self-management skills, and (ii) the sphere of managing relationships with others. The other dimension in the model examines the aspects of attitudes, accumulating knowledge and behavioral skills. (DiMauro & Bolzani 2020)

In the model social emotional or attitudes components are considered as a requisite for skills development, and they also guide the expectations of a student (DiMauro & Bolzani 2020). The attitude and curiosity toward self-reflection enables the student to grow their knowledge and awareness of self, and also foster their identity (Usborne & Sablonniere 2014) and manage their expectations of learning. With these requisites the actual skills of self-reflection and mindfulness can be developed. This in turn would affect how students approach online groupwork both in terms of expectations and groupwork skills, which further affects the motivation of the student (Figure 1).

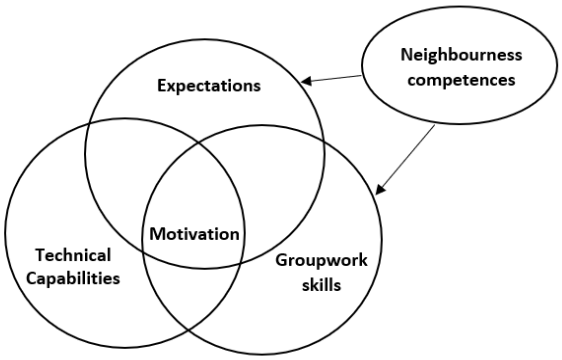

Figure 1 Challenges of online groupwork.

Expectations

A major factor on how any activity, in this case an online group assignment, succeeds, is the expectations of the student and how they experience the work. In Figure 1 we show that neighbourness competences, the ability to self-reflect in relation to others, affect the expectations a student brings into a situation.

The challenges in expectations have been identified from many perspectives. Students can be unsure about their ability to act as a group member (Harasim et al. 1998). In online context this can be a result of bad previous experiences (Brindely et al. 2009). Students can also struggle with engagement, community building and gaining support (Gillet-Swan 2017), and this will further pose challenges for their expectations of working in a new group. Also, problems with identity and belonging have been identified (McInnery & Roberts, 2004), as well as issues with participation and interaction with their peers (Romiszowski & Mason, 2004; Kebritchi et al. 2017).

Groupwork skills

Typically, online tools are designed for specific purposes, which might not be in line with the objectives of teachers, when they aspire to facilitate group work. Even the research focusing on the cooperation in online environments focuses on small groups (Grudin 1994), which does not necessary apply to classrooms, where students are expected to collaborate, sometimes in small groups, but other times with the whole classroom (Brindely et al. 2009). The research on online collaboration also tends to focus on interaction between individuals who already know each other (Kraut et a. 2000), although, in classrooms and other online groups, individual might have non-existent social ties (Weisband 2007), creating new types of barriers to group work and collaboration. Thus, online learning environments require students to have ability to work within different sizes of groups and skills to work with unfamiliar individuals. However, most individuals have little training regarding how to successfully work together with others in online environments where different type of skills and behaviours are needed than in in-person interactions (Brindely et al. 2009). Consequently, online learning environments also require teachers to have skills to facilitate the work and support students with the online learning environment (Kearsley 2000).

The challenges of online groupwork are summarized in Figure 1. The student expectations, technical capabilities and groupwork skills all play an important role in the student's motivation to participate and engage in the online working environments. As the Figure shows, while the technical capabilities play an important role in the students' ability to participate in online group work, also skills and expectations that are not necessarily related to the technical working environment can play a significant role. Self-reflection among students can be defined as reflecting upon their own learning, which includes their personal experiences, perspectives, beliefs and claims (Shaw et al. 2018). Self-reflection can be done either in action or on action (Brownhill 2022), meaning that it can take place during or after a learning activity. Neighbourness competencies on the other hand combine skills for intercultural communication, global citizen skills and neighboring skills. Thus, the neighbourness competencies emphasize a mindset of a welcoming and open attitude towards others, which encourages students to learn from each other, share a sense of belonging but also gain a feeling of responsibility (DiMauro & Bolzani 2020). Social identity refers to the sense of belonging to a group, the "we", and the existence of an out-group, "them" (Tajfel & Turner 1986). While the sense of belonging to a group can be viewed as a positive thing, the behavior toward the out-group may not be positive. What we consider neighbourness skills in this paper is the ability to be flexible with who belongs to the "we" and understanding of the differences between people, i.e. ability to create a flexible and dynamic social identity. The aim of higher education study programs is to equip students with skillsets that are useful for them

in their future careers. Many students with a higher degree in management or engineering will work in international corporations, where working with people with diverse backgrounds in constantly changing group compositions is a given. In order to do this, study programs should address the challenges illustrated in Figure 1 both from the online environment perspective, but also from the perspective of neighbourness skills, that affect both the sphere of groupwork and the sphere of expectations (Figure 1).

3. Methodology

This paper introduces experiences from a groupwork initiation assignment conducted in a bachelor-level university course in a Finnish university. In Finnish university, students have a very equal starting points in their education owing to the welfare state agenda of equal educational opportunities for all (Välimaa 2012). However, while university education does not include tuition fees, non-EU/EEA students have to pay nominal fees to study in Finnish universities (Vuori 2013), which can cause inequality.

The course covers topics of organizational behavior and leadership, and thus assignments in the course aim to facilitate learning of the course content and trigger reflections on the topics covered in the course, such as diversity, groupwork and conflicts. The assignments also support the development of groupwork and leadership skills of the students, help them observe their own actions as a part of a group, and think about the skills needed as future supervisors and leaders. The course is a compulsory part of studies for students majoring in industrial management or knowledge management. In addition to these groups the course gathers a large number of students with minor studies in industrial management. It can be assumed that many of the students have some kind of interest in organizational behavior, and this may bias the results somewhat toward a positive attitude for the assignment.

The experiences reported here are gathered from three implementation rounds of the course, in spring 2021, summer 2021 and spring 2022. All three implementations were carried out by the same responsible teacher, who at the beginning of data collection had 12 years' experience as a teacher in various university courses. Part of this study is thus self-observation by the teacher.

The questions asked from the students were different each round, as one aim was to develop the questions to facilitate the reflection of the students, while also providing the teacher with meaningful information about the success of the assignment. The purpose of the study was thus to experiment how the wording of the assignment directs the reflection of the students. It is assumed the wording has an impact on how the students respond to questions, and the goal was to find wordings that would direct the students to reflect on their behavior and thinking. This causes bias into the data, but was done intentionally, since the primary purpose of the data was to help the students, the research purpose being secondary.

The variance in the data poses challenges for the validity of the analysis across rounds, and it is also the main reason for not quantifying most of the analysis results. Quantitative reporting is done only on the third implementation, when the reflection was conducted with a questionnaire developed for assessing multiple different tools for supporting neighbourness skills in a research project. Analysis across implementations is done only on the open questions with qualitative content analysis.

The student groups

The students of the course are mainly second- or third-year bachelor students, but some students take the course as part of their minor studies in industrial engineering in their master's degree.

Groups were formed by the course staff with the aim of having as heterogeneous groups as possible in terms of study program (e.g. industrial engineering and management, information and knowledge management, computer science, environmental engineering, materials engineering, etc.), and in the international groups in terms of assumed cultural background based on name, as information on the nationality or study program of exchange students was not available to the teachers.

The assignment

The initiation assignment was given a to all student groups, but reporting reflections on it was extra credit, i.e. voluntary. The students got 5 extra points to the total max 100 points on offer during the course. In many cases the extra 5 points meant a better final grade for the course. The assignment was given as follows:

Select (from your own files or from the internet) a picture that to you represents being Finnish. Also select a picture that to you represents your own culturality if you are not a Finn. Show these pictures to your group members with a short explanation of why you chose these pictures, and if you had other options. Discuss together what similarities and differences you have in the pictures across your group. Also discuss possible stereotypes you identify in the selection of pictures. Reserve 30-45 minutes for this discussion at the first session you meet with your group to do the first assignment.

In the first round the instruction for the reflection was:

Write about the process of choosing the picture, the event of sharing them in your group and how this exercise impacted your relationship with your group members. Include the photos in your written account. The length of this assignment is approximately 1 page.

The reflections written to this instruction focused quite much on the process of choosing the picture, but not on self-reflection of cultural identity, which was intended. The response rate for the first round was 47% (139/293).

For the second round the reflection was assigned as follows:

Write a short report on the discussion you had with your group. Write about how the discussion went, what kind of characteristics the pictures had and how this assignment affected your relationship with your group members.

The response rate for the second round was 74% (26/35)

In the third round the reflections were collected with a survey, and the response rate was 74% (186/246). The survey questions are presented in the accompanying file.

Example of content analysis

The main analysis method used in this study was qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis describes the meaning of qualitative material in a systematic way (Schreier 2012, 1). This inductive approach moves from specific data to the general, so larger entities can be made (Elo & Kyngäs 2007, 109). Content analysis is well suited for the analysis of unstructured data, and this method aims to obtain information about the phenomenon under study (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018).

An example of the coding process can be illustrated with this quote from one student reflection:

> *"I would say that this exercise helps us to understand each other better, so we know what we can expect from the people in the group, what they like/dislike, how they are working, acting and how to communicate with them. From my point of view, mainly it helps us to know each other more."*

At the first coding round, this quote was coded under the general code "impact of the task". There may be several statements in each reflection that were coded individually under this code. In the next round, the impact codes were coded again under positive, neutral or negative impact. This quote got the value "positive" as the student stated that the task helped them work as a group. The analysis was done based on codes, and thus exact numbers of students who gave a positive, neutral or negative impact, cannot be reported, since some students may have reported all types of impacts for the task in their reflections.

4. Findings

Teacher experience of the assignment

One of the authors of this paper is the responsible teacher for the course implementations described in the method section. Before going to the analysis of student reflections, here are some thoughts of the assignment from the teachers point of view.

When giving the assignment instructions to the students, there were surprisingly little questions or comments about it. Only a handful of questions were asked about the instructions. At the outset, the idea of the task was to trigger self-reflection and cultural curiosity of the students. Based on the reflections that we got in the first round, the assignment directed more to describing the selection of the photo, rather than really reflecting on the thinking process behind the selection.

There were many reflections that did touch on the topics of representing one's own culturality, being curious about others, and how just having this kind of assignment to discuss brought the group together, it seems that for many groups the assignment did serve the purpose it was developed for. Even for the students that did not like the assignment, it may have created a platform of discussion and finding common ground, if the whole group has decided that they do not want the extra credits and will not perform the initiation assignment. Writing a reflection to an open question that is properly formulated is probably most helpful for the students.

Collecting experiences from students purely in a qualitative format may be pedagogically sound and provides rich data. It also takes a lot of effort to analyze. Having a student help analyze the data as part of bachelor thesis work was thus vital.The survey provided a higher response rate, but it may not have prompted as deep reflection from the students as the open assignment. Naturally, analyzing the survey results was a lot easier, as most of the questions were quantifiable. The downside of using a survey developed for a larger international research project was that it was not designed this specific assignment and course in mind, and some of the questions may thus have felt irrelevant to the students.

Experience of the students

Overall, the reflection essays and the student survey indicated that the students saw the assignment as a good way to initiate group work in an online environment and especially with previously unfamiliar people. Most of the coded statements for the impact of the assignment were positive, and this would indicate that the assignment was at least to most parts successful. The student feedback emphasized especially the fact that the

assignment was easy and did not take a lot of time. Moreover, many of the students felt that the assignment was a good way to start a conversation with a group of unfamiliar people, which some presumed would have been more awkward if they would have proceeded straight to the actual graded group task. The assignment was also considered easy to participate in and the instructions provided sufficient support and thus helped students to avoid misunderstandings. Many also pointed out that at least to most parts, it was easy to discuss about their own opinions and even shy students felt that the exercise helped them to participate.

Many of the students felt that the assignment was especially helpful to working in the online environment and its challenges. The students did not have the possibility to meet outside the online environment and thus they saw the assignment as a way to make the collaboration more fluent. The following quote represents well the kind of statements the students gave: *"The assignment improved my group's familiarity with each other and during the online work, gave us a lot needed information about the people we were working with, and whom we did not have a change to meet".*

However, many of the students felt that they would have benefitted from the assignment even more if they had had a chance to do it face to face. Especially the students who felt that while the assignment was useful, other students still seemed distant afterwards, pointed out that more benefits would have been gained with face-to-face interaction.

Some students indicated that the assignment did not really help them to overcome the challenges of online environment. This was the case especially among the students whose group members were not interested in the task and rather focused only on its completion rather than learning about each other. For some students the motivation for the task was only the additional points they could gain for the course.

The attitudes of the students had a significant effect on the way they approach the assignment. Some of the students had not read the instructions well or did not listen when the teacher introduced the assignment and had not really understood the point of the assignment. Consequently, there were situations where the assignment did not have the intended effect but instead made the actual group work process, not necessarily more difficult, but clearly less motivating than it would have been without the assignment: "*It raised concerns about how the actual groupwork will go, when the group members were not interested in this initiation assignment*". The process of introducing the pictures was also not a positive experience for all students. "*It created instantly a feeling of being an outsider if the picture was significantly different from the others, and one had to defend their choice*".

In the survey results a few new students, that had been studying less than a year, indicated that the assignment had helped them to learn something new about themselves but also others, indicating that the assignment had an impact on their understanding of their own identity but also their relationships with others. The assignment also enhanced the students' feeling of belonging in the local and global level. For instance, one student from an all-Finn group pointed out "*My relationship with the other group members advanced faster than it would have without it. The*

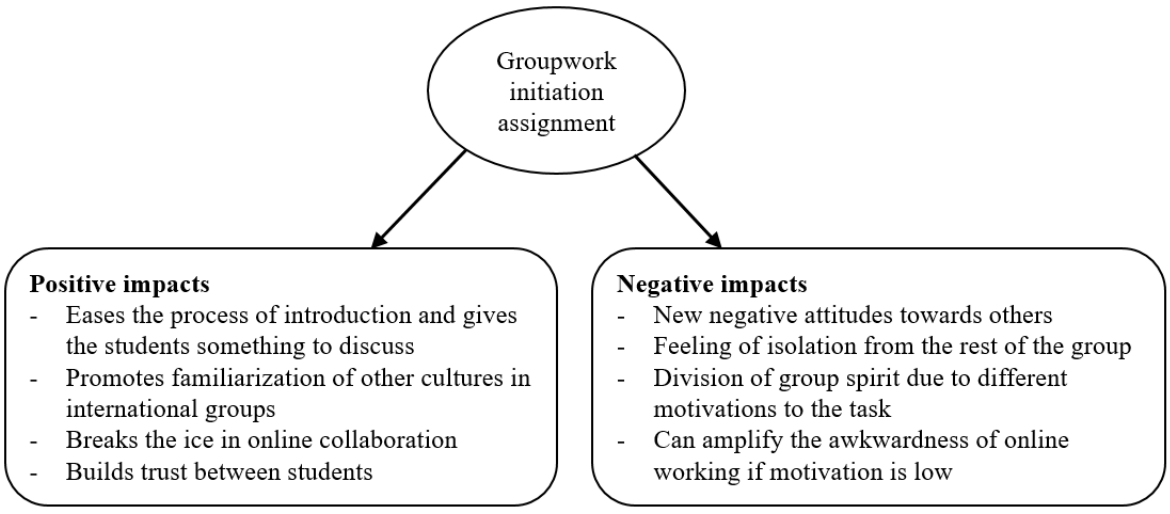

Figure 2 Impacts of the assignment

pictures also created this sense of unity as even though all the participants had very different pictures, everyone could recognize some aspect of being a Finn and this way reflect the picture from their own perspective.", while a student who participated in an international group reflected the assignment: "*I think that owing to the assignment, we managed to form a better understanding of each other. We managed to better comprehend how different members of our croup think and how their approach differs from our own. This again improved our prerequisites for the successful collaboration*."

Finnish students considered the assignment to increase their companionship with other course participants more than the international students. This was the case even though the reflection essays from the international groups were 100 % positive. The international group students indicated that they were happy to learn more about Finnish culture but also what Finns thought about their cultures, which they though as very revealing of Finns as well. The interest in other cultures was thus visible in all kinds of groups, but the companionship was improved especially among the all-Finn groups.

The assignment was considered a good way to get to know other students: "*This is a very effective way to build trust among different people through our culture*". This indicates that the assignment succeeded in building shared sense of belonging through the reflections on one's own culture. However, especially students who completed the assignment in all Finn group indicated that: "*this assignment would have been more fruitful in an international group as then there would probably be more variance on the discussion as the pictures would be different*." Besides the cultural perspectives, many of the students felt that the assignment helped them to get acquainted with students from other fields and connect with people they would normally not have done so. In this sense, the assignment also improved the students respect for diversity, as the assignment helped the students to identify different ways in which individuals can approach various topics. This was helpful in the actual group work as well, as it enabled the students to recognize their differences and apply them in the actual assignment. As one student pointed out: "*This was fun and gave a concrete example to me on one of the best sides of group work, i.e., the fact that you can work on things from multiple angles when there are different people with different life experiences working together*".

While most of the students indicated positive impacts regarding attitudes towards self and others, there were also contradicting views on the topic. Some students would have liked the assignment to be more personal for them to build more in-depth relationships with other students, while some felt that talking about one's own culture was too personal, and they would have liked the assignment to focus more on work related topics. Some students again felt that the exercise was useless and too superficial for it to actually have an impact on the group relationships. This indicates that, for the assignment to facilitate sense of belonging the students need to be on the same page regarding how much they wish to share with the rest of the group.

The student responses indicated knowledge formation. The assignment improved for instance critical thinking and self-reflection of some of the students: "*It gave me the chance to reflect about myself and my identity both under a private perspective and a global point of view*." On the other hand, the assignment also improved the self-awareness of the students, well represented by the following quote: "*it helped me to begin thinking about me, about who I am thanks to what I received before, who I want to become in my professional career, and what my culture brings to me*" or another one states the same idea "*It was nice, it did make me think about the culture we have grown up in*". Thus, the assignment helped the students to learn about others and themselves. However, there were conflicting views pointed out in the reflection essays as well. For example, one student felt that the assignment in itself was beneficial, but considered a picture selected by a group member to be weird and this resulted in a negative attitude towards that particular student throughout the group work. This indicates that while the assignment helped the students in building awareness of different cultures, this did not necessarily result in deep understanding of the culture and its impacts, or in deep understanding and openness toward others.

The findings on the impact of the initiation assignment reported by the students are summarized in Figure 2. Although the majority of the coded statements were positive, the negative impacts are given room here as well, since it may be safe to assume that the students who opted not to hand in their reflections would have reported proportionally more negative feelings about the assignment.

The assignment helped students in building their neighbourness skills. Especially the relationship building skills, and the ability to find common interests and activate meaningful and trustful relationships were emphasized in the student responses by many students. For instance, the students saw the assignment as a tool to build relationships with the other students in their group as it helped the students to relax and move from a very formal approach to the group work to a more natural and friendly collaboration. Students also felt that it was easier to have discussions beyond the actual topic of the group work, which also helped the students to agree on the practicalities such as when the work would be continued. As one student summarized: "*the*

assignment was a nice way to start the group work as it was not demanding in itself and did not take a lot of time, but still initiated conversation with people who were previously unfamiliar to me". Overall, many of the students indicated that the group work was more meaningful to them after the initiation assignment. One of the students even thought that: "*the opportunity to discuss about our cultural backgrounds helped us to communicate without insecurities or presumptions towards the other person or their culture*."

In the quantitative results of the third round survey, the strongest positive reaction to the assignment came with the feeling of companionship: 76,1% of the respondents answered that the assignment increased their feeling of companionship with other course participants with an additional 17% answering maybe to this question. The large number of Finnish students and single nation groups explain that 63,8% of the respondents state that they did not learn anything new about other cultures.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The assignment reflection findings can be analyzed with the help of the framework presented in Figure 1. Especially the expectations, motivation and groupwork skills spheres were concretely demonstrated in the student reflections. Some students reported negative attitude toward the assignment in the outset, but in the end found it a positive experience. In most reflections that reported negative experiences the expectations going in were negative as well. It is important thus to try to manage the expectations of the students with clear instructions to the assignment and good introduction to the background of it. If an assignment like the one used in this study is presented as an additional assignment, which can provide additional points in the course, and as a "nice to have" ice breaker for the following group work, some might not take the assignment seriously, which in the worst case can result in the assignment having more negative impacts than positive ones. Briefly presenting the neighbourness competence model and using more time on explaining the kinds of competences the assignment is meant to develop are going to be the next steps in the development of the tool.

The possible negative outcomes of the assignment can be linked to the challenges of online environments discussed in section 2 of this paper. Students may come in with previous negative experiences (Brindely et al. 2009) or the assignment may create such negative experience if the assignment evokes feelings of not being part of the group. An interesting insight from some students was that the discussion was not welcoming of differing viewpoints to what it means for people to be a Finn, although this was clearly addressed

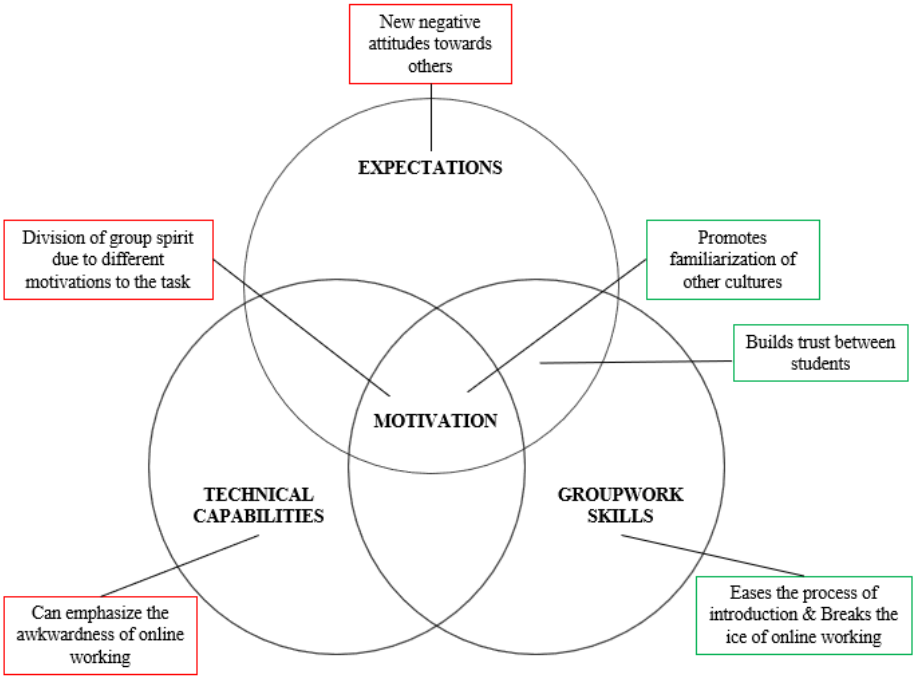

Figure 3 Findings of the assignment linked with challenges of online collaboration.

as a key aim of the assignment. Online environments can pose challenges for identity and feeling of belonging (McInnery & Roberts, 2004) and for some students the assignment did not meet the goal of facilitating self-reflection of identity or foster the sense of belonging to a group, which supports the theoretical findings that online environment can make this more challenging. The instructions given to students both in writing and in the accompanying oral instructions should more clearly instruct the students toward openness of others and curiosity on how people experience cultures, either their own or of others. The instructions should prompt both reflection in-action and reflection on-action (Brownhill 2022) so that the students would be more mindful of both their own experience of their culture, and of the thinking of others.

The assumption of the authors was that the focus in the reflections would be on improved communication skills or group atmosphere, not on attitudes and motivation, which received a lot of attention in the reflections. The difficulty of the balancing act of writing a brief and simple instruction for the assignment and providing enough background information to trigger competence development and self-reflection is illustrated by the results of this study: for many students the assignment worked as intended, but some students had a negative experience.

Finally, besides providing good introduction to the tool, it is also important to realize, that these types of assignments that can be very personal at least to some of the students, should be discussed also after the assignment and provide the students a way to express the possible negative emotions that the assignment brough about. A "debriefing" facilitated by the teacher after conducting the assignment would be also a point to further instruct the students in self-reflection and the diversity of people in experiencing group work situations.

Implications for practice from the results are twofold: firstly, the role of the teacher in giving the assignment and writing the instructions in a manner that facilitates self-reflection is important. Secondly, the importance of debriefing as an enforcer of meta-skills learning is highlighted by the results. The next rounds of the assignment will include a discussion about the survey results of previous implementations at the introduction of the assignment, and a discussion about the assignment in a debriefing manner at the end of groupwork, that should be included in the reflections. The reflections survey will in the future be collected approximately one month after the initiation assignment.

The fact that the student reflection was voluntary may cause bias in the results, and thus poses challenges to the validity of our results. It can be assumed that students who had a positive experience of the assignment are more likely to go through the effort of writing the reflection on it as well. However, there were numerous reflections that reported both a poor motivation at the outset, and negative experiences of the assignment, so we can argue that even if there is bias in the material, it is not severe. There were also no big differences on the data from different rounds, although the response rate was different, and thus the assumption is made that the data is representative and generalizable to the context of higher education with caution.

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