

how to get the best from impromptu small group sessions?

You know the story. The last minute call from the secretary, 'Prof. has been called away; can you do his 11am session with the 4th years?' You now have 20 minutes to prepare. So, where to start?

THE OBVIOUS QUESTIONS

How many, what stage of training, what was the session meant to be about, where is it to take place, how long? If you are lucky you will already know the students, if not a chat with the administrator can be useful. Knowing for example that one of the group is a qualified pharmacist, another is newly arrived from overseas and all are just starting their second attachment enables you to get a feel for the group that will be helpful in the session.

The good news: There are 6 students; they have only just started the run; seminar room 1 is booked, the choice is yours to use it or not.

The bad news: nobody knows what the session was meant to focus on and you have never set eyes on this group.



SO, WHERE TO START?

Plan what you are going to do. You may only have a few minutes to do this but a roughed out approach will help you keep on track during the session. Most of us get easily side-tracked so writing it down allows you to refer to it when necessary, true back-of-the-envelope stuff.

Introductions are an important first step. Not just who they/you are but use this time to get a feel for the group, who they are, where they have been, what experience they have had so far and what has been helpful. All this will give you some useful clues on where to take the session.

Create a safe learning environment. This is a key to effective learning. Follow the introductions with some ground rules. These

need not be complex 'do this/don't do that' rules but use the time to ensure the group knows what is/isn't expected e.g. all are expected to contribute, not to be embarrassed by asking questions, cover confidentiality issues (especially if discussing specific patients). Remember, students are good at getting the 'teacher' to do the work. Learning is much more effective when the student is involved so your role is not to pour out information but to get the students to engage with the information available.

With a topic. You may be fortunate and know what the session was meant to be about. The danger here is that you dive into a long monologue because you know this topic really well and the students don't, so you will tell them! Probably not the most effective approach; find out where their learning is at. What do they already know about the topic? Where does it fit in with other learning? Use open questions and draw in the whole group. Work out what they know and what they need to know for their stage of training. How does it fit with what else they are covering during this attachment?

Get them to do the work. There may be a patient on the ward whose condition illustrates an important point or principle. Get them to work out what they need to find out, look at the notes, have a brief discussion with the patient then come back and draw it all together. This would have to be well timed but adds reality to the learning.



If you are really unlucky you will have been given the topic and the 101 PowerPoint slides that accompany the talk. Always remember, more than one slide a minute leads to PowerPoint Poisoning, a recognised condition that leads to narcolepsy and paralysis of the learning faculties. One slide every two minutes leads to a milder form of boredom and disinterest.

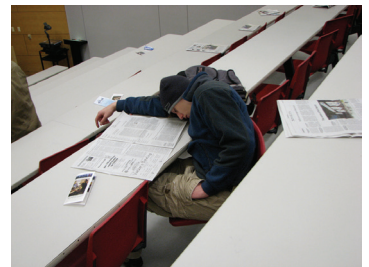
Without a topic. This is your lucky day. Work with the group to decide what will be useful. You do not necessarily have to focus on a specific, you could explore what they need to cover over next few weeks, how they can best do this, discuss tips on how to get the best out of colleagues. Local 'institutional' information (how to access out patients, getting the best out of a ward round, get them to practice using a piece of equipment that is important in the run) can have important long term benefits.

WINDING UP

Time your session to allow a few minutes at the end to wrap things up. This is a chance for the students to reflect on what they have gained from the session – the take home messages. It also gives you the opportunity to get some feedback on the session; what worked, what didn't.

SELF-PRESERVATION

Being a doctor means you will be expected to 'teach', often at short notice. Think about having a few topics and ideas up your sleeve for such times. A quiz on a topic common to your discipline can form the basis of a very interactive session. Give them the quiz to start with and go through their results. Get them to help each other out so that all arrive at the correct answer. You could keep a few such quizzes on a memory stick or smart phone. Some common (short) presentations from cases the students are likely to come across can be invaluable. Don't give them all of the answers; ask them the questions and work through to arrive at the answers. If you are likely to be given more than one session, or have adequate preparation time, give them some preparatory work, expect they have done it, and build on that work in the session.



For further assistance contact your MEA or CEA; details below or at <http://micn.otago.ac.nz/medical-education-faculty-of-medicine>

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USEFUL REFERENCES:

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Do you know ...

