**Small group teaching – Methods and techniques**

‘Mixing it up’ is important. You can’t please all the people all the time but designing your small group teaching session with ‘variety’ in mind allows your learners to work in their comfort zones for some of the time and provides them with new challenges at others. Different methods facilitate different kinds of student engagement and provide different opportunities to learn.

The name of the small group teaching session will provide some clarity on the overall teaching approach expected. These fundamentally vary in how directive the teacher is expected to be :

* **Tutorials (academic)**: small groups of students discuss an issue, their essays or a topical problem
* **Personal Tutorials**: As above but also has a pastoral role in supporting students more widely if they have academic and personal difficulties.
* **Problem classes**: focused specifically on working through a set of given problems – these are frequently mathematical, statistical or computational.
* **Seminars**: groups discuss journal papers and/or other learning materials
* **Workshops**: a mixture of small inputs by the tutor interspersed by work on group or individual tasks, followed by feedback to the whole group and discussion.
* **Problem-based learning**: A group of students work through a given scenario or problem to diagnose a solution. The group is likely to meet 2 or 3 times on each problem, gaining further information each time from a non-specialist facilitator.
* **Student-led groups**: students decide on the topic and how it will be discussed; tutor merely observes or may intervene if necessary
* **Self-help groups**: run by students using the tutor as a resource
* **Action Learning Sets** : tutor acts as a facilitator to the set, each students present issues in turn with others asking questions and suggesting ways forward – the presenting student then decides which points to act on.

In some classes it is expected that the teacher will be very knowledgeable and be prepared to lead on a specific subject or topic. The teacher is in the class to share their expertise and to ‘present’ information and his or her views to the group. However, in many small group teaching sessions this is definitely **not** the role of the teacher. A more common situation is that the teacher is there to help manage the process of learning, by facilitating discussion and supporting the students to work through learning activities and tasks. Tasks that have been designed to encourage the students to think for themselves, share their ideas with each other and help them to develop a set of, much valued, academic and communication skills.

*One thing that I hadn’t expected was that I actually found it really difficult to shut up sometimes – what I mean is, it is hard to stop yourself jumping into the discussion all the time and effectively doing the work for the students.*

These two very different teaching roles typify, two very different teaching ideologies - firstly, a **teacher-led** approach and secondly, a **student-led** or a **student-centred** approach to learning.

**Student-centred Learning**

*Student-centred learning describes ways of thinking about learning and teaching that emphasise student responsibility for such activities as planning learning, interacting with teachers and other students, researching, and assessing learning.*

Cannon, (2000)

Student-centred learning therefore, requires that students get actively involved in the learning process and take responsibility for their own learning.

The implications of this for teachers are that they place greater importance on what their learners are doing, and why they are doing it, rather than on their own actions and performances as a teacher (Biggs). It requires a mutual respect within the student – teacher relationship.

You may find the following toolkit of use:

European Students’ Union, Student-centred learning: Toolkit for students, staff and Higher Education Institutions:

<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED539501.pdf>

**Active Learning**

Several authors have emphasised the importance of learners being actively engaged in the process of their own learning and have criticized educational methods that view learners as human vessels to be filled with knowledge. Workers, such as Vygotsky, Piaget and Bruner, saw learners as people who are constructing their own understanding by interacting with knowledge and very importantly, with other people (including teachers and peers).

***Constructivism***

This construction process is greatly helped by the provision of frameworks, structures and mental models that help learners to begin to organise and arrange knowledge in ways that are meaningful to them. This means that each learner will build their understanding in an individualistic way and will find different personal connections points of relevance in their learning.

For further information please see: www.learning-theories.com/constructivism.html

**Some take home points arising from a student-centred view**

As a small group teacher it is going to be important to:

* challenge students to think for themselves,
* help students to organise and structure their thoughts and ideas,
* encourage students to vocalise and discuss their views and understandings
* design learning activities and tasks that require students to actively engage
* give students feedback on what they are doing well and how they can improve.

**Encouraging Active Learning - Some Seminar Techniques**

There are hundreds of different ways in which students can be encouraged to participate in a small group teaching session and actively engage with new knowledge, concepts and ideas…(and with each other).

**Crossover groups**: the class is sub-divided into two or more smaller groups with transfers of some students between groups at appropriate times. E.g. Students begin part A of a task in groups of four, after completing this, two people from one group swap places with two people from a second group – to form a new group of four. The task then continues to part B.

**Buzz group**: Write a question or a topic on the board and ask each student to write down any ideas / responses they have. Then ask them to share their thoughts with a colleague for a couple of minutes. Give them time to discuss and then ask the question again – asking them for their suggestions.

**Brainstorming or Ideas storming:** Write down a statement, a word or a question on the board. Ask the students to shout out their thoughts and ideas and write them down without comment, on the board or flipchart. Do not stop to analyse any of the suggestions, just produce the list of comments. When suggestions or time has been exhausted, organise and critique the list together. The intention is to separate ideas generation from the editing and checking phase.

**Presentations**: individual students or groups of students present on a topic devised by the tutor or on a self or group generated topic

**Debates**: The teacher or the students can set up a debate between two opposing positions. Time is allocated before or during the class to prepare arguments and then the debate is ‘chaired’ by the teacher.

**Jigsawing a topic –** Produce two sets of cards giving two sets of alternative variables or situations. The students would be given one card from each set to generate a unique set of circumstances. E.g. one set of cards could include the names of different historic figures and the second set a number of political issues – the students have to discuss or present on the connections between the person and the issue.

**Snowballing**: individuals, then pairs, then fours etc to generate wider views on a topic progressively. You effectively grow the size of the working group and draw in an increasing range of views.

**Mini projects**: individuals or groups work on a particular small project and report to the whole group

**Resource based tasks:** Provide the students with a range of resources (could be articles, quotations, x-rays, tables of data, test results, photographs, printouts etc). Ask them to solve a problem or address a question using the provided resources.

**Role play**: students take on specific roles and act out the views or actions associated with those roles. This could involve experiencing different points of view or putting into practice certain skills and approaches. E.g. Taking a patient history, or interviewing a witness etc

**Simulations**: The teacher provides the students with a set of ‘briefs’ that provide information and background to the simulation. The students often work in small teams to adopt different roles within the simulation. E.g. groups taking the stance of different European countries in a European Union strategy negotiation.

**Fishbowl**: a sub-group of students are observed (in the ‘fishbowl’) by the rest of the students. The student in the bowl are asked to argue a case, debate or role-play a situation. The observing students are then called upon to feedback, summarise the discussion, or take the reverse role.