

Use Small Groups to Invigorate your Teaching

Lynne Allery

In recent decades in response to the debate about passive and active learning^{1,2} there has been a deliberate shift away from didactic, large group teacher centred events to more learner centred, small group activities.

Small group sessions can be stimulating and rewarding experiences; providing learners with safe, structured spaces for exploration and experimentation.

Introduction

Within these sessions interaction is central in order to promote trainee engagement and promote learning; it is vital to recognise that the small groups are not defined solely by size, yet clearly there are optimal numbers to ensure the quality and quantity of the discussion, so between six and twenty participants is ideal. Tasks need to be clearly defined and provision made to engage all participants and times allowed for the groups to feedback and debate the outcomes³.

Reasons for teaching in small groups

1. Social Contact

They provide opportunities for a wide range of collaborative activities and in depth discussions. Participants are able to explore topics in greater depth through their shared knowledge and experiences, which may prove valuable in fostering support networks and developing learning cultures.

2. Educational Objectives

These include the teaching of thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation and problem-solving; practical procedures and skills; and the attitudes and values underpinning clinical practice. The setting promotes consideration of wide ranging and potentially sensitive issues such as individual attitudes and beliefs allowing various perspectives to be identified and discussed within a safe environment.

3. Reflects Complexity

They allow trainers and trainees to explore the complexity, uncertainty and variability of clinical practice. Here the focus is on the sharing of ideas, and promoting insights and reflections on individual differences. They encourage the development of interpersonal skills through dialogue, questioning and collaboration. Participants learn to work as a team and to take responsibility for different elements of the group learning task.

Table 1

Facilitation Tips

A Few Tips

- ▶ Set ground rules – e.g. not talking over each other
- ▶ Agree task and negotiate other opportunities if indicated
- ▶ Allow the group to contribute ideas and suggestions
- ▶ Provide opportunities for group members to participate

Discussion Types

Trainers can influence the nature and style of the group discussion by the way they set up, interact and run the discussion. The decision to move between the different formats of small group teaching will vary according to the nature of the session, the content and the specific dynamics of the group at that time. Groups can be controlled with the tutor clearly in charge, determining the direction that the learning will take. The careful use of questions which test the students or trainees in a highly structured and systematic manner can help to present new knowledge in a logical and ordered manner and will test the learners' understanding and their ability to integrate new material within pre-existing schema. In an open format the move is away from the transmission model to one of facilitation. The tutor asks open questions, providing positive reinforcement, and appropriate verbal and non verbal cues to develop and maintain engagement and participation. Activities don't just happen; planning and preparation is central to the success of a small group session.

Small Groups Techniques

Buzz Groups:

A group can be split into smaller subgroups which enable participation and allow for collective decision making. Where the main group contains a professional mix or a group with different knowledge levels, the sub groups can be organised in different combinations to allow for a variety of perspectives to be heard.

Snow-balling:

This involves the phased increase of the size of a group addressing a specific task or sequence of tasks, encouraging critical analysis as the groups need to identify and prioritise options. It may be used to achieve consensus and is useful with learners with varying levels of expertise.

Snow-balling Procedure

- 1. Individually** – The Student or Trainee reads a background paper, case history or examines a problem.
- 2. In Pairs** – They compare understandings, clarify any difficulties, make preliminary attempt to solve problem.
- 3. In Fours** – They share ideas, seek agreement (perhaps on main 6 points, preferred solutions) and clarify disagreements. Groups prepare to report back to the whole group.

Brainstorming:

Brainstorming is a technique for generating ideas, identifying the level of the learners or stimulating recall. Use a round robin approach and record all ideas on a whiteboard or flipchart. Continue until no new ideas are offered then clarify any unclear terms or ideas and encourage the group to combine/categorise/prioritise each.

Summary

Effectively organised sessions are well worth the effort; they enable trainers to actively facilitate learning, providing trainees with opportunities to explore various options and engage actively with the construction and reconstruction of their knowledge skills and attitudes. Keep a look out for the problems that can arise with group dynamics, your priority is always to the group and ensuring the best learning experience for the majority. Acknowledging concerns and strongly held views; redirecting individual's questions to the group (rather than directly answering this yourself); dividing the group into smaller groups, summarising and moving the discussion to new points can all help to ensure an effective outcome, maintain order and give direction to the discussion 'active' means bringing these skills and principles together.

Further Information

1. **Rich, S K., Keim, R G., Schuler, C F.** (2005). Problem based learning versus traditional educational methodology: a comparison of pre clinical and clinical periodontal performance. *Journal of Dental Education*. 69. Pp 649-662.
2. **Foord- May, I.** (2006). A faculty's experience of in changing instructional methods in a professional physiotherapist education program. *Physio Therapy*. 86. Pp. 223-235.
3. **Jaques D, Salmon, G.** (2007)(4th Ed). *Learning in Groups. A handbook for face to face and on-line environments*. Oxford: Routledge.

Authors

Lynne Allery is Reader and Director of Medical Education in the Academic Section of Postgraduate Medical Education, School of Medicine at Cardiff University. She has a wealth of experience in the facilitation of small groups in a variety of settings both nationally and internationally.

Series Editor

Dr Michal Tombs – Senior Lecturer in Medical Education, Academic Section of Postgraduate Medical Education, C4ME, School of Medicine, Cardiff University.

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