

Tutoring Small Groups

A tutor in a Department is part of a teaching team and can have a broad range of responsibilities. What you do as a tutor will vary according to Department, discipline area and year level you are teaching.

A tutorial is a regular meeting of students under the control of a tutor to discuss a topic. It is very similar to a seminar (a more advanced type of tutorial) and a workshop (a “doing” session)... The format of tutorials may vary depending upon the subject, the tutor, the topic, the students. (Bertola & Murphy, 1995, p. 5)

The idea that groups help individuals to learn is one of the main reasons why tutorials exist. Another reason for having tutorials is to give students the chance to think about and to absorb the new ideas, theories or information they have been presented with in lectures.

In most small group situations, there will be active participation, face to face contact and purposeful activity (Newble & Cannon, 1995, p. 40).

Responsibilities

In general, a tutor is responsible for facilitating the learning of a group of students as they work on material they will have met during lectures and through their readings. As a facilitator of groups, you will take on the role of leader, encourager, planner, listener, questioner, and director. Your task will be to stimulate discussion and to encourage students to interact with each other and with the subject matter.

Depending on a number of things including, for example, your Department, the paper, the Paper Co-ordinator and the needs of students, you may be provided with a very precise and detailed outline of what you need to achieve each week and how to go about it, or you may be given some general learning outcomes or topics to be covered. Whatever the situation you find yourself, you will have at least some choice in how you run your classes. That means that planning is always essential.

Practical tips for tutors of small groups

Remember the following when you are planning for and teaching your small groups:

- Learning together brings great benefits to students.
- Discussion will not happen automatically. You will have to deliberately plan for and implement group interaction strategies.
- Ground rules help make the group work better.
- A positive, supportive and friendly tone in a classroom will help make students work better together.

- Structure is as important for small group work as it is for lectures.
- Variety in approach and activity sustains student interest and involvement.
- Students are able to do things for themselves, and indeed should be encouraged to become independent.
- Getting students to do things (and giving them guidance in how to do them!) such as making effective presentations during tutorials, can boost their self-esteem.
- Your skills of questioning, listening and responding, as well as group management, are key to successful group sessions.

Some things to think about when you are getting ready for your teaching:

- **the setting**, for example, the shape of the room; where your students sit; how the furniture is arranged; where you stand and sit;
- **group-work experience** of your students – do you have to show them how to work in groups?; how much direction do they need?;
- what are the **learning outcomes** of the group work session?;
- what **techniques** are you going to use to set objectives, agree assessment procedures and criteria (if applicable), allocate tasks and develop ground rules for interaction?
- what group **interaction strategy** are you going to use?

Remember, discuss your sessions with your Co-ordinator or any other teacher/tutor with experience. They will be the best source of ideas and guidance. You can also contact the HEDC to discuss any issues or concerns you may have, or to talk through some ideas for planning and running your tutorials.