

Teaching Notes for Physicians:

Facilitating Small Group Work

Background

By definition (1), small group work encompasses seminars, tutorials, and break-out sessions. Undergraduate medical students here work in small groups on clinical problem-solving, using case presentations and the clinical reasoning schemes that they have learned about in lectures. Small group facilitation is quite unlike any of the more formal teaching methods you may have used; these guidelines will help to make small group work both effective and enjoyable, for you and for your learners.

Advantages of small group work

Working together in small groups prepares learners to develop from passive information receivers into independent, task-orientated learners who are equipped for effective, self-directed learning throughout their professional careers. Cases or presentations are the stimulus for learners to explore what they already know, identify any gaps, then find, reflect on, evaluate, synthesize and apply new knowledge to solve the clinical problem. Discussion and debate in the safe environment of a small group allows learners to examine, develop, and change their understandings and beliefs, and to become critical users of the literature. Learners acquire the transferable skills of teamwork, negotiation, self-regulation, debate, and the ability to prioritize tasks. Small group work encourages active, higher-order learning. Solving the case is secondary to developing this active learning process, as students become increasingly responsible for their own learning (1-3).

Facilitating small groups

Facilitating small groups can be initially frustrating and awkward for physicians, who are used to being knowledge-transmitters; but if you fall back into your expert role, answering all questions and giving mini-lectures, you are depriving learners of all the benefits just described. Instead, your role as facilitator is to maintain group function and ensure task completion. (2)

Characteristics of effective groups (4)

- All contributions are received positively
- One person speaks at a time
- No ridicule or humiliation – no question is considered stupid
- Responsibility and rewards are shared by the group

What you must know at the start

Prevent your small group session from turning into a mutual misinformation session, or a mini-lecture, by preparing in advance. (5) Well-planned sessions will almost run themselves, allowing you to concentrate on group dynamics while the learners do all the work. (1)

Learner needs

Assess learners' prior knowledge by consulting the core documents and / or the chair of the course. This information may already be summarized online; check Osler¹.

Your needs

Familiarize yourself with the case, the presentation (in the core document), associated learning objectives, the clinical problem solving approach (scheme), and suggested references for your session. Locate these with the help of course chairs or Osler¹. Consider any physical resources you may want to have available and organize these ahead of time; would an anatomical model or chart be useful, for example?

Group needs

Groups are defined as collections of people who can all see and respond to one another (1), so arrange chairs in a circle, and find out if there is a white board in your room or import a flip-chart and pens, for note-taking.

Running the session

Common small group problems result from poor group dynamics, unclear goals, and low group motivation.

Group dynamics

Your task is to build a safe learning environment that allows all members to participate; begin with introductions and negotiate ground rules with the group, facilitating an atmosphere for open exchange of ideas and opinions. Express your enthusiasm – it's contagious! Observe group dynamics and encourage interaction between learners by glancing around all group members while one is speaking, using effective questioning technique (6) to guide direction, and reflecting questions back to the group; count to ten before answering any question, including your own. If dynamics are poor and you are seeking a change, involve the whole group; say 'what can we do differently?' Share the responsibility for good dynamics just as you share the rewards for task success.

Goals

Manage the session by planning and careful time-tracking. Introduce your proposed schedule and be strict about time-keeping.

Characteristics of ineffective groups (4)

- The facilitator gives a lecture
- The facilitator talks more than the learners
- Learners are reluctant to speak, and do so only when individually called upon
- One learner dominates the discussion
- Learners want immediate solutions rather than discussion

Make learning goals and objectives explicit at the outset, outline the tasks the group must accomplish, and be ready to break up larger groups into subsets if necessary (5 or 6 learners is ideal), each with a different task. Get everybody involved. Make learners responsible for identifying the scheme, finding relevant knowledge, and debating areas of uncertainty. Act as a knowledge resource only when learners have exhausted other resources or are going astray. Intermittently, draw the group together and summarize on the board or flip chart, highlighting what is most important, pointing out progress, and moving the group ahead.

Motivating the group

Having a relevant problem to solve is the initial motivation for adults to learn. (7) Giving feedback on individual contributions and encouraging members to do so is an important part of the facilitator's role, and has been identified by learners as one of the most important characteristics of effective facilitators (8;9).

Guide members to direct their own learning by identifying areas where further study is needed, and ask individuals to undertake research and share new knowledge at the next session. Keep the learning relevant by sharing your own related experiences and highlighting the latest evidence.

Help learners to incorporate their new knowledge by drawing explicit links with what they already know; broaden the contexts where they can apply new knowledge by leaving them with vignettes incorporating 3 or 4 shared key features to work through. (10) Revisit these at the start of the next session.

At the end of the small group session

Consider asking a group member to make a final summary. What has been achieved? Which questions remain? What needs further clarification? Ask the group for feedback and use this to improve the next session. Give individuals specific feedback, and give reminders for any 'homework' that's been allocated. As learners increase their knowledge base and their experience with group work grows, the guidance and support they require will decrease, and you will know that you have been a successful small group facilitator.

Enjoy your teaching!

For further information or confidential no-charge teaching consultations, contact us:

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ⁱ Access this curriculum management tool for faculty and students online: www.osler.ucalgary.ca
Contact Janet Tworek, Education Design Lead for Undergraduate Medical Education, for a password and username: jktworek@ucalgary.ca

Reference List

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