

Setting Ground Rules

This educational resource will discuss how negotiating ground rules with students can help manage small groups to best facilitate the students' learning.

When meeting a new group of students, particularly if you are going to be their tutor for the forthcoming term / academic year, then it is always worth devoting some time in the first session to discuss and negotiate some ground rules, setting out how you and the students want the course to run. This is particularly important if the topic area being studied has any potential to be controversial, for example topics such as ethics, culture, religion, sexuality, HIV / AIDS etc.

There are a number of common issues, concerns and problems that can arise when facilitating small group teaching. Most small group teachers in all subjects would recognise the following from their own experience:

- Punctuality – students arrive late or return late from breaks
- Attendance – students don't turn up at all, and / or don't inform you
- Students have not prepared work or done the reading they should have
- Student participation is poor, so sessions turn into mini-lectures given by the tutor
- Some students are silent during discussions
- Other students dominate the discussions

In addition, when teaching medical students, there are sometimes more specific professional concerns about students around issues such as

- Students' expectations too high (e.g. wanting to examine patients, perform procedures in advance of their level)
- Students are inappropriately dressed or poor hygiene
- Students breach confidentiality

Starting with a new group

When you meet your students for the first time, there will be a number of house-keeping things to remind them about, such as fire drills and health and safety. Some things may not be open to negotiation or change, for example attendance may be compulsory. However, it is valuable for you to find out what their expectations of you and of the course are, as well as you letting them know what you expect of them in terms of scholarliness, professionalism and inter group relationships.

After your initial introductions, you can ask the students to spend some time as a small group, or in sub-groups, coming up with their own ground rules of how they want you to facilitate the course. If they are asked what they think first, students will often expect higher standards or devise more strict ground rules than their tutors would have thought of. Students will also generally be able to articulate what you expect of them without prompting. Once you've finished the discussion and

agreed on a set of ground rules, one student could be asked to scribe the outcome, and then circulate the agreed ground rules to the rest of the group by e-mail.

The level of concern or annoyance about, for example, how punctual students should be, is clearly going to vary from one individual tutor to another. Therefore the purpose of this resource is not to dictate what ground rules should be, but to provide a framework for the discussion and some thoughts and tips on the process. Having said that, there are some possible solutions to the issues, concerns and problems raised above, which you may want to weave into your discussion about ground rules:

Punctuality Ask the students how punctual they think or expect doctors should be

Are you going to start on time no matter if people are late? Are you going to start 5 minutes after the hour? Are you going to re-start the session if there are latecomers?

Negotiate with the students about what they want you to do about late-comers – do they want you to allow them to join the group or not? Or should they wait until the first break so that they won't disturb the others?

Remember that as group facilitator it is your role to make sure the students get sufficient breaks and finish on time. Discuss what breaks the students feel they need

Attendance With both students who will be late and those who cannot attend at all, do you have a system so that they can let you know (What is best for you all – a phone call, a text to the other students or to the tutor?) Remember the medical school also needs to be informed of absenteeism – check the regulations and process for the course you are teaching on

If the students are assessed on their attendance (or punctuality professionalism etc) then they should be made aware of this at the outset

Students not prepared

Is the expectation that all the students are to have prepared work or done agreed reading for each session?

If there are a series of sessions, would the students be interested in choosing 1 or 2 sessions each and prepare them so that they can lead a seminar – the benefits are that this will make it more interesting for them and they will learn more effectively – if a student is not able to do the preparation for whatever reason, then they can perhaps organise a swap with another student.

Ask the students what they want you to do if a particular student or the group hasn't prepared for the session as agreed – are you willing to offer mini-lectures when this happens? If not, is there a plan b?

Very quiet or overconfident students

Ask them how they want you to manage the group in terms of dealing with people who don't contribute or if one person is not letting others have a say

Students usually say that each person should have their turn to speak and that what they say should be respected – Do the students or you have any boundaries about things that would be unacceptable to say?

Expectations too high (or low)

Students may have had bad experiences in previous courses or placements. It's valuable to know about these, so at least you can ask "What can I do to make this a more valuable learning experience for you?"

Students often feed back that they want more opportunities to examine patients, to take histories and to practise clinical skills. Have a discussion about what you will be able to provide in terms of patient contact etc, and what they won't be able to do because it isn't available or appropriate at their stage

Inappropriate dress / poor hygiene

Again, ask them what they think patients might expect from a doctor. Ask them if they have heard any patients commenting on doctors' inappropriate attitude, dress or hygiene – or have they had any noteworthy experiences in this regard?

Confidentiality Again ask them what they think is acceptable in terms of talking and writing about patients they will see when on placements

Discuss what is acceptable from a patients' perspective and from your own perspective in terms of them using patient information for their learning – e.g. when they make their own notes while talking to patients, or when reading and using patients' medical notes

Some other issues to think about:

Mobile phones Are they to be switched off altogether / on vibrate or silent. When is it in/appropriate to make calls or read / write texts?

Eating and drinking

When and where is it in/appropriate to eat or drink

Using the ground rules

Allocating time to a discussion about ground rules will raise awareness of these issues for students. More generally it will also raise their awareness of professionalism, which is an important learning objective of these courses and an important part of being a lifelong, adult learner.

As the course progresses, if things do not go well for whatever reason, then it is reasonable to revisit the ground rules you have all signed up for. You can have a discussion about how you feel that the ground rules are not being followed. Ask the students if they agree, and if so, if they have any ideas about why that might be. Then you can ask them what they want you to do to help to get things back on track so that they learn what they are supposed to be learning. This type of approach will share the responsibility for the smooth running of the group and the learning between all members of that group, rather than it being seen as the sole responsibility of the tutor. All of this is easier to do if the ground rules have originated from the students and they feel a sense of ownership about them.

Peter Washer
Lecturer in Medical Education, CBME
p.j.washer@qmul.ac.uk