Action Research Project

Gem Smith

'Purpose –

In a collaborative learning environment, there will be many learners with diverse cultures. These learners should be supported to communicate and collaborate among themselves.' (Economides, 2008, p.1)

'I find it difficult to speak up about my ideas in my group. They do not understand about what I am saying.' (UAL international student 2024).

'Some students do find it a challenge due to cultural differences to work together collaboratively. This can bring discord. (UAL MA Lecturer, 2025).

I feel isolated in my class and find it a challenge to work in a group' (UAL home student 2025)

(TyliJura, 2025)

About me.

- Who am I?

  An Academic Support Lecturer at LCC for 4 years

- Professional background?

  Interior Designer,

  FE - Admissions Officer,

  Art & Design, 3D Design and Fashion Progression Lecturer

  worked in Education for over 16 years.

- Positionality?

  Woman of colour

  First generation for HE

  Parents from the Caribbean, born and raised in England

  'There's a natural influence of culture simply through being in a certain region for most of my life, but I grew up in a global family and worked with people from everywhere through adult life, so I have become adaptable.' (LCC Student, 2025)

'For us, therefore, reflexivity is always a self-monitoring of, and a self-responding to, our thoughts, feelings and actions as we engage in research projects.' (Corlett and Mavin, 2018, p.3)

'… whilst reflection might enable researchers to observe research practice, as it might be reflected back to them from a mirror image, reflexivity involves 'exposing or questioning our ways of doing' (Hibbert et al., 2010: 48).' (Corlett and Mavin, 2018, p.3)

Social Justice and professional context

Academic Support
Social justice is embedded into my professional practice. It is not a separate entity it is what we do.

Social justice
moving beyond words requires action by policy and practice.
(Fields and Green, 2025)

Removing barriers so, everyone can thrive.

Dignity and Hope
Song by Bob Dylan
"Blind man breaking out of a trance puts both his hands in the pockets of chance. Hoping to find one circumstance of dignity" .
(Sony Music Entertainment, 2021).

Changing the status quo and putting all hands together to create new collaborative opportunities.

'Striving for dignity is at the core of social justice movements. (Loewen and Pollard, 2010, p.1)

Original context/Background
Action Research Project Inspiration

Research Question:

## How can the awareness of cultural identity **enhance** collaborative learning experiences in higher education?

Continuation from the <mark>Inclusive Practice Unit on Intersectionality.</mark>
'I want to suggest that intersectionality offers a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics.' (Crenshaw, 2013, P.10)

<mark>LCC Students mark making and writing</mark> collaboratively irrespective of differences. A masterpiece of freely created visual ideas and expressions.

(UAL, n.d

<mark>30.7% students are not home students according to UAL Dashboard 2024/2025. (UAL,n.d)</mark>
How do students communicate and integrate culturally with each other when working collaboratively?

(Smith, 2025)
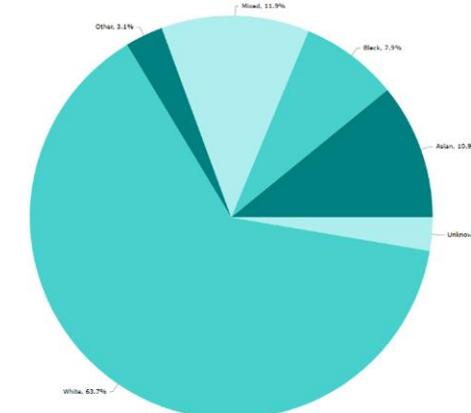
Original context/Background
Theoretical Framework

'... the different learners' cultural backgrounds affect their participation, their motivation, their satisfaction and their performance during collaborative learning activities. Learners with diverse cultural background may have divergent modes of communicating, interacting, and working. They may have different views of the world, different values, behaviours, and attitudes. They may also develop different feelings and thoughts during the collaborative learning activities.' (Economides, 2008,P.2)

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is the cultural conditions needed to speak up, point out issues, errors, blind spots, take risks and productively navigate tensions without negative consequences. It involves learning, curiosity and vulnerability. (Green, 2024)

Design Activism

Where design is used to address social, environmental and political issues. (Julier, 2013, pp.215 – 236.) I hope to achieve this through the design of collaborative cards. However, I will note that images are subjective and have different meanings in cultures. (Phoenix 2010, p.2).

Framework

'Framework: A set of givens about the group's situation and how it will behave that form a stable platform from which the group operates.' (Gersick and Hackman, 1990, pp. 65-97)

Tuckman's Linear Model of Group Development

Forming
Storming
Norming
Performing
Adjourning
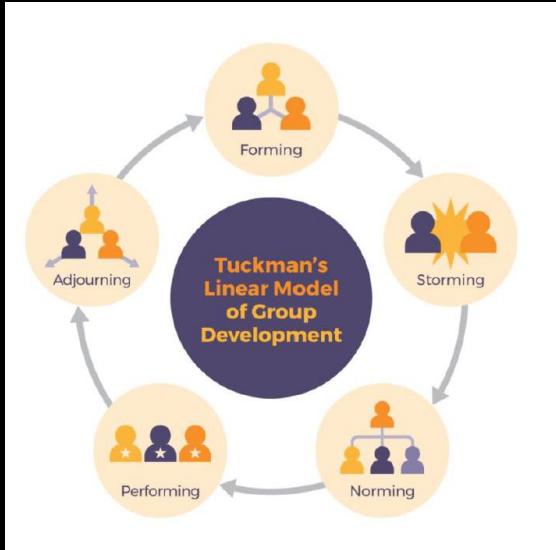
When relationships are formed collaboration comes into its own. A space of shared ideas and leadership. Relationships are based on trust. Trusting and understanding the intersections of individuals is vital to group work.

Creating fluid structures within education is important and they refer to Tuckman's theory. (West Chester University (2024)

Disadvantage of the Tuckman theory – *Oversimplification* with a linear approach, *focus on conflict* in storming may reinforce stereotypes and jeopardise relationship building. (Crosta and Mcconnell, 2010). Are the stages fair? Are relationships linear?

The idea to support students basic physiological, safety, love and belonging needs so that they can achieve the esteem and self- actualisation goals.

(Maslow, 2007, pp.3-4)

Self-actualization
desire to become the most that one can be

Esteem
respect, self-esteem, status, recognition, strength, freedom

Love and belonging
friendship, intimacy, family, sense of connection

Safety needs
personal security, employment, resources, health, property

Physiological needs
air, water, food, shelter, sleep, clothing, reproduction
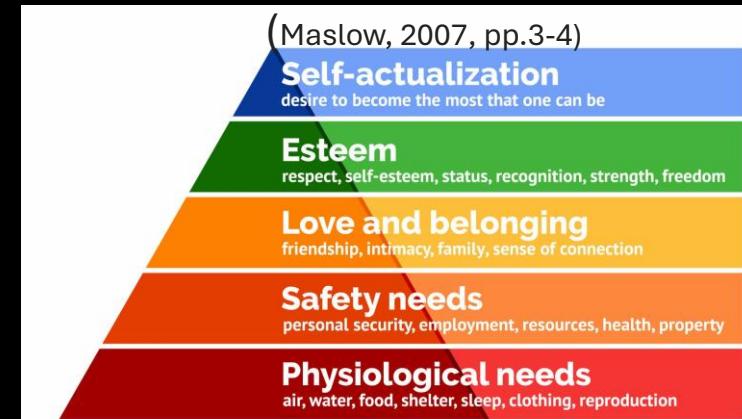
Maslow's hierarchy of needs

The idea to support students basic physiological, safety, love and belonging needs so that they can achieve the esteem and self- actualisation goals.

One of my main objectives for this project was to provide a safe space, provide resources, a sense of connection and friendships through my intervention for students.

TSW TRAINING

BLUE HAT
The blue hat is metaphorically worn by the individual chairing a meeting, controlling a team, or managing a situation. They will often provide the ground rules in the form of an agenda, goals and scope.

WHITE HAT
The White hat is used at the beginning and end of a session. Used at the beginning to concentrate on the facts or data available. Used at the end of a session to question ideas derived from using the other hats.

GREEN HAT
The green hat is used to encourage new and innovative ideas. Thinking outside the box where anything should be considered. No negative thinking or comment allowed at this stage in the process.

YELLOW HAT
The yellow hat is the optimistic hat, used to consider the possible merits of ideas which may have been generated by the green hat process.

RED HAT
This is the intuitive hat where feelings and emotions can be expressed, such as fears and dislikes. These feelings do not need to be justified they just identify gut feelings.

BLACK HAT
The black hat is the negative but logical hat as it looks at possible solutions or ideas to determine if they may or may not work. Negativity without reason must be avoided as this is a red hat function.

(Channell, 2021)

Aims and Objectives

- To create safe spaces for discussions, shared opportunities for cultural awareness and ways of working. This will encourage a more cohesive and productive collaborative space for students to thrive and learn from each other.

What do I want to do?

- Co – create with students a set of collaborative working cards that will act as a supportive participatory tool for students.

Rationale for selecting the topic / intervention continued

My role and my practice?
Why do I want to do it?

As an Academic Support Lecturer, **I have witnessed a gap in provision** for supporting students in providing safe spaces to discuss if they so wish their cultural values when collaborating. My role is a supportive one and I am always looking to see how I can best support students.

As pointed out by a student from my survey, I must be careful not **to imply that student's cultural identity defines them or is the only barrier to collaborative working**. This is not the case; however, it can form a part of their intersectionality as highlighted by Crenshaw (2013).

'I am proud of my culture, but I am not just my culture. Get to know me and ask questions.' (LCC student, 2025)
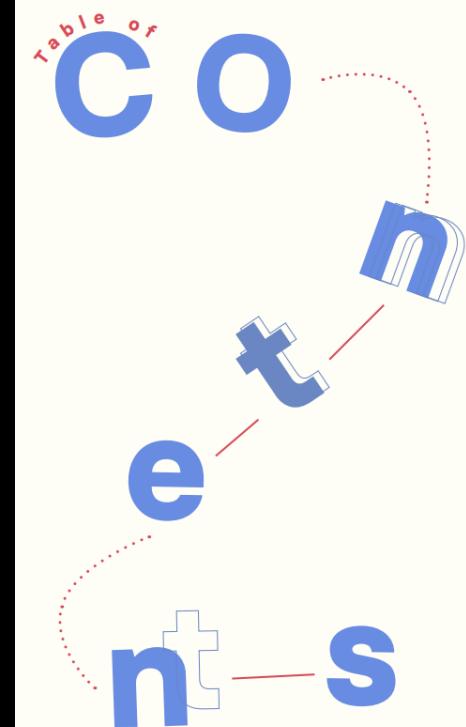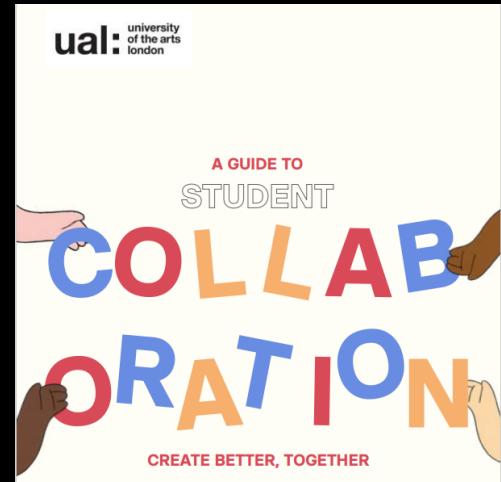
UAL collaborative tool kit available for a MA course with no direct emphasis on cultural identity.
(UAL, n.d.)

ual: university of the arts london

A GUIDE TO
STUDENT

COLLAB
ORATION

CREATE BETTER, TOGETHER

Table of
CONTENTS

WELCOME GUIDE

Here's a little introduction of this Toolkit

Unlock the power of collaboration with our comprehensive collaboration toolkit, designed to enhance teamwork, communication and productivity in any settings.

In this toolkit, you will find topics that will be covered such as where to find students for collaboration It will also provide some platforms for you that can be used for online collaboration or ideation.

The Collaboration Toolkit includes

Introduction
Pg 5: Background of the toolkit & Who should use this toolkit

Conclusion

Creative Collaboration

References

Pg 7: What is Creative Collaboration?
Pg 7: How does it work in digital spaces?
Pg 8: Importance of Creative Collboration
Pg 9: Finding students for collaboration
Pg 10 - 11: Practical tips on effective collaboration
Pg 12 - 13: Useful platforms for collaboration
Pg 15: How to collaborate with others?

Two of the contributory factors to feedback and observation at LCC from my survey

1. Students not knowing their peers **ways of working**.

'Miscommunication, perseverance, conflicts.' (LCC student, 2025)

'Conflict, lack of organisation, communicating.' (LCC student, 2025)

'Being on the same page, equal contribution, tension.' (LCC student, 2025)

2. **Cultural divides** when sometimes working in a group

I have a very different background from my friends. I think due to lack of experience of living and visiting western countries I cannot sometimes relate to them.' (LCC student, 2025)

Rationale for selecting the topic / intervention

Intervention

This took the form of initially <mark>3 stages at the end of 2 workshops for about 30 mins each meeting.</mark>

1. After discussion with the lecturer, I presented to students at the end of a critical thinking workshop with the research project information sheet, consent form and <mark>paper questionnaire</mark>. 17 students attended. Multi – cultural cohort. Enthusiastic and engaging group.

2. Two week later at the end of a critical reading workshop students were presented with <mark>sample designs and questions</mark> for further feedback. (2 students attended).

3. Will <mark>test out the prototype cards</mark> as an ice breaker at the end of January with a MA class for a collaborative workshop.

This project will be ongoing exercising the cyclic flexible research design approach.

What did I do ?
Who did I do it with?

I co – created 38 collaborative working cards that encourages discussion about cultural identity with 17 MA User Experience Design students at LCC

Duration of the project? Ongoing

b) Procedure for flexible research designs

Designing → Data collection → Analysis and reporting → Idea generation → Designing
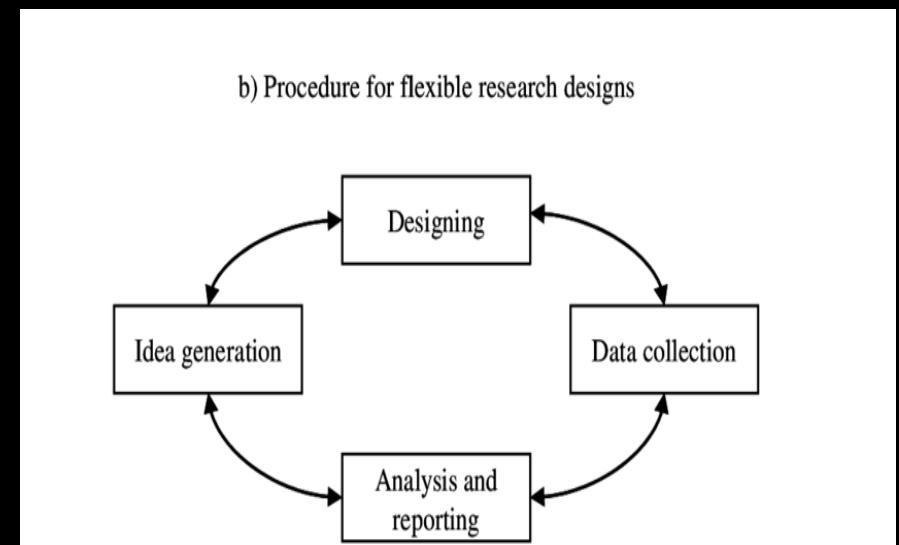
(Assistance, 2019)

Methodology - Mixed method research - Qualitative and Quantitative

Methods used – **Primary research** using a questionnaire survey with 17 MA User Experience Design students and gathering the data collected for primary research. Reviewing **secondary research** looking at existing data such as UAL dashboard.

Constraints – Participation, time and access to students.

Successes – 100% response, detailed feedback and built relations.

Collated the information **thematically.**

Methodology - Longitudinal ethnography – conducting studies over a period with the same cohort of students. Immersing myself within the research.

Methods used – Feedback, questionnaires, co – design, participant observation, discussions with my peers, colleagues and students for feedback.

Constraints – long time to see complete results, my biases, not completely transparent when they get to know you.

Successes – Design collaboration, progressive development, student agency and an open dialogue.

I would also be thinking about the ethical aspect to my methodologies and **refer to my ethics action plan at regular intervals**.

Card sorting which is used in UX Design for research. This helps to understand user groups. Applying this familiar method for my MA UXD students. (Will try this in stage 3).

Reflection Research Method/s used

Combination of methods =

gathering of meaningful data.

'…continually reflexive research process in order to insure that research methods do not undermine political and ethical research goals.' (Olitsky and Weathers, 2005)

Difficulties of deciding on what methods to use. Shared by Walker (2006, p.2) who spoke about the struggles for a researcher to find an appropriate methodology for their investigation. They discuss that fewer papers discuss the methodology in detail and concentrate more on the research results. Finding the right methods and methodologies is a skill.

Example of the Student Questionnaire

According to Patten (2016) the **advantages are that they provide an efficient way to collect data and they are easy to analyse.** They are also useful for collecting information that are sensitive. They can be submitted anonymously. This is also an economical way of conducting a survey.

(Smith, 2025)

Student Questionnaire Collection of Raw Data - Quantitative

Analysing the data - quantitative

C11 — Being on the same page, equal contribution, tension

Student form number	1.What do you enjoy and what do you find challenging about working collaboratively?	1.What do you enjoy and what do you find challenging about working collaboratively?	2. When working with someone on a project what are the key attributes that you look for? List in order of importance (1-7.) (1 being the highest and 7 the lowest.)	Effective communication skills	Active listening skills	Adaptability	Empathy	Conflict resolution	Reliable	Open mindness
1	Talk/commuicate, share culture, different opinions	Reject communication, different ideas, finalising		1	5	6	4	7	3	2
2	Getting to know people. Creating a network, hearing new ideas	Getting to an agreement, finding time to work, assigning tasks		1	5	7	2	6	3	4
3	Citicise artwork, to know my group opinion on each at work, try to think more critically	To understand if I am in the right direction		1	7	2	6	4	3	5
4	Discussing with others, learning from others, everyone's different perspectives	Too many ideas, adjusting to each other		1	3	3	2	3	2	3
5	More ideas. Life experiences, not feeling alone	When people are late, stuck on own ideas, conflicting work styles		1	7	6	5	4	3	2
6	Able to do multiple things, generating different ideas, making jokes while working	Orgnaising group dynamics, working with disruptive people, getting to know groups		1	3	2	6	5	4	4
7	Sharing, talking, ways of working	Commitment, time contraints		1	7	5	6	2	4	3
8	Teamwork, different point of view, balance work load	Clashing of thoughts, lack of cooperation, lack of punctuality		3	1	5	7	4	6	2

(Smith, 2025)

Student Questionnaire Analysis of Data

Analysing the data - quantitative

AutoSave On | First stage - Final Summary of the results of the collaborative cards question... • Last Modified: Thu at 12:48 | Search

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Paste — Cut, Copy, Format Painter | Aptos Narrow | 11 | Wrap Text | Merge & Center | General | Conditional Formatting | Format as Table | Normal | Bad | Good | Neutral | Insert | Delete | Format | AutoSum, Fill, Clear

AI21 — The ideas that were suggested from students will be useful in formulating the design of the cards. The idea of co creating and collaborating with the students to make a useful tool for themselves is empowering as an ed

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
1	Results	1.What do you **enjoy** and what do you find challenging about working collaboratively?	Results	1.What do you enjoy and what do you find **challenging** about working collaboratively?		2. When working with someone on a project what are the key attributes that you look for? List in order of importance (1-7.) (1 being the highest and 7 the lowest.)	Effective communication skills	Active listening skills	Adaptability	Empathy	Conflict resolution	Reliable	Open mindness
2	Ranked highest to lowest	Students responses have been summarised under the following themes:	Ranked highest to lowest	Students responses have been summarised under the following themes:		Results - Ranked highest to lowest			Number of responses				
3	1st	**Idea Generation** - New ideas, Opinions, experiences, experimentation, skills and perspectives = 25 views	1st	**Ideas** - Clashing thoughts, different ideas, too many ideas, stuck on own ideas, finanising ideas and agreement = 8 views		1st place	9	1	0	2	0	1	3
4	2nd	**Teamwork** - Can work on multiple areas at once, shared and balance workload = 11 views	Joint 2nd Place	**Time Management** - Time to work, lateness, punctuality and disorganisation = 5 views		2nd Place	1	4	2	3	2	2	5
5	3rd	**Relationships** - Creating friendship groups, networking, getting to know each other, not feeling alone and openess = 8 views	Joint 2nd Place	**Confidence** - Knowing if in right direction, lack of confidence to share ideas, indecisiveness, voicing opinions of others and criticism about their own work = 5 views		3rd Place	2	4	2	2	1	6	3
6	4th	**Communication** - Talking communicating with others = 4 responses	Joint 2nd Place	**Team work** - rigidness of others, disruptive people, adjusting to each other, group dynamics, conflict of work styles, and lack of cooperation = 5 views		4th Place	1	1	3	2	4	3	3
7	5th	**Critical thinking** = 2 views	Joint 2nd Place	**Comunication** - miscommunication, lack of and rejection of it = 5 views		Joint 5th Place	4	3	2	4	1	2
8	6th	**Culture** - Sharing culture = 1 view	Joint 3rd Place	**Lack of Empathy** - Not being heard and denying others = 2 views		6th Place	1	1	5	4	2	3	1
9	6th	**Environment** - Creating an active atmostphere = 1 view	Joint 3rd Place	**Behavioural Management** - Conflict and tension in the group = 2 views		Joint 7th Place	3	3	2	1	3	1	0
10			Joint 3rd Place	**Distribution of Tasks** - Assigning tasks and equal distribution = 2 views									
11			Joint 3rd Place	**Motivation** - Lack of perseverance and commitment = 2 views									

Summary | Q2 - charts | Q4 - charts | Q6 - charts

Ready | Accessibility: Investigate | Display

(Smith, 2025)

Analysis - Student Questionnaire Collection of Data

Analysing the data - quantitative

4. Influence of cultural identity

6. Is creating collaboration cards a good idea?

**6. Reasons for creating collaboration cards**
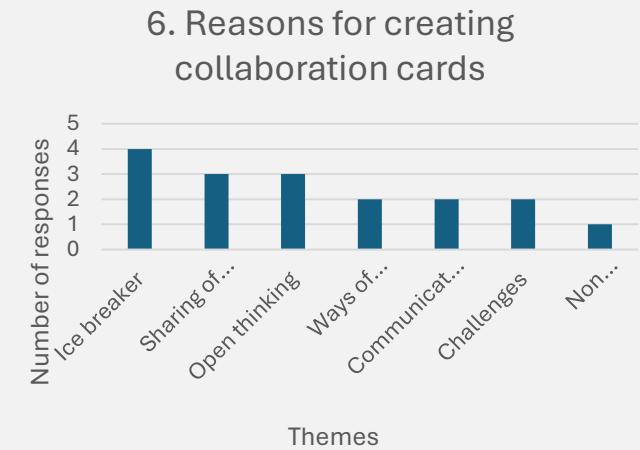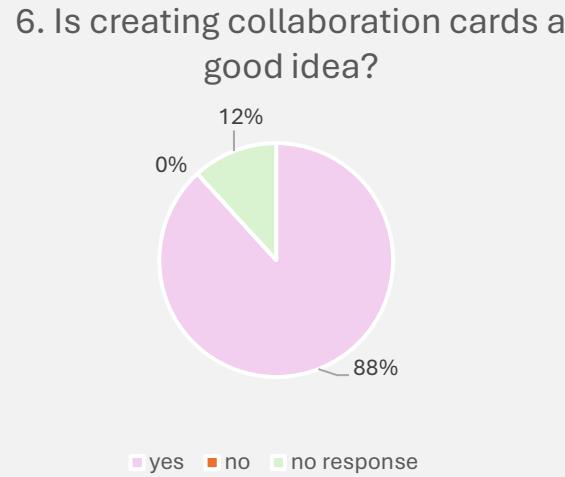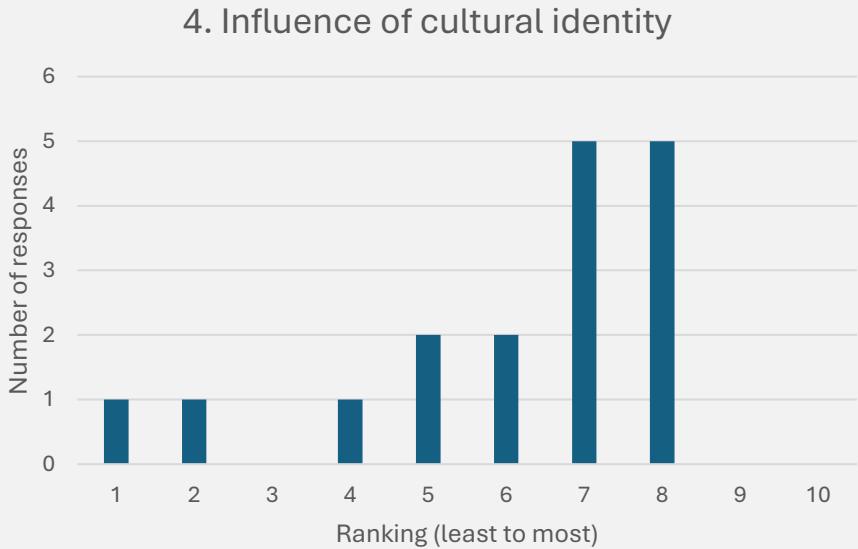
4. How much do you think your cultural identity has an influence on the way you work within a group? Circle numbers 1- 10. 10 being the highest.

6. Do you think this is a good idea to create collaborative cards that encourage a conversation about your culture and ways of working? Circle Yes or No. (Please state a reason for your answer.)
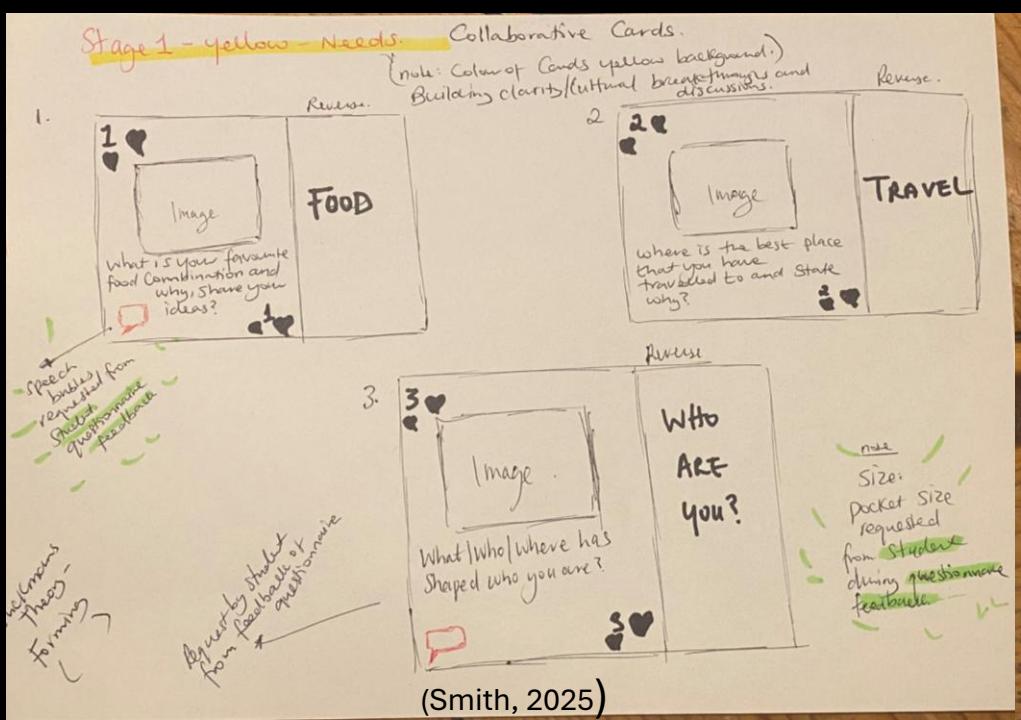
(Smith, 2025)

Reflection –
Co - Design Collaborative Cards –a
new research toolkit - planning
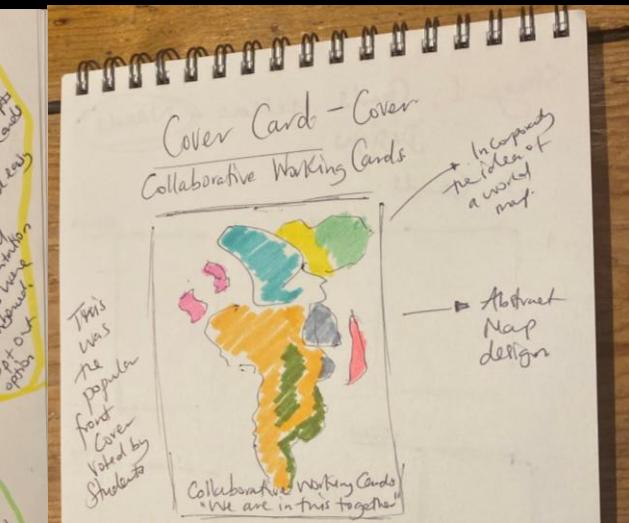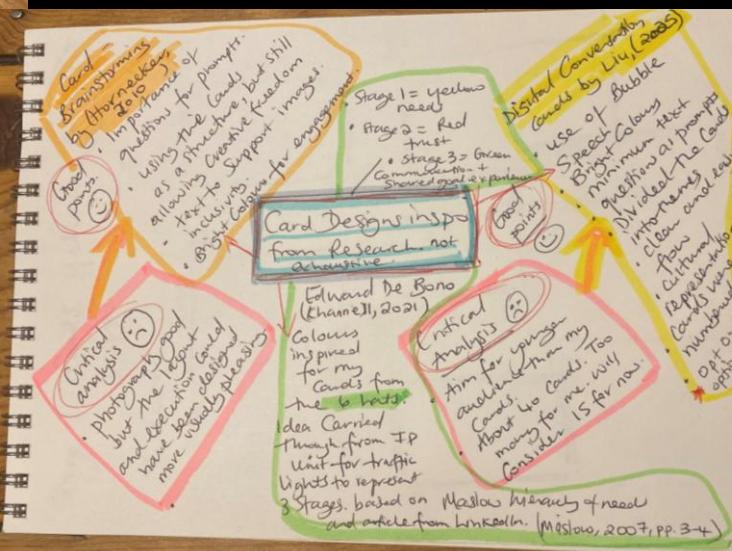
(Smith, 2025)

Sample Designs

Front cover design 1   Front cover design 2   (Smith, 2025)

(Smith, 2025)
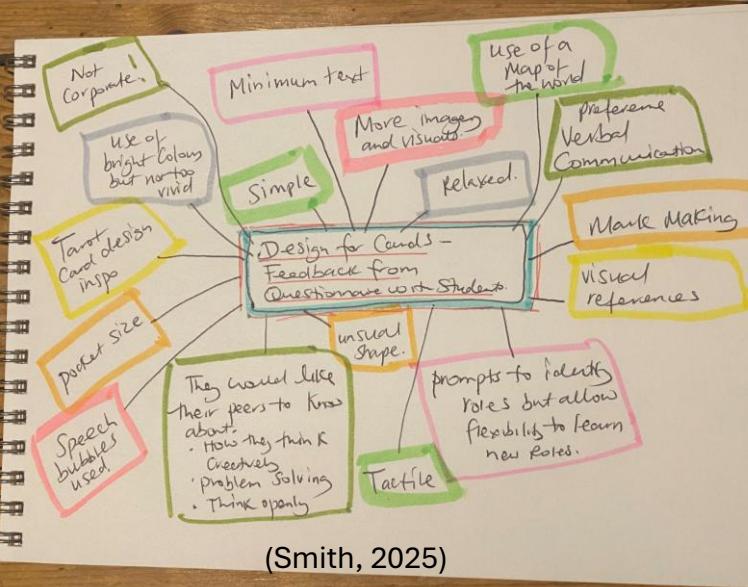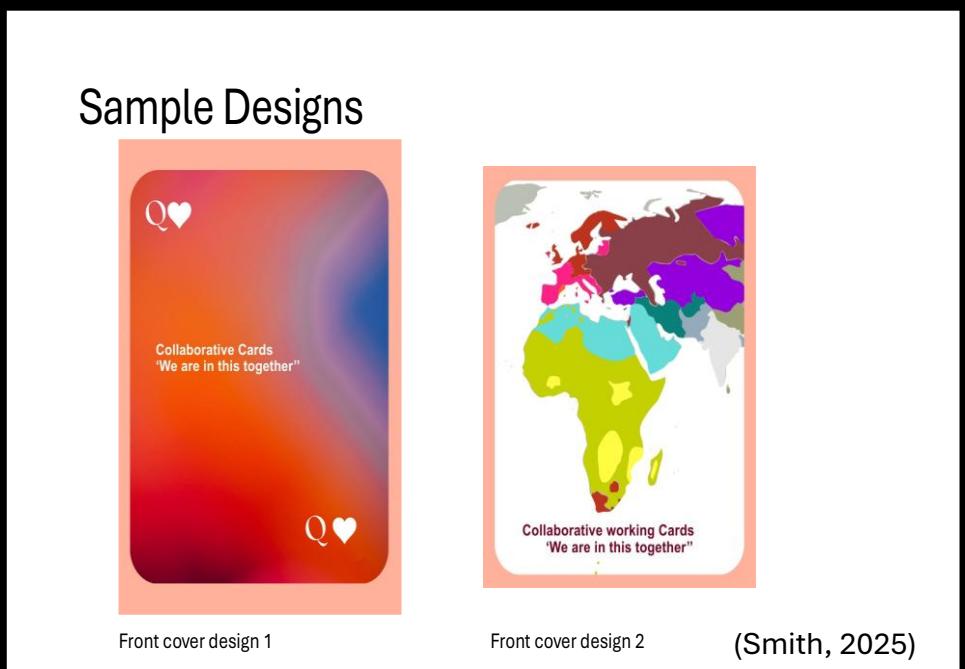
(Smith, 2025)

(Smith, 2025)

Encouraging peer learning
and less tutor centred.
Encourage visual thinking
for creative students.

Reflection - Co - Design Collaborative Cards –a new research toolkit – prototype still to be printed and tested.

3 ♥

Who Are You?

Stage 1 - Needs

How can you include and NOT exclude others into your group work? 5 ♥

Reflections

What have you learnt from this exercise?

What is your best take away from this interaction?

How will you implement this in your future collaborative work?

Collaborative working Cards
'We are in this together"

3 ♥

(gerait, 2023)

What, who or where has shaped you? 3 ♥

Etiquette

When working collaboratively please note the following:

• Please be respectful
• Allow each person to join the conversation
• Listen attentively
• Ask questions and be patient with the answers
• Be aware of others feelings
• Support each other
• Be kind to one another
• Be honest and open

Definition of Cultural Identity

Cultural identity refers to an individual's sense of belonging to a particular culture or group.

It is formed through shared characteristics such as language, traditions, beliefs, values, and norms that are passed down from generation to generation.

Cultural identity plays a pivotal role in shaping how people view themselves and the world around them. (Oxford Review, 2024)

(Smith, 2025)

WILLKOMMEN
欢迎 स्वागत
BIENVENIDA
WELCOME
BIENVENUE ようこそ
добро пожаловать
BEM-VINDO

(Tumisu, 2015)

The 'Collaborative Working Cards' are designed to support you working together with your peers.

This is an opportunity for you to share, if you so wish your cultural values, preferences of working in a group and your learning experiences.

Enjoy!

'Moreover, the use of cards is a form of game, and has a playful nature. Such a strategy is suggested to ==take pressure away from participants== and facilitate expression of personal experiences.' (Alsherhri, 2020 p.11)

Idea of playing cards. ==Cards are colour coded and placed in three stages,== inspired by the 6 hats (Channell, 2021), traffic lights and Maslow hierarchy of needs.(Maslow,2007, pp.3-4) Stage 1 Yellow - needs, stage 2 Red - trust and stage 3 green - communication and shared goals.
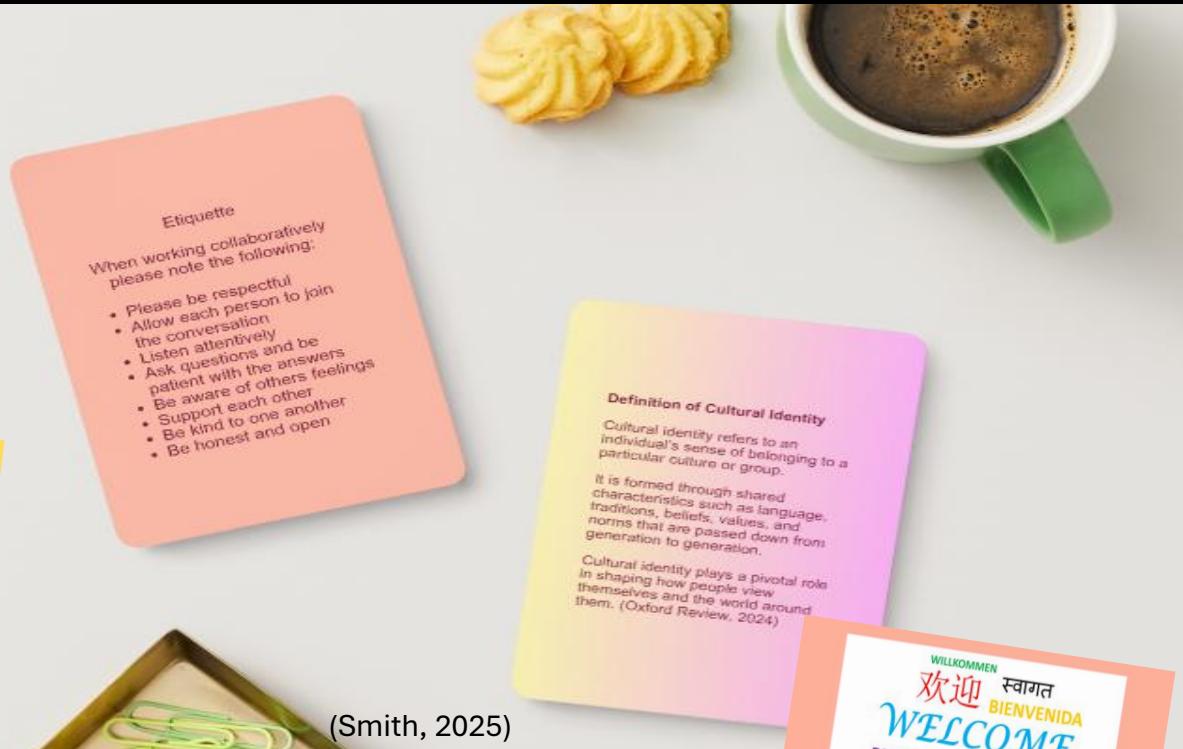
'The foundation idea is that people gather and talk together, sharing ideas and experiences and thus learn from each other. ==The cards can be used in the perspective of peer learning== – educational processes where peers interact with other peers interested in the same topic and learn with and from each other (Boud 1999).

Students welcomed the opportunity to co - create and **welcomed the cards idea..**

'Yeah, it can be weird when you first get in a group, so would help break the ice.' (LCC student, 2025)

Evidence from my questionnaire suggests that there are students that are collaborating well particularly when there is no language barrier.

'My first language is English; I do not really have any trouble communicating.' (LCC student, 2025)

I had to ensure that my own biases due to my own positionality did not affect my research.

'We acknowledge reflexivity as ambiguous and complex and consider how processes of reflexivity address researcher positionality, identity and power in research.' (Corlett and Mavin, 2018, p.4)

This was a good opportunity for students to express any concerns, and they felt safe to share. Using a questionnaire was a success.

'Not being heard, miscommunication, too many ideas.'(LCC, Student, 2025)

'I do not know if this counts, but I have been diagnosed with ADHD and that sometimes poses a problem for effective communication.' (LCC Student, 2025)

Primary Research
Speaking with colleagues, peers and students – confirmed a gap and challenges when working collaboratively. The break down of understanding within a group can bring discord this was clear. The questionnaire also confirmed this.

'Conflict, lack of organisation, communicating.' (LCC student, 2025)

Limitations
Limitations - Questionnaire was pivotal in this research project and formed the basis of this project. Nevertheless, this information was only captured from one course group at post graduate level with a sample of 17 students. This was limited. Further research will need to be conducted to have a more detailed account and summary.

Reflections/summary of project findings

Improvements - Conducting a focus group would have also been a good way of receiving more in - depth feedback.

Further development - An area that I would like to further develop would be to create an instruction manual to accompany the collaborative cards. Due to time restraints, I was unable to do this. This would be useful for students and facilitators.

'Better understanding and encourage communication more effectively and actively.' (LCC Student, 2025)

Conducting this research, I was mindful and noted that the challenges students face in group work is not only about culture as pointed out by a student. However, this is a contributory factor that can affect how we work within a group. This was also made evident in my findings.

Secondary Research
Reviewing data from UAL dashboard was helpful and offered an overview in terms of stats, but what happens to the students after this? Reviewing other case studies of co created cards was important to the project and helpful. I was able to use this information to refine my cards. (Alshehri et.al., 2020)(Liu, 2025) (Hornecker, 2010, pp. 101-108)

Using the Maslow (Mcleod,2007, pp. 3-4)) theory highlighting the hierarchy of needs and Tuckman's theory although limited in places due to the linear approach brought structure to my project.

'The outcome of such deductive research will either strengthen the theory by verifying the hypothesis or weaken its explanatory power if the evidence and analysis do not support the hypothesis.' (Riazi and Candlin, 2014, p.3)

Thinking Forward

'Cultural identity matters in DEI because it forms a ==vital part of an individual's lived experience==. Ignoring cultural identities can perpetuate inequities and contribute to exclusionary practices. Conversely, recognising and ==valuing cultural diversity strengthens equity by providing individuals with the opportunity to contribute fully and equitably== within an organisation or community. Inclusion of cultural identity promotes better understanding and communication among diverse groups.' (Oxford Review, 2024)

Impact on my practice:

The collaborative cards will be ==used during Academic Support workshops== and will be implemented not only in collaborative sessions but can be integrated into any ice breakers with students for all workshops. This tool will enhance my practice.

My takeaway from the project:

It has enabled me ==to build better communication with students as a facilitator and to be culturally aware of my ways of working as an educator.== Our differences do not define who we are but strengthens our experiences of working collaboratively. DEI is an integral part of social purpose and collaboration in HE.

To further develop:

- **Print Collaborative working cards**

- **Create a user manual**

- **Test cards with MA students and other courses and cohort of students**

- **Receive further feedback from students at touch points practising longitudinal research**

- **Further research is required.**

- **Creating more themes for cards according to students needs**

    (Hämäläinen, 1999, p.2)

Challenges faced: Time

On reflection this was not a huge task to tackle for this was a continuation of my IP unit. I ==did not factor in heavy work demands some areas could have been developed further. This causes for better time management and realistic planning.== However, this project is a reflexive research project and will be ongoing, the cycle will continue.

I had to increase the number of cards due to feedback and welcome/ etiquette.

Overcome:

Scaled back on not completing the instruction manual and final production of the cards. The experience of the students shared and the co – creation of the cards enriched the project. As I say to my students, 'It is about the journey not necessarily the outcome.'

Questions

References to relevant literature for Presentation and Blog

Alshehri, T., Kirkham, R. and Olivier, P., 2020, April. Scenario co-creation cards: A culturally sensitive tool for eliciting values. In *Proceedings of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1-14).

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Fig.1. Questions inspired by blackboard display at LCC (Smith, 2025)

Fig.2. A-Z quotes (2026). *Charles Kettering Quote*. [online] A-Z Quotes. Available at: https://www.azquotes.com/quote/574150 [Accessed 5 Jan. 2026].

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Fig. 3 Smith, G.(2026) 'Ethics Action Plan Overview [Screenshot]

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Fig 3. UAL Verbal feedback (2025)

Fig. 4 UAL Dashboard for Ethnicity (UAL, n.d)

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