Functional Diversity and its Impact on Distributed Groups: An Exploratory study

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Abstract

Work groups have become diverse and will continue as such in the coming years, in as much as nations and organizations themselves become more diverse. Diversity studies have focused on social categorization, such as ethnicity, gender, culture, sexuality and anything that makes two entities different from one another, or on functional diversity that involves task-related knowledge, skills, opinions and perspectives. This paper examines functional diversity in the context of virtual groups that work together in an online environment and its effect on group performance. A longitudinal experiment involving online classes was conducted and the results are reported. Our research revealed that functionally diverse groups are not good for ad-hoc tasks but perhaps good for on-going tasks. In addition, the research shows that groups become more trusting and cohesive over time. Future research areas are also discussed.

1. Introduction

Diversity is becoming a norm in the borderless world. Work groups are becoming more frequent [28,61,63], consisting of members that differ in race, gender, nationality and expertise. Many authors from different disciplines have provided a definition of diversity. Knippenberg & Schippers (2007) define diversity as, “…a characteristic of a social grouping (i.e., group, organization, society) that reflects the degree to which there are objective or subjective differences between people within the group (without presuming that group members are necessarily aware of objective differences or that subjective differences are strongly related to more objective differences).” Aggarwal (2010) defines diversity as, “... the differences among factors like ethnicity, gender, culture, sexuality and anything that makes two entities different from each other. Diversity creates a heterogeneous environment and is becoming an inherent part of all groups, especially virtual groups that consist of geographically distributed members”. Cummings (2004) defines that, “... a diverse work group is one in which the members, by virtue of their different organizational affiliations, roles, or positions, can expose the group to unique sources of knowledge. It is hypothesized that if members of structurally diverse work groups engage in external knowledge sharing, their performance will improve because of this active exchange of knowledge through unique external sources”. From all the above and many more studies [12,39,57,58 etc.], it is inferred that diversity reflects differences among group members on various structural, informational, and perceptual dimensions. Diverse groups may have different outcome than homogeneous groups [24,33,63]. The nature of the task and the level of communication between members and group cohesiveness play a major part in group decision making [13,27,39,66]. It is important to understand how diverse groups make decisions. According to Devoe (1999) “...there are challenges to managing a diverse work population. Managing diversity is more than simply acknowledging differences in people. It involves recognizing the value of differences, combating discrimination, and promoting inclusiveness. Managers may also be challenged with losses in personnel and work productivity due to prejudice and discrimination and complaints and legal actions against the organization. Many theories related to diversity have emerged. William and O’Reilly (1998) suggested two theories that may influence group behavior: social categorization, and information and decision making (functional). Social categorization defines groups based on categories like gender, age, race, etc., and information and decision making defines diversity based on task related skills. There are no clear results and literature has provided conflicting evidence that either supports or opposes diverse group performance. It becomes more complex when groups are distributed in different time zones and places. This necessitates diversity research to develop new models and theories and validate existing experiments. We study functional diversity and its impact over time on group performance. The first section describes current literature on diversity, followed by experiments and a discussion of the results and limitations of this study. In addition, we provide directions for future research.
2. Literature Survey

More and more groups are becoming mirror images of the general U.S. population. The U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division [61], reports that race, gender and age diversity in the U.S. population is increasing. Modern teams reflect the changing national demographics and changing business models [20]. Not only teams are becoming more diverse but they are also more geographically dispersed [28,34,50]. Organizations must learn how to manage people of different color, race, national origin, religion and others. Understanding information sharing and decision-making in diverse teams is also becoming important [1,12,40,57,58]. Williams & O’Reilly (1998) examined over forty years of research and have provided a comprehensive review of literature. They identified diversities based on two theories: social categorization and information and decision making categorization. Social categorization relates to variables like gender, race, nationality etc. and information and decision making relate to diversity due to differences in education, skills, abilities, knowledge etc. Knippenberg and Schippers (2007) built on Willaim and O’Reilly’s research to identify challenges of work group diversity research. They concluded a “need for more complex conceptualization of diversity, as well as to the need for more empirical attention to process.”. In parallel, researchers in business and social sciences [34,46, etc] have categorized diversity as “visible” and “invisible” while others [32,44,66,60] in organizational sciences have categorized diversity as “surface” and “deep” These classifications are quite similar. Visible diversity refers to “visible” factors like race, gender, religion and nationality and invisible factors refers to “non visible” factors like skill, knowledge, sexual orientation, etc. There is an abundance of research in the areas of group working, how groups make decisions, and emerging leaders in groups [6,9,24,67 etc.]. It is well established that diversity brings a wealth of knowledge to the group [25,46,54,55,58], however, diverse group effectiveness is still a debatable issue see [23,39,48]. Researchers [44,46,54,58] agree that diverse groups, if managed properly, can have a positive effect. This has tremendous potential for organizations that create distributed groups that can tap the expertise of its diverse workforce at a lower cost. However, group decision making is complicated when groups work and are distributed in a virtual environment. More studies are needed to understand diversity and the performance of such groups.

Does diversity influence decision making in a positive or negative way? Many authors [24,33,63 etc] have summarized diversity research and the evidence is conflicting. Mannix and Neale (2005) have linked diverse team performance to the nature of tasks. According to their report, diverse teams are appropriate for tasks involving innovation and exploration of new opportunities, while homogenous teams are more appropriate for routine tasks. In virtual teams, gender, race, culture, and social status have been identified as some of the factors affecting team outcomes [3,4,8,10,17,37,59,62]. In addition, communication and, above all, trust becomes critical [2,13,29,56] for group performance. There is conflicting evidence as to whether the diverse groups perform better than homogenous groups. According to Boiney (2001), diverse teams have been shown to generate a greater variety of ideas, draw on a greater store of tacit knowledge, make better decisions, and more effectively accomplish complex tasks than individuals. According to Simard (2006), “… diversity is beneficial because a variety of opinions, backgrounds, and thinking styles and their integration into the solution are what contribute to better decision outcomes. In a recent report from Harris & Raskino (2007), “… teams with gender diversity will double their chances of exceeding performance expectations when compared to all male teams.” implying diverse teams perform better than non-diverse teams. Palmer (2006) summarizes the state of research on diversity and group performance, stating that “Many studies have shown diversity to impact the performance of work-groups, but the exact nature of the relationship between diversity and performance is not at all straightforward as both positive and negative correlations between diversity and performance have been found.”.

Knippenberg & Schippers (2007) summarized diversity research and concluded, in social categorization perspective that “…People tend to favor in-group members over out group members, to trust in-group members more, and to be more willing to cooperate with them. The result of such categorization processes may be that work groups function more smoothly when they are homogeneous than when they are more diverse, and that group members are more satisfied with and attracted to the group when it is homogeneous and they are similar to the other group members.” In contrast they also summarized social categorization perspective as emphasizing the positive effects of work group diversity. They report that, "Diverse groups are likely to possess a broader range of task-relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities, and members with different opinions and perspectives. This gives diverse groups a larger pool of resources that may be helpful in dealing with non-routine problems.” This view is shared by many researchers [23,26,49]. Harrison & Klein (2007), however, proposed moving away from the two theories and thinking more in terms of unit differences within and suggested diversity constructs as separation, variety and disparity. They propose that researchers should identify the diversity types they are studying and use appropriate operationalizations to develop theories. Harrison and Humphrey (2010) discuss the interrelationship among diversity, task type and teams. Given the current conflicting state of diversity research, it is important to continually validate existing research and add to the existing knowledge.
The e-Learning teams can be used as a surrogate for virtual teams. Aggarwal (2010) noted that “… both teams operate in a similar environment implying that e-learning teams can be used as a surrogate for virtual group in a distributed environment. In many ways, geographically distributed teams mirror the teams in on-line courses. Students are also physically dispersed, perhaps in different time zones, have different ethnic, race, cultural and national backgrounds, and work in a group to achieve certain goals. Many authors have successfully used students as a surrogate for their experiments”. Many authors [8,27,53,64,66] have also used students as surrogates for organizational teams. We also used webMBA students for our experiment.

3. The Proposed Model

Based on previous research [1,7,23] we have taken an optimist view of diversity, in the sense that diversity improves group decision making. Contextual variables, as already mentioned, include surface and deep variables. Group process is the e-learning environment where groups exchange and share ideas. Several researchers [1,8,38,40,66] have suggested model(s) to study the impact of contextual variables in learning environments. We have modified their model to include informational/decision making (deep) variable, functional diversity, for this experiment (see Figure 1)

3.1 Functional diversity and its impact on group performance

There are many dimensions of diversity, as previously stated, but we have restricted this experiment to the deep level functionality factor skill level. We have followed Harrison and Klein’s (2007) model to recognize this as a “variety” construct and have used perceived skill levels as measurement. We also looked at within group skill level diversity over time to study the longitudinal, short term impact of skill level diversity on group performance. The experiment itself used on line classes to mimic virtual working environment.

3.2 Group Performance

Group performance was measured as the score received by each group on the assignment. Peer evaluation was used to study an individual’s contribution and their satisfaction with the group. Individual grades were adjusted based on peer evaluation.

4. Research Hypotheses

The following research hypotheses were developed.

4.1 The “Social categorization” and “Information/Decision-making” view

Diversity has both a positive and negative impact depending on the factors studied. The social categorization view research [13,28,63 etc] has shown that homogenous groups work more efficiently and have more satisfaction and are more likely to reach high quality decisions than heterogeneous groups. On the other hand, the information/decision making perspective emphasizes the positive effects of work group diversity. This perspective focuses on task performance of the group and emphasizes that people bring different views and that there is information sharing and information seeking outside the group, resulting in better outcomes. These conflicting views have created confusion, which Milliken and Martins (1996) referred to as “a double-edged sword. In addition, Kravitz, (2005) summarized the state of research on
diversity, stating, “As one might expect from these incompatible theoretical perspectives and predictions, results are complex and inconsistent. Some types of diversity (e.g., race, gender, and age) are more likely to have negative effects, whereas other types of diversity (e.g., functional background, personality) are more likely to have positive effects, at least when the group process is controlled”. However, Kravtiz also noted the optimist view, which “... focuses on diverse teams’ access to a variety of resources that, if properly exploited, should enhance performance. This work tends to look at functional diversity, which serves as a proxy for diversity in knowledge, skills, information, and expertise. Information processing provides the theoretical basis”.

There is conflicting research related to the effect of diversity in group decision making [39]. We are taking the information/decision making view, supported by researchers in one form or the other [7,25,35 etc.], in developing our hypothesis that deep level diversity helps group performance.

Accordingly, first hypothesis is:

H1: The level of functional diversity affects group performance.

In addition, we wanted to study if diverse groups perform better than non-diverse groups. We developed the following hypothesis to study performance among diverse groups.

H2: Functionally diverse group perform better than a non or less diverse group.

4.2 The Trust and Cohesion Issues

The next question relates to group performance over time. Several authors [2,13,29,30,48,56] have discussed the “trust” factor among groups. Interpersonal trust [15,21,47,56] and cohesion [27,64] play important roles in group communications. Some authors [45,51,65] have questioned trust building among virtual groups in the short run. However several authors [41,65 etc] have argued that virtual ad-hoc or temporary groups exhibit “swift trust”, which develops in ad-hoc groups in the short run, which we studied and used peer evaluation for this purpose. It was hypothesized that if trust developed among group members, they would rate their peers better over time resulting in better individual score.

H3: Functionally diverse groups perform better than non-(less) diverse group over time.

In addition, we wanted to test for group member trust over time. Several authors [18,45 etc] have suggested that trust is an important factor for long term group performance. In addition, authors have also advocated that swift trust develops in ad-hoc groups in the short run, which we studied and used peer evaluation for this purpose. It was hypothesized that if trust developed among group members, they would rate their peers better over time resulting in better individual score.

H4: Groups develop trust and perform better over time.

5. Research Design

The present study was conducted at an urban public university in the Mid-Atlantic area. The university is an upper-division university, has a non-traditional, commuter student population, and a diverse student population. The model in Figure 1 was used to assess a diverse group’s outcome in an online course in the webMBA program. The first management information system (MIS) course in the MBA was selected for the experiment, which is a required course and typically the first course many students take, and requires extensive group work.

As already mentioned, diversity consists of many social and economic factors, but for the experiment, we selected one deep factor: skill level. Each group member’s perception of his or her individual skill was measured for the task at hand. Regression analysis was used to test
hypotheses one, and independent mean comparison was used to test differences in group performance for hypotheses two and three. Difference in peer adjusted score was used to test fourth hypothesis.

A regression analysis was used to test the first hypotheses whereas ANOVA was used to test the differences among groups.

Group Project score = f(functional diversity)

The next section discusses the experiment.

6. The Experiment

The experiment was conducted over two semesters (Fall 05 and Fall 06) with a total of 49 students in the two classes. For group assignments, classes were divided into groups of three or four students, based on their past experience and familiarity with the subject matter to provide parity among groups. There were thirteen groups in the course. Over the semester each group worked on two projects and individual grades were based on an overall project grade adjusted for peer evaluation. Two assignments were used to study the effect of group diversity over time. Both tasks were structured in nature and required intense group communication. Tasks in both assignments were kept similar to remove the effect of tasks on group performance. The first task involved designing a budget using a spreadsheet, and the second task involved developing a database using database software. Both projects included several topics requiring extensive group discussions in the group conference area, with only group members and the instructor having access to the group area. The instructor did not intervene in the group discussion and all clarifications were provided via e-mail. Skill level data was collected for both tasks that ranged on a continuous scale from 1 (no knowledge) to 10 (expert). Following Harrison and Klein (2007), we used standard deviation as a measure of within group variation. Tables 1 provides the standard deviation for each group for each assignment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class/Group</th>
<th>Functional Diversity Assignment 1</th>
<th>Functional Diversity Assignment 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>0.577</td>
<td>1.707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>3.40343</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>2.380476</td>
<td>1.258306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.825742</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>2.174665</td>
<td>3.86221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>0.945163</td>
<td>2.393568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>5.333333</td>
<td>2.333333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>2.282542</td>
<td>3.239341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>0.816497</td>
<td>3.366502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>2.217356</td>
<td>1.732051</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Functional Diversity among Virtual Groups

As noted in Table 1, diversity ranges (standard deviation) from 0.5 to 5.3 with an average mean deviation of 1.9 for assignment 1. For assignment 2, diversity ranges (standard deviation) from 1.2 to 3.8 with average deviation of 2.48.

The next section discusses results.

7. Results & Discussion

SPSS was used for analysis. A regression analysis was used to study the impact of diversity on group performance. Tables 2(a) and 2(b) summarize the result of group performance on project one.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>R Square</th>
<th>Std. Error of the Estimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.444*</td>
<td>.197</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2(a): Project 1: Model Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regression</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>.128*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2(b): ANOVA

The second hypothesis was tested using ANOVA. Groups were divided into two independent groups of different diversity indexes. A mean score of 5 was used, but that did not produce two groups. There was little deviation among groups in term of skills for assignment 1. For illustration purposes, we used a score of 8. Tables 3(a) and 3(b) summarize the results of comparison of means for Hypothesis 2.
As seen in Tables 2(a) and 2(b), diversity does not affect group performance at .05 or even at .10 level of significance. Also, Tables 3(a) and 3(b) show no difference in the performance, for groups with different functional diversity levels; hence, both Hypotheses one and two are rejected. These results are not consistent with the “informational” theory view but are consistent with social categorization view reported by several researchers [5,39,60]. Researchers supporting information/decision making view have argued that diverse groups provide quality results for “innovative” tasks since those tasks require more information exchange and range of ideas. The social theory researchers view is summarized by Kravitz (2005) as, “The pessimistic view concentrates on affective problems, as predicted by the similarity-attraction paradigm (birds of a feather really do flock together) and by social-categorization and social-identity theories (with the resulting distinction between in-group and out-group). This work typically defines diversity in terms of tenure and social categories such as race and sex.” For informational theory Knippenberg and Schippers (2007) suggest “…diverse groups are likely to possess a broader range of task-relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities and members with different opinions and perspectives. This gives diverse group a larger pool of resources that may help in non-routine tasks”. Our results did not support decision making theory, which may be due to the nature of task. The proposed task is routine and decision theory typically is valid for non routine tasks that requires extensive informational input and exchange of ideas.

Hypotheses three were tested using ANOVA in SPSS. As groups develop trust, it should result in improved performance for diverse groups as compared to less (non) diverse groups. Tables 4(a) and 4(b) summarize the results for hypothesis three.

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### Table 3(a) Diverse group performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meanassign1score</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt;= 8.00</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 8.00</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3(b): Independent Samples Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assign1</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.992</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3(b): Independent Samples Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>assign2</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.080</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Tables 4(a) and 4(b) show that the level of diversity does impact group performance over time and supports the hypothesis that functionally diverse groups tend to perform better than non-(less) diverse groups. Hypotheses 3 was accepted at $\alpha = .1$ (note: hypothesis three is a directional hypothesis). We also wanted to test if groups develop trust over time by using differences in peer evaluation adjusted assignment scores over time. If there is trust then group members would rate their members more favorably over time, resulting in better scores.

### Hypothesis 4 was tested using differences in means between two assignment scores.

### Table 6(a): Group Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>diffsore</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 6(b): Improvement in scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>One-Sample Test</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>diffsore</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Tables 6(a) and 6(b) reveal that groups do develop trust and perform better over time as hypothesis four is accepted at $\alpha = .05$. Peer evaluation became more positive as 62% of
the group showed decrease in variation in peer evaluation and 70% showed improvement in group performance from assignment 1 to assignment 2 implying that groups tend to judge their peers more favorably over time resulting in better performance. These results are consistent with researchers who have argued [41,65 etc] that swift trust develops among group members in a short time and diverse groups tend to perform better over time [2,6]. There appears to be support for hypothesis 4 that functionally diverse groups do develop trust and cohesion and diverse groups tend to perform better over time than less(non) diverse groups.

7.1 Discussion

In this study, we empirically tested the effect of functional diversity, namely skill level, on group performance over time. Based on previous research, we proposed a model that tested not only functional diversity but also the level of diversity on group performance. Diversity definition and operationalization were based on previous research. The results do not support the informational/decision making view, but back the social theory view that a homogenous group performs better for routine tasks. Our results also indicate that functionally diverse groups perform better than non(or less) diverse groups over time. In addition, the study revealed that groups tend to trust members even in the short term (which many have referred to as swift trust), as peer ratings improved over time for group members. The experiment raises some interesting questions of group development and how functional diversity can be a positive factor in group decision making. However, the question still remains: should managers create less or more functionally diverse groups? The results, though not conclusive, have implications for managers and may provide some guidance on this issue. Our research indicates that functional diversity has no impact on group performance for routine tasks in the short run, but in the long run, diverse groups may perform better than less diverse groups. This would imply diverse groups are not good for ad-hoc tasks but might be good for on-going or follow-up tasks.

8. Limitations

As with any study, the results should be interpreted with caution. The study has several limitations, including the sample size, and requires that it be replicated. In this experiment, only small groups were considered but group size was not, so it is possible results may differ if it was a factor. While we removed the effect of the task, it is possible that groups tend to perform better over time only for certain tasks. While we considered only one of the functionality factors, we believe it would be interesting to study several factors and combine them to evaluate their impact on group performance. In addition the trust measurement we used is only one measure of trust, there are many other measure of trust that could be used in the future. We are continuing our efforts in this direction by extending this experiment to include surface variables, studying the effect of group size and by changing the nature of the task.

9. Future Research

There are many interesting research areas related to diversity and distributed groups. Future research could build upon existing research by replicating it over time across different groups and group sizes. Also, it may be desirable to have a wider range of diversity as suggested by Harrison and Klein ( ); i.e., groups with no diversity and groups with maximum diversity. This would help to further validate the experiment. In addition, this experiment should be replicated with different group sizes to study the impact of size and diversity on group performance. It may be desirable to include other forms of functional diversity like ability, different perspectives or opinions, etc., to study their effect on group performance. Most of the current research looks at diversity traits in isolation. However, it would be challenging to study multiple attributes (both deep and surface) and their impact on group performance. Another important area of interest would be to change the nature of the task from structured to semi-structured and to study diversity’s impact on group performance. As long as research produces mixed results, there will be a continuous need for validation and replication of experiments.

10. Conclusions

This longitudinal study of short time duration provides an important step in studying the impact of functional diversity on group performance. The study confirms the existing literature’s social theory view that diverse groups do not perform better for routine tasks. However, the experiment also revealed that diverse groups develop trust and may perform better than less diverse groups over time. This could be beneficial to managers who are creating diverse groups either by choice or out of necessity.

Diversity is a fact of life, be it skill level, gender, race, nationality or any such factor. It is becoming the norm as organizations outsource work and the teams become geographically distributed. It is necessary to study the interaction of a diverse distributed group and its impact on problem solving. We provide guidelines for future research and areas for further study.

11. References


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