

Managing small group teaching

Most of the teaching we ask our GP tutors to do is with small groups of students (rather than one-to-one or in lectures for example). Although small group teaching offers plenty of opportunities for enjoyable and interesting teaching and learning, there are some common problems that can arise when teaching small groups. This learning resource describes some strategies to deal with problems, as well as ways that GP tutors can make the most of the potential of small group teaching.

We all remember inspiring lecturers we had from our student days. Lectures are a good use of busy experts' time, and allow the lecturer to teach their subject area efficiently to a large group of people. Lectures can be a particularly useful teaching methodology when you want to explain and follow a complicated train of thought or a concept with few interruptions. However, lectures are not fit for purpose when you want students to master a skill, to explore their attitudes or to develop their knowledge by getting them to engage with the material in different ways.

Small group work is useful, essential even, when you want to:

- Encourage students to develop their *knowledge* by engaging with the subject in a range of different ways and from different directions
- Enable students to practice *skills* or procedures
- Encourage students to explore their feelings and *attitudes*

Small group teaching can mean a number of different things. Most commonly, the sessions can be structured as

- **Seminars** – usually round-table group discussions around a subject or a paper etc, or a presentation by one member of the group followed by a discussion
- **Tutorials** – usually focused on the individual students' reactions, problems or interpretations of their own work-in-progress, or work they have completed
- **Problem based learning** – a structured teaching methodology ([used at QMUL medical school,](#)) where groups of students are given a 'trigger' problem, identify what they need to learn, and meet again a week later to share what they have learned
- **Practical skills sessions** – for example to learn clinical skills, such as venepuncture
- **Workshops** – usually a mixture of different teaching methods and session structures, often directed at learning a skill or exploring attitudes, for example around communication skills

Unlike lectures or library-based learning, group work can also be *experiential*, insofar as students construct their own meanings from their direct experiences, rather than from the second-hand experiences of their teachers. Students are often shocked at how genuinely emotional they feel, for example, when breaking bad news to a simulated patient (an actor) in a teaching situation. The point about experiential learning is although the students realise it is a simulation, the associated thoughts and emotions they *experience* are real enough.

Small group teaching can be:

- **Task orientated**, for example, where the group has to identify appropriate methods for treating a patient with x and reach a conclusion
- **Practice orientated**, for example, learning how to take blood pressure, to explain a procedure either in real clinical settings or in simulated settings with actors / role-players / models and mannequins or
- **Process orientated**, for example, a discussion of how participants have dealt with the process of breaking bad news in their own practice

Common difficulties in small group work

Although small group teaching offers plenty of opportunities to innovate and think up exiting ways to engage your students, there are a number of common difficulties that tutors have. For example:

- Your session pivots on students preparing something in advance, and the students, or some of the students, arrive inadequately prepared
- You plan a group discussion, but the students won't contribute (usually the silence is then filled by the tutor giving a mini-lecture), or
- You plan a group discussion, but one student dominates the discussion
- The discussion over runs, and you either have to cut into the time allocated to another activity or another part of the session, or you don't finish on time
- Students arrive late, and you restart the session for the latecomers
- You generally get 'bad vibes' --- the students talk to each other when they should be listening, read phone texts, bicker, complain, attendance is poor etc

These types of problems are common to all small group tutors, but there are couple of things you can do to try to avoid them, or to address them if they do arise: The first is to think through the session again, and try to make it as engaging and interactive as possible. [See the related learning resource on this site for advice and tips on lesson planning.] The second strategy is to set ground rules.

Ground Rules

If you are going to be teaching the same small group of students for the next 11 or 12 weeks (as is the case with the Medicine in Society and Extending Patient Contact courses) then it's worth devoting time in the first meeting to both your and the students' expectations of how the subsequent weeks will work. It can be a good idea for the students to get together and come up with their own ground rules, and for you to think up with a list of your own. Then you can negotiate with the students about what standards and behaviours you expect of them, and they can tell you what they would like from and expect from you.

The type of things you and the students should think about:

- **Punctuality and absenteeism** – what level of lateness do you and the students consider un/acceptable? Depending on how strongly you feel about punctuality, you might, for example, say that you are prepared to start five minutes late but no later. Whatever rule you negotiate, ask *the students* what they want *you* to do to police this? Remind them of your obligations to inform the College also, which are non-negotiable. Finishing on time is always a good idea.
- **Housekeeping** – Do they know where things are (such as the fire escapes, toilets, tea and coffee, etc)? When are their breaks? Where / when are they allowed to eat or drink? What happens if they finish their allotted tasks early? Do you have their mobile numbers and do they have a number to contact you in case of illness etc?
- **Preparation** – there are a number of ways you might encourage students to prepare agreed work. You could let them choose sessions from a list they will prepare to present to the others. Alternatively, you could get them all to prepare every session as if they were going to present it and then randomly choose someone to present on the day. The danger with overly strict or rigorous rules and sanctions though is that students who haven't prepared won't attend at all. You might say that if they haven't been able to prepare for whatever reason they should still attend, but with the expectation that they will be the person presenting the

following week. *Ask the students what they want you to do* when the ground rules are not adhered to – say for example if one person dominates the discussion, or what to do when people don't prepare or contribute.

- You should have a discussion with them about allowing others to air their views and being **non-judgemental**. Ask them what they think the limits of this might be – for example if someone made a sexist or otherwise discriminatory remark.
- Remind them about **confidentiality** as part of a discussion about **professionalism**.

As a general rule, you will probably find that the students' own ground rules are far stricter than you would *dare* try to impose yourself. Get one of the students to write up the agreed ground rules and distribute them by e-mail to you and the other students. If things don't go to plan, you can then revisit *their* ground rules.

Dealing with difficulties as they arise

It is good practice to start any teaching session by setting out the learning outcomes. Then it is the tutors' role to set out the learning activities and methods and steer the content and the discussion towards the learning outcomes. At the end, tutors should summarise the outcomes and highlight areas for further learning.

When you are running a session, try to step back, talk less and question more. Allow the students to take the lead in managing the group and the activity. You can encourage participation by all students by:

- When they do speak, you can encourage quiet students by making eye contact, smiling, nodding etc. Also you can get students into pairs to feedback, which can help quiet students voice their opinions by proxy. If you have a quiet student it may be because they are struggling or shy, or there might be other things going on. If the lack of participation becomes an issue, have a one-to-one chat with the student and ask what you can do to help.
- If there is a dominant student in a group, the other students will be looking to you to help them deal with that. The idea would be to nudge rather than embarrass, so you can use phrases like "that's a really interesting point, and I'd like to open it up to the rest of the group", or "I'm conscious of the time, and I'd like to move us on or we won't meet all our learning outcomes". At the same time, make eye contact with the other students (rather than the dominant student) to encourage the others to talk.
- If two or three students are jointly being disruptive, separate them by subdividing the groups when you introduce a new activity.

In terms of classroom discipline, it is generally easier to start stricter and get softer as time goes on than to have to ramp up the sanctions if they are badly behaved.

The chemistry of groups is such that sometimes something that has worked well with other groups in the past won't work with a particular group. Sometimes it can be difficult to work out what is going on when a group is silent, defensive, aggressive or just generally badly behaved. If you feel things are going pear-shaped, don't let bad situations run on, try to deal with them as they arise, or soon after you have had some time to reflect. It's best to get whatever problems there may be onto the table so you can bat it back to the group about how you should proceed. For instance, you might say: "I'm sensing that you're not happy with something, but I'm not sure what that is. How can I help to make this a more constructive use of your time?" This puts the onus on the students to help diagnose the problem and think through its potential solutions.

Conclusion

When you plan your teaching sessions, instead of thinking about what you are doing as a tutor to teach the students, think about what they are doing to learn and retain the material themselves. Remember that the reason you are being asked to teach our students is because you are an expert in your field. However, as a small group tutor you shouldn't be giving mini-lectures. In fact, you shouldn't be working too hard while the session is going on – the students should be doing all the hard work. Your expertise and input comes in the lesson planning and group facilitation. Think of your role as a small group tutor not as *teaching* the students, but in *planning and facilitating their learning*.

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