



## SMALL GROUP TEACHING: A REVIEW

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**B**ACKGROUND: Small-group tutorials and discussion groups are commonly used teaching method in the health professions.<sup>(1,2)</sup> Small group teaching offers students an opportunity to discuss and refine their understanding of complex issues, to problem solve and apply their knowledge to new situations, and to reflect on their attitudes and feelings. Small group teaching can be a most rewarding experience for both teacher and student.<sup>(3)</sup> To achieve success a health professions Teacher will need to plan carefully and develop skills in group management, will need an understanding of how groups work and how to apply a range of small group techniques to achieve the goals set out to achieve. The goal of this article is to outline ways in which small-group teaching can become more effective and more enjoyable, and to recommend strategies for enhancing small-group teaching.

**Active participation:** The first, and perhaps the most important, characteristic of small group teaching is that teaching and learning is brought about through discussion among all present. This generally implies a group size that is sufficiently small to enable each group member to contribute.

**Face-to-face contact:** The second characteristic of small group teaching

is that it involves face-to-face contact among all those present. It is difficult to conduct satisfactory small group teaching in a lecture theatre or tutorial room with students sitting in rows. Similarly, long board-room type tables are quite unsuitable because those present cannot see all other group members, especially those seated alongside.

Effective discussion requires communication which is not only verbal but also non-verbal involving, hence face to face contact is the need in small group teaching.

**Purposeful activity:** The third characteristic of small group teaching is that the session must have a purpose. The purposes set for the small group can be quite wide. They include discussing a topic or a patient problem and developing skills such as criticizing, analyzing, problem solving and decision making & also to use the small group approach to develop the higher intellectual skills of students and even to influence their attitudes.

**ADVANTAGES:** The most important advantage of small groups is the ability of the small group to foster active and collaborative learning. (4, 5) These two characteristics are very important components in learner-centered learning approaches and supported by diverse theories such as constructivist theory, adult learning principles, and social



learning theories.<sup>(4)</sup> Active learning in the group is necessary to promote higher order cognitive processes such as analysis and problem solving.

A small group is able to execute more demanding and complicated work that would not have been possible by working in isolation. A small group creates an even playing field for the learners and eases the distinctions between the better learners and the less efficient ones. Examples of such demanding situations include project-based and case-based learning, dealing with complicated situations.

The general consensus is that small group does not have any overt advantage over large group to achieve knowledge acquisition but a properly functioning small group promotes active learning and in turn may make a difference in fostering higher order cognitive skills in the learner<sup>(5)</sup>.

**Managing a small group:** Small group teaching is considerably more challenging to manage than a conventional lecture because it needs to take account of the students' behaviour, personalities and the emotional aspects of being in a group<sup>(1,6)</sup>. Teachers have particular responsibilities as the initial leader of the group but the role will vary considerably both within a session and from session to session.

A successful group is one that can proceed purposefully without the need for constant intervention by the teacher. This is hard for most teachers to accept but it is very rewarding if one recognizes that this independence is one of the key goals of small group teaching and is more important than satisfying one's own need to be deferred to as teacher and content expert<sup>(7, 8)</sup>.

### **Small group discussion techniques :**

As with any other aspect of teaching it is helpful to understand several techniques in order to introduce variety or to suit a particular situation. Such techniques include:

- 1. One-to one discussion:** This is a very effective technique which can be used with a group of almost any size. It is particularly useful as an 'icebreaker' when the group first meets, and is valuable for enhancing listening skills. It can also be used to discuss controversial or ethical issues when forceful individuals with strong opinions need to be prevented from dominating the discussion.
- 2. Buzz groups:** These are particularly helpful to encourage maximum participation at one time. It is therefore especially useful when groups are large, if too many people are trying to contribute at once or, alternatively, if shyness is inhibiting several students.
- 3. Brainstorming:** This is a technique that is considered when student is needed to encourage broad and creative thinking about a problem. If used frequently, it trains students to think up ideas before they are dismissed or criticized. The key to successful brainstorming is to separate the generation of ideas, or possible solutions to a problem, from the evaluation of these ideas or solutions.
- 4. Role playing:** This is a powerful and underused technique. It is valuable in teaching interpersonal and communication skills, particularly in areas with a high emotional content. It has been found to be helpful in changing



perceptions and in developing empathy. It is not a technique to use without some experience so teacher should arrange to sit in on a role play session before using it in own course.

**5. Plenary sessions:** In many group teaching situations, and sometimes conferences, subgroups must report back to the larger group. This reporting back can be tedious and often involves only the subgroup leaders who may present a very distorted view of what happened. The plenary session method may help you solve these problems.

**Challenges for small group teaching:** Proper functioning of small groups requires recognition of several important challenges and attributes of the group.

**Variation of the learners:** Group members differ from each other in their prior level of knowledge, educational interest, learning effectiveness, and ability to work within a group. While diversity promotes varied and interesting opinions, it also has the potential of creating conflicts and interfering with the proper functioning of the group.

**Group leadership skills:** Proper functioning of the group depends on a good group leader. Tutors vary in their ability to be a group leader which can be enhanced by proper training and practice.

**Finding a common ground:** Groups function properly when group members share common learning goals and have common expectations and roles. Difference in finding a common ground is an obstacle that groups have to overcome by negotiation.

**Content and instructional materials:** Learning activities in small groups are driven by the learners. Apart from textbooks, a wide range of instructional materials are needed to satisfy diverse learning activities.

**Time:** The small group tutorial is a relatively slow process. The preparation time for small group activity is generally longer than that for other forms of tutoring.

**Assessment:** It is customary to assess each individual member of the group. Assessing the group's collective knowledge or skill in an objective manner has yet to find a place in the conventional curriculum.

**Role and Responsibilities of Tutors in Small Groups:** The role and responsibilities of the tutor in a small group assume two basic dimensions:

- (a) ensuring social cohesiveness in the group and
- (b) keeping the group on target. Both are important and connected with each other. Social cohesiveness and effective interactivity within the group ensure that the group remains on target and achieves the learning goals.

**Conclusion:** Proper use of small group teaching methods develop higher-level intellectual skills such as reasoning and problem-solving; the attitudes; and the acquisition of interpersonal skills such as listening, speaking, arguing, and group leadership. Increasingly, students will need these skills so that they can participate effectively in group discussion & in learning process.

These skills are also help health professionals to deal with patients, peers, community and other learned societies.



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