

***Introduction to  
University Teaching Series***

Teaching Small Groups

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Other titles in the series include:

Teaching at a Distance

Postgraduate Supervision

Balancing Academic Demands on Your Time

Assessing Student Learning

Lecturing to Large Groups

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# Foreword

Teaching has always been an important responsibility of university academics. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition that the ability to teach a diverse set of students in a range of teaching and learning contexts does not necessarily come automatically once an academic is appointed to a university position. Within the University of New England, there are several forms of resources and support available for newly appointed academics so that they can assume their responsibilities more easily.

This series of booklets Introduction to University Teaching prepared by Dr Izabel Soliman for the Teaching and Learning Centre covers a range of topics of vital interest to those staff who are appointed with limited teaching experience. They also fulfil an important role of providing an overview or refresher for those academics who have been teaching for some time.

With academic life becoming busier and busier, these booklets provide the means to learn about university teaching without the need to attend workshops or seminars. They also offer additional background material and resources to those who do attend the Teaching and Learning Centre workshop program. They provide a flexible approach to learning about university teaching.

I commend these booklets to you. Even those of us with wide teaching experience always find there is something new to learn when it comes to teaching.

Professor Sue Johnston  
Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic)  
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# Introduction

Small group work is a widely used and important learning activity in higher education. It provides more scope than lectures for learner involvement and participation in two-way communication and for student-student, and student-teacher interaction not easily achievable in lectures. Personal involvement can also increase motivation and interest in the subject matter. Small group work promotes learning in providing opportunity to share and test ideas with others and to examine different perspectives on issues. The lecturer can get to know the students better, observe how they respond to the unit materials and learning activities and to diagnose learning problems and to clarify misunderstandings.

Small group work also provides opportunity for co-operative and collaborative learning, for problem-based learning, for defining, exploring and solving problems, for developing higher order cognitive skills, such as using and/or transferring knowledge to new situations, for discussion and for the development of communication skills.

While small group work can enhance learning in many ways, it is important that you establish why it is desirable for learning in your unit and what particular outcomes you would like to achieve.

Effective group work does not just happen spontaneously. It requires understanding of group dynamics and the planning and monitoring of appropriate group activities. You will need to be sensitive to the diverse needs of students and the development of the group. Setting aside time for reflection, evaluation and discussion of group processes with students will also contribute to the development of effective techniques.

## Examples of Small Group Activities

### *Tutorial*

A regular meeting of students under the direction of a teacher/tutor to discuss a topic. Students may be asked to work through a set problem individually or in small groups, with assistance as necessary from the tutor.

### *Seminar*

The presentation of a piece of work prepared by a student to his/her peers and subsequent discussion loosely structured by the tutor.

### *Workshop*

A structured set of activities which provide opportunities for learning through reflection, analysis, problem solving and discussion, usually in a group context.

### *Laboratory session*

Structured practical session where experiments may be conducted, observations made, data collected and analysed, conclusions drawn, work reported and skills introduced and practiced.

## **Group Development**

### *Stage Theory*

Research on group development suggest that groups evolve and develop in various stages over the course of a semester and there are activities appropriate for each stage (Harris and Watson, 1997).

The postulated stages are orientation, transition, working and ending. The orientation stage involves group members getting to know each other and building some degree of comfort in working together. Introduction and icebreaking activities are appropriate at this stage for members of the group to learn something about each other and to ease the possible tension and anxiety that some students may feel about how others in the group may regard and react to them. Dividing students into pairs where one person introduces the other to the rest of the group is a useful activity at this stage. You might also ask students to make paper name plates with a symbol beside their names that represents a hobby or an activity they enjoy doing which each person talks about briefly by way of an introduction.

The transition stage is a critical one for group development as students try to work out their place in the group and resolve communication and leadership issues. At this stage, activities that reinforce the value of the group input and

the importance of differing points of view are crucial for the development of an effective collaborative group. The teacher acts as a role model, facilitator, coach and cheerleader during this stage. Group definition (Harris and Watson, 1997) is a useful activity at this stage where you divide the group into smaller groups of three or four students and give each one the task of defining a broad key concept in your subject area (e.g. community mental health, multicultural communication). Afterwards, a recorder from each group writes the groups definition on the board and you facilitate analysis and discussion of similarities and differences across groups and reinforce the students' cooperative efforts.

Using and discussing learning style or personality inventories are also useful at this stage, (e.g. the Myers Briggs Type Indicator).

At the working stage the group can perform at its peak in communicating and problem solving of complex tasks, panel presentations and creative group projects. Indications of a group working at this stage are a positive, enthusiastic attitude, where members both support and challenge each other.

The ending stage is a time of closure and saying goodbyes. It may involve activities that consolidate and generalise learning through group projects presentations, individual concept maps, unit and peer evaluation. Sharing highlights about the learning process is also beneficial.

### ***Group cohesion***

Group cohesion is considered an indicator of an effective learning group because it affects the interactions between group members (Michaelsen, Fink and Black, 1996). The openness of communication between members and their motivation to ensure that the group achieves its goals are considered the two most important interaction dimensions (Michaelsen et al. 1996).

Group cohesiveness develops by means of communication among group members by which they test the extent to which they can trust each other to treat everyone seriously and fairly. This takes time to develop. As trust develops so does readiness to give peers feedback and group members become increasingly willing to commit personal time and effort to group tasks.

You can create conditions for developing group cohesion by:

- designing activities and assignments that require a group effort
- assignment that can be done during class time when all members of the group are present
- assigning tasks that stimulate a high level of group interaction, e.g. those that require members to discuss and make a decision or choice using a complex set of data (e.g. compare and contrast data for making a decision about the single best location for a specific business in a specific town)
- not assigning tasks that require a great deal of writing which can be done by individuals alone
- providing performance criteria that allow comparisons with other groups, and
- rewarding group performance.

## **Strategies for Facilitating Small Group Work**

- *Clarify your expectations of students*

One of the major reasons groups fail to work is that students do not know what is expected of them (Bertola and Murphy, 1994). Giving students a general topic to discuss and a reading list is not enough, particularly with first year students. You can encourage preparation by:

- specifying reading tasks
  - requiring student to list the main points derived
  - asking them to note the most interesting point and the muddiest point
  - requiring them to prepare one question and a possible answer for discussion
- *Clarify your role*

You can assume a number of roles in a small group session depending your objectives, the size of the group and how the session unfolds: e.g. instructor, facilitator, devil's advocate, neutral chairperson, consultant, counsellor. Whatever role you choose to adopt in a session be aware of the tendency of academics to talk too much.



If you assume the role of an expert who talks for most of the time then the students are likely to be passive and wait for you to give them the answers. In a teacher dominated session the important attributes of cooperative learning, independence, and accepting responsibility for learning are not likely to develop.

Concentrate on both the content (what is learned) and the process (how learning is facilitated) when planning your role.

- ***Clarify ground rules***

Establishing clear ground rules about behaviour provides structure and a sense of order and security for the participants. Ground rules may include:

- everyone arriving on time
- all members will do some preparation
- treat each other with respect, e.g. no put downs
- it's OK to make mistakes.

Negotiate these rules with the group and review them from time to time, making changes if necessary.

- ***Organise appropriate seating arrangements***

Rearrange the furniture, if possible, so that it is more conducive to discussion, e.g. enable making eye contact and observing non-verbal behaviour.

- ***Ensure the safety of participants***

This can be done by providing them protection from personal attacks, humiliation or ridicule, by dealing with students' concerns, by setting tasks within the group's capabilities and by rewarding their contributions.

- ***Plan your sessions***

The first meeting is important for setting the tone and starting off on a relaxed positive note. It should include:

- introductions
- outline of the program for the semester
- clarification of expectations

- finding out the concerns of the group about studying the subject (perhaps by means of a simple checklist) and discussing these at the second session
- establishing ground rules, and
- organising seating arrangements.
- ***Closing the session***

Plan for ways of closing each session and allow time for it. The following are some closing strategies:

- organise a different student each week to record the main points discussed
- ask students to summarise the conclusions reached
- ask each student to reflect on and write down the major points they have learned in the session
- ask them to also note the muddiest points and any outstanding questions which may be dealt with at the next session.
- ***Structure group activities***

Plan to use a variety of activities to add interest and to find out which activities generated enthusiasm and participation:

- brain storming to generate ideas
- snowballing/pyramid—where people start working individually, then in pairs, then in quartets
- rounds—where people sit in a circle, each person makes a brief statement or comment on an issue or problem or has the right to pass
- fishbowls—where half of the group sits in a circle and the rest sit behind and listen and changes places after 7 or 8 minutes
- case studies, simulations and games
- syndicates—where a topic is split into sections and the group divided into teams; each team works on a section of the topic and presents its views
- plenary session to draw conclusions or to review the discussion process
- problem solving session structured to help students identify
  - \* what is the nub of the problem?
  - \* have I met a similar problem before?
  - \* what approaches can I use?
  - \* how should I check the solution?

# Questioning and Listening

Your planning for the small group discussion should include the type of questions that best suit the objectives of the session and the needs of the group. Plan to use (and thus model) a variety of questions illustrated below. Remember the importance of waiting and giving students time to think. If you don't get an immediate response, wait rather than answering a question yourself:

## Categories of questions:

- *Questions of fact*

Concerned with truth or falsity of an issue:

Does something actually exist?

How widespread is this problem?

How much will it cost?

- *Questions of value/worth/judgement*

Is the production of nuclear energy morally defensible?

Is work-based learning worthwhile in higher education?

- *Questions of policy*

What should be the university policy about smoking in the cafeteria?

What can the city council do to promote tourism?

- *Questions of clarification*

What do you mean by...?

Are you saying that...?

Could you give an example of...?

- *Questions that probe assumptions*

What are you assuming?

Do you think that assumption is warranted?

Are there any hidden assumptions in that question?

- ***Questions that probe reasons and evidence***

What are your reasons for saying that?

Do you agree with those reasons?

Is that evidence good enough?

Do you think that source is an appropriate authority?

- ***Questions about personal meaning and interpretation***

What does that image suggest to you?

How do you interpret that paragraph?

What do you think are the most important ideas in that article?

- ***Questions about viewpoints and perspectives***

Are there any other beliefs on this subject possible?

Are there circumstances in which your view might be incorrect?

Can you try to see the issue from their point of view?

- ***Questions that probe implications and consequences***

What would be the likely consequences of behaving like that?

Do you think you might be jumping to conclusions in this case?

- ***Questions that seek closure***

What are the points we have discussed?

What conclusions have we reached?

In what way have your perspectives been challenged or changed?

What concepts were developed, analysed, and applied?

What new meanings or understandings were constructed and conveyed?

## **Common errors in questioning**

Tick those errors that you have experienced:

- Asking too many questions at once
- Asking a question and answering it yourself
- Asking questions only of the brightest and most likeable students
- Asking a difficult question too early

- Asking irrelevant questions
- Always asking the same type of questions
- Asking questions in a threatening way
- Not giving time to think
- Ignoring answers
- Failing to build on answers

## Levels of listening

Listening is the companion skill of questioning. Four levels of listening have been identified (Brown 1986):

- (i) Skim listening — little more than awareness that someone is talking
- (ii) Surveying — building a mental map of what is being said, identifying key points
- (iii) Search listening — active searching for specific pieces of information.
- (iv) Study listening — the deepest level of listening, going beyond the information given to hidden meanings of the content and patterns of thinking of the speaker.

Discuss the importance of listening with your small group and reinforce it with a listening exercise.

Organise students to work in pairs and decide who will be 'the listener' and who will be the 'explainer'.

- The explainer explains a tiny segment of subject for three minutes.
- Listener may ask questions but may not take notes. Then reverse roles.
- When both have been listener and explainer, the first listener reports back what she/he was told.
- The explainer should correct any major errors or omissions.
- Then reverse the procedure.

Discuss with students any difficulties they encountered in listening. Did the level of listening change? Did the exercise affect the way they explained?

## Maximising Student Participation

- Generate interest by facilitating student ownership of the topic for discussion, e.g. ask students to propose topics which are then written on the board, briefly discussed and a topic selected by the group.
- Agree upon procedures for discussion, e.g. introduction of relevant information, keeping on track, and encouraging expression of individual differences.
- Help students clarify the topic, e.g. is it concerned with matters of fact, interpretation, value or policy?
- Encourage sufficient examination of issues before drawing conclusions.
- Foster critical thinking by asking appropriate questions and encouraging scrutiny of evidence, ideas, and opinions.
- Encourage focus on the goal of discussion rather than on individuals.
- Develop group cohesion, e.g. by encouraging cooperation not competition, by making participants feel at ease, by showing interest and giving full attention to contributions.
- Listen attentively and speak less than the students, e.g. don't feel compelled to speak after each student comment.
- Include periodic reviews of progress in the discussion.
- Allocate one or two students to write a summary of the discussion for distribution to the group to reinforce ownership and provide a reference for group members.

## Difficulties and Possible Solutions

### *1. Problem*

Students have not done the preparation or do not know what they should have done.

### *Possible Solution*

Clarify objectives/topics of each session and how students should prepare for each one (e.g. what reading analytically and critically involves). Make your requirements realistic relative to students' other learning commitments. Provide advice on how to take part productively in seminars/tutorials. Try providing

specific tasks to individuals or small groups and at the start of the session, review what preparation has been done.

## ***2. Problem***

The whole group is silent and unresponsive.

### ***Possible Solution***

Break up the group into smaller structures; use 'buzz group' or 'rounds' to get people talking. A 'buzz group' is a pair or three students quickly formed to discuss a topic for a short period. A 'round' involves each person in the group speaking briefly in turn before anyone speaks a second time.

## ***3. Problem***

Discussion goes off the topic and becomes irrelevant.

### ***Possible Solution***

Set clear objectives, themes or questions for discussion. Display these for everyone to see on the board at each session. Say, "I'm wondering how this relates to today's topic?" Seek agreement on what should or should not be discussed.

## ***4. Problem***

Members do not listen to each other or build on previous contributions.

### ***Possible Solution***

Point out what is happening. Establish or review the ground rules about behaviour during discussion. Use a 'round' to give everyone a chance to speak. Use a listening exercise to draw attention to the need for listening to each other (e.g. students in pairs tell each other their initial reactions to the reading set for the week; each person then reports the other's comments to another pair of students who do the same).

## ***5. Problem***

Two students dominate the discussion.

### ***Possible Solution***

Support and bring others in. Give the dominant students a task, such as note taking or summarising the discussion at the end. Use structures such as rounds, buzz groups and 'pyramids' to take away their audience. 'Pyramids' (also known as 'snowball' groups) involve students first working alone for a few minutes, then in pairs, then in fours or sixes, and finally as whole group in a plenary overview session which can take the form of pooling points from each group in turn.

## ***6. Problem***

Some students talk among themselves or behave in a distracting or confronting way while other students or you are talking.

### ***Possible Solution***

Review the ground rules established for discussion. Give each person a copy. Speak to those involved individually after the session addressing their behaviour and its effects. Photocopy page 65 of the UNE Handbook, on misconduct and penalties, and give a copy to the each of the offending students saying, "I would like you to read this before the next session".

# **Assessing Student Participation In Tutorials And Discussions**

## **Why assess participation?**

At UNE, the development of oral communication skills is an expected attribute of graduates and discussion is also a major learning strategy in many units, particularly those with a professional orientation. Research indicates that students' perceptions of assessment are critical factors in influencing their approaches to learning (Gibbs, 1992; Ramsden, 1992). Assessment of participation is, therefore, likely to motivate students to prepare for and to contribute to discussions in order to obtain a good mark.



## Criteria for assessing participation

These need to be made explicit for the students so that they will know what is expected of them. Ideally, you could develop the criteria collaboratively with them during the first few sessions in the semester so that they are involved in selecting and justifying the relevance of the proposed criteria and thus have a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for their own learning.

The following criteria have been used in assessing participation in an education unit at UNE:

- contributes questions for discussion on set readings
- helps select focus questions
- helps keep discussion on topic
- helps to link discussion to set readings
- provides critical analysis of concepts and arguments
- identifies assumptions
- willing to listen to others
- respects different viewpoints
- responds to the views of others
- builds upon others' contributions
- encourages clarification of ideas
- accepts valid criticism
- suggests ways to resolve problems
- helps to summarise the discussion.

Additional criteria used in a law unit at UNSW (Nightingale et al. 1996) include the following:

- provides constructive criticism
- clarity of contribution
- provides comparative insights
- facilitates further discussion
- is not domineering
- is courteous and tactful

Attendance at tutorials is not one of the criteria although it is a prerequisite for participation and may be an indicator of interest and a positive attitude.

## **How to assess?**

A self-assessment form which lists the criteria for participation can be constructed for students' use to monitor and judge their own performance on a five-point scale. The same form could be used by the discussion facilitator to assess students' performance at four-week intervals and at the end of the semester. The results of the facilitator's assessments could be compared with students' self-assessments and opportunity provided for discussion with them and for negotiating of discrepancies. Peer assessment could also be used rather than teacher assessment, as peer and self-assessments have been found to be fairly consistent with teacher assessments ((Nightingale et al. 1996).

A weighting of 10% to 25% could be allocated to participation, depending on unit objectives. Individual marks may be arrived at by combination of adding up several assessments by the facilitator and moderating these with students' self-assessments.

## **Possible side effects**

Anxiety induced by assessment may inhibit some students' participation. This could be alleviated by the use of self-assessment only and/or negotiation over the final mark.

Competitiveness and the urge to make as many contributions as possible could be reduced by clarifying that quantity is not used as a criterion for assessment. If the group is large, forming smaller sub-groups would provide more opportunities for participation.

Students who are not fluent in spoken English may feel at a disadvantage. The inclusion of a criterion such as "progress in participation for those with initial difficulty", the use of directed questions and the forming of smaller sub-groups could alleviate disadvantage.

# Assessing Your Own Performance

Ask a trusted colleague, or ask your students, or honestly assess your own performance (perhaps by audio taping a session) in conducting a small group session using the following criteria on a scale of Strongly agree (SA), Agree (A) Neutral (N), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD)

During this session the group facilitator:

- |  |    |   |   |   |    |
|--|----|---|---|---|----|
| • clearly communicated the objectives of the session | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| • gave clear and understandable explanations         | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| • was enthusiastic                                   | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| • was well prepared for the class                    | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| • was sympathetic to the students' needs             | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| • was prepared to answer questions                   | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| • encouraged students to think                       | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| • gave students opportunity to express their views   | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| • had open and friendly relationship with students   | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| • did not dominate the discussion                    | SA | A | N | D | SD |

Reflect upon your assessment of your performance. Identify what you think are your weaknesses and develop an action plan for improvement over the next few week and months. Who and what will provide the help you need? You may need to discuss this with a trusted friend or colleague. Remember not to be too hard on yourself. Developing professionally is a lifelong activity.

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