

Do you know ...



how to make the most of planned small group teaching?

Small group learning is an important part of contemporary education. They have been a major development in our Early Learning in Medicine (ELM) programme and are frequently used in the Advanced Learning in Medicine (ALM) programme. So, what is special about small groups, how are they best used, are there any 'techniques' we can share to make the experience better for everyone?

HOW BIG SHOULD A SMALL GROUP BE?

Eight is the optimum size but size is probably less important than what the group does; delivering a lecture to a small group may be no different (or effective) than one given to 200. Larger groups (10-20) can always be split into small groups.

USE SMALL GROUPS WHEN YOU WANT TO

- Encourage deeper learning & understanding
- Promote discussion & sharing of ideas
- Develop critical thinking, problem solving, communication & teamwork skills
- Encourage active learning
- Build on and consolidate knowledge
- Use a wider variety of approaches and venues; can be asynchronous.

SMALL GROUP ARE NOT WELL SUITED TO:

- Mini lectures – you will not release their potential.

SETTING THE SCENE – PRACTICALITIES

Housekeeping: Ventilation, lighting, available equipment, room size. Much depends on how long the session will be. Always assume equipment will be temperamental. A poor environment will lead to student distraction.

Set up: Do not underestimate the influence of the room set-up. Reposition the furniture to suit the purpose of the group. Discussion will be limited if the students cannot see each other; a circle will enable good communication. **Check out the seating diagrams down the side margin; draw in the communication lines between the participants and identify the best purpose of each group.**

Ground rules: Develop these to suit the group and purpose. It is important to establish expectations (of the group) on key issues and how problems will be resolved. Set ground rules at the first meeting and revisit if necessary.

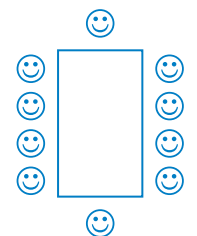
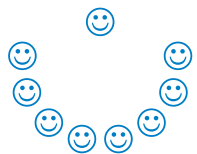
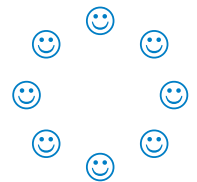
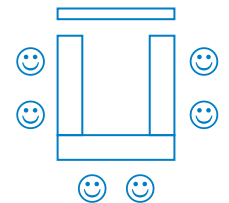
AZER – GROUND RULES TIPS

- Ground rules should be identified by the group members.
- When a group breaks a rule remind them of the agreed rules.

Examples of ground rules may include:

- Turn off mobile phones during tutorials.
- Everyone should come on time [and finish on time].
- We should respect each other's opinions.
- Listen to one another.
- Everyone should contribute to the case discussion.
- When we do not agree on a point, we should debate our differences in opinion rather than argue.
- When we discuss cultural, ethical or moral issues we will listen to the different views we have in the group.

Azer SA. Challenges facing PBL tutors: 12 tips for successful group facilitation. Medical Teacher. Vol 27. No 8 2005. pp676 – 681.

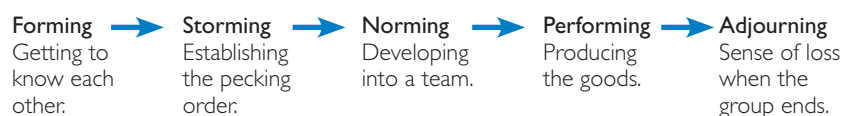


THE ROLE OF THE TUTOR AND ROLE OF THE STUDENT

This is one of the main differences from the traditional approach to teaching. In small group work the tutor's role is that of facilitator, ensuring the group functions and not, primarily, delivering information. The role of the student is to develop a deep, critical and applied understanding of the subject. Facts can be found elsewhere, small group work should help the students gain the ability to apply the facts.

GROUP DYNAMICS

Tuckman^{1,2} suggests a framework of group development which will probably occur as the group evolves:



Much will depend on the group; how well do they know each other, do they often work as a group. How the group moves through these stages is highly dependent on how well the group is facilitated. If you reflect on groups you have been involved with you will probably be able to identify this pattern emerging.

DEALING WITH PROBLEMS IN GROUPS

Any discussion about working with small groups will raise a number of common themes which may occur:

Where possible encourage the group to sort out any problems rather than taking a top down approach.

Lack of preparation	Small groups work best when all come prepared. Students must be aware of required preparation in good time. Be clear from the start that doing the preparation is not an option. DO NOT repeat work they should have already done. Build on what they know.
Lack of input from students	There may be a variety of reasons for this. Be clear that all are expected to contribute. There may be specific reasons why they are not contributing (illness, shyness, cultural). These should be explored and dealt with appropriately. Encourage the shy ones; perhaps give them a role within the group. Asking them direct questions may make matters worse. Often they will develop as the group evolves. Humiliation and embarrassment have no place in teaching. If the student is simply not pulling their weight the group should sort it out.
Session dominated by one or two members	A dominant/disruptive student can be quite destructive. Ensure the other members get a say. Perhaps give them a job to do (scribe?). Have them sit where they cannot easily catch your eye. If the behaviour is damaging the group refer to the group for solutions, rarely does the disruptive student have insight. It may be necessary to speak to the student outside the group.
Session dominated by facilitator	This usually happens when the tutor wishes to deliver (too much) information or is inexperienced in the facilitator role. Get the students to do the talking and be sure you give them time to respond. Be clear about the purpose of the group; occasionally a tutor centred session may be appropriate. Facilitator training may help.
The silent group	Ensure all are aware of the purpose of the group. Use open questions to stimulate discussion, build on what they know, encourage a safe environment (no sarcasm). Ensure your questions are clear. Try to think of where the students are coming from, not where you have arrived at. Try breaking the group into pairs to discuss a topic. Be aware of your non-verbal cues and use them positively.

EVALUATION AND REFLECTION

Reflecting on what the group has learnt and how it has performed is an important part of the learning process, often consolidating what has been covered. Because of the small numbers it can be useful to have a third party meet with the group to do the evaluation.

ASSESSING GROUP WORK

This is a topic in its own right. A discussion with your Medical Education Adviser may be helpful.

References

- 1 Tuckman, B.W. Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 1965 1 (69663)5, 384-399.
- 2 Tuckman, B.W. and Jensen M-A.C. Stages of Small-Group Development Revisited *Group & Organization Management* 1977 2: 419

Further reading.

Kitchen M. Facilitating small groups: how to encourage student learning. *The Clinical Teacher* 10(12); 9: 3-8.
Edmunds & Brown. Effective small group learning; AMEE Guide No.48. *Medical Teacher* 2010; 32:715-726

Do you know ...

