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Snippets on Small Group Learning

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Small group learning is a useful educational approach although it is not an easy option to choose. The group work has to be carefully planned, may require the production of stimulus or resource material and frequently requires a facilitator. In addition the group function and the learning that takes place needs to be assessed and evaluated. Facilitatory skills are important and require the teacher to ensure that both the task is achieved and the group functioning is maintained.

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The problem

Some teachers are just not aware of the advantages of using small group teaching:

'My trainees already get lectures as well as a variety of other opportunities for self study and on-the-job learning. Why use yet another method of teaching? What has this method to offer?'

The solution

Working with other individuals in a small group is an educational approach to learning that has many advantages over solitary and other methods of learning.

Teachers need to be made more aware of these advantages.

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Introducing small group work

Small group work is one of a variety of different educational strategies that may be used to facilitate learning.



It may form the basis of an educational programme or may complement other educational approaches – for example the lecture or independent work.

Small group work may focus on one single outcome or may include a variety of diverse outcomes.

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Examples of learning outcomes suited to small group work

- To ensure knowledge/understanding of a topic
- To make aware beliefs and views
- To increase ability to problem solve and reason
- To enhance empathy and sensitivity towards patients
- To increase responsibility for learning
- To develop interpersonal skills
- To develop team working skills
- To develop practical skills.



Note...

Each broad outcome can encompass a wide range of specific learning outcomes, eg to develop interpersonal skills may include the sub-outcomes: to orally communicate effectively, to present material in an understandable manner and to be able to justify a point of view.



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We have already mentioned that learning in small groups has many advantages over other methods of learning. Here are some specific examples:

- Small group learning allows students to develop problem solving, interpersonal, presentational and communication skills. These are generic skills that are beneficial in any walk of life. These generic skills are difficult to develop in isolation and require feedback and interaction with other individuals.
- Small group learning allows individuals to question and challenge assumptions and to develop a deeper understanding of a topic. A deeper understanding will facilitate the application of what is learned in the future and in novel situations encountered.

Team working is a further generic skill that can be developed through the small group approach. Such skills cannot be achieved other than in a team 'small group' setting. In a healthcare setting the ability to work as a member of a team is paramount.

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Small group learning in action

We will look at the role of the facilitator and how to run small group sessions.

**Role of the
facilitator**

**Running
small groups**

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Role of the facilitator

Running small groups



Although there are many advantages of small group work, the key to successful learning lies with the teacher - the facilitator. The facilitator must adopt two major roles:

Group maintenance role

This requires the ability to observe what is happening in the group in order to ensure the group functions well together

The task role

This role is to ensure the group completes the tasks set for them.

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Role of the facilitator

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Group maintenance role

To ensure that a group functions effectively the facilitator must observe what is happening.

- Are all group members participating; who isn't ?
- Is anyone dominating?
- Is anyone undermining the group process?
- Who holds the power?



Note...

So that group members work well together, adequate introductions should be made and conflicts resolved as and when they arise.

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Role of the facilitator

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Task role

The facilitator must also ensure that the group

- completes the tasks set for them
- achieves the stated outcomes for the session.

Once the group members are clear about the expectations, the facilitator must ensure they remain focused on the task.



Can you think of ways in which the facilitator can do this?

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Role of the facilitator

Running small groups



Task role

To ensure the group members remain focused on the task, the facilitator should:

- explain the task
- question understanding
- keep time
- clarify and summarise progress
- close the session.



Note...

The facilitator may also provide appropriate stimulus material and resource material so that the group can achieve the task(s) set.

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Role of the
facilitator

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Small group methods

There are various types of small group methods. Which you choose depends on the learning outcomes expected. Here are three popular techniques.

Tutorial: This commonly used technique relies on the teacher developing stimulus questions which the group should work on before discussing and sharing their findings.

Role play: Students enact a scenario either in their expected role or as the recipients of their role. Enacting their role gives the student an appreciation of what the situation is like, eg breaking bad news to a patient. Being the recipient gives insight into how patients may be affected.

Brain storming: This technique is used for creative requirements where ideas are sought. It is important that students feel comfortable enough to share strange ideas without the danger of ridicule.

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Role of the
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Practical issues

Can you think of some of the other issues that need to be addressed prior to running the small group sessions?

Group composition: Do you want a gender balance or a mix of skills or experiences?

Group size: A number between 6 and 12 is ideal.

Staff support: Ensure that you have enough well trained staff to facilitate the groups.

Accommodation: Ensure you have appropriate rooms for the small group sessions. The room should allow the group to work in a circle (allowing all participants to see and hear each other). Make sure the room is not too hot or cramped, is well lit and has appropriate visual aids if required, ie flip chart, overhead projector.

Resources: If students are expected to research a topic ensure that adequate copies of resource material, books and articles, models or patients, are available.

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Examples in practice

You might find this table helpful in your teaching. It outlines a variety of outcomes and provides suggestions on how they can be achieved.

Outcome expected	Type of small group	Resources required	Key issues to consider
Increase in knowledge base	Tutorial; seminar; Problem-based learning	Stimulus material, eg patient cases. Resource material for researching topic	Ensuring students do the preparation work. Let students give the answers
Awareness of attitudinal issues	Role play; free discussion group	Stimulus material, eg scripts, is required to ensure adequate briefing of students	Beware that emotions may be heightened and disagreements may ensue
Development of team working skills	Most methods, especially group work around cases	Group task	Beware of group dynamics
Enhanced creativity	Brain storming	Flip chart or blackboard	Supporting, trusting environment is required
Development of clinical skills	Demonstration and practice of clinical skills	Patients or models	Consider the implications of using real patients - consider using simulated patients

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Group dynamics

Groups go through a series of defined stages: forming, storming, norming and finally performing. Being aware of these stages should give you the confidence to accept that any difficulties and conflicts that arise are normal and help you to ensure the group reaches the performing stage.

Forming

An exploratory stage, where members of a group attempt to discover more about other members. This may be an awkward stage characterised by silence.

Storming

Members of the group may confront each other. Open conflict may become evident.

Norming

The formulation of rules, in an attempt to minimise any further conflict. The rules are specific to each group. During this stage students may start to conform to the formulated rules.

Performing

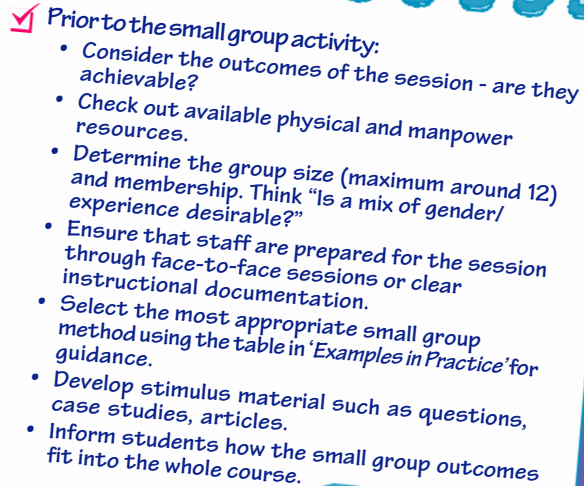
The group focuses on the task. This is a productive period.

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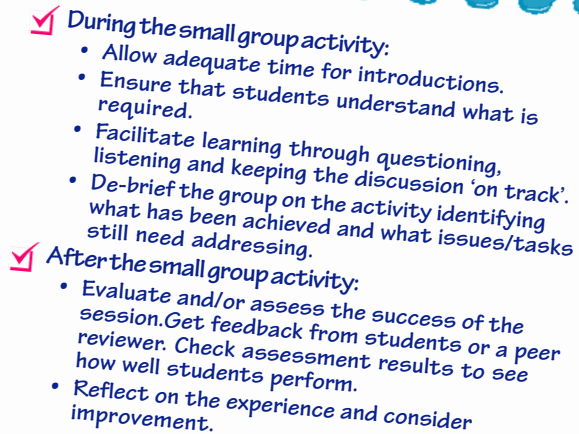
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- ✓ **Prior to the small group activity:**
 - Consider the *outcomes of the session* - are they achievable?
 - Check out available *physical and manpower resources*.
 - Determine the *group size (maximum around 12) and membership*. Think "Is a mix of gender/experience desirable?"
 - Ensure that *staff are prepared for the session through face-to-face sessions or clear instructional documentation*.
 - Select the most appropriate *small group method* using the table in 'Examples in Practice' for guidance.
 - Develop *stimulus material* such as questions, case studies, articles.
 - Inform students how the *small group outcomes* fit into the whole course.

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- ✓ **During the small group activity:**
- Allow adequate time for introductions.
 - Ensure that students understand what is required.
 - Facilitate learning through questioning, listening and keeping the discussion 'on track'.
 - De-brief the group on the activity identifying what has been achieved and what issues/tasks still need addressing.
- ✓ **After the small group activity:**
- Evaluate and/or assess the success of the session. Get feedback from students or a peer reviewer. Check assessment results to see how well students perform.
 - Reflect on the experience and consider improvement.

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Other learning opportunities

There are many books and articles on using small groups as a method of learning. These can be broadly categorised into those detailing the *theoretical underpinning* of small groups, those looking at the *running of small groups* and those which give *practical tips*. Ensure that you access books/articles that are relevant for your stage of development and application of small group learning.



Click the appropriate button if you wish to find out more

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Jacques D (1986). *Learning in Small Groups*. Second Edition. London, Kogan Page

This is a comprehensive book for teachers who will be using small group work as a major teaching strategy. It offers the theoretical underpinning to small groups as well as considering delivery.

Elwyn G, Greenhalgh T, Macfarlane F (2001). *Groups: a guide to small group work in health care, management, education and research*.

A comprehensive book starting with 'What is a small group?' and then concentrating on specific contexts where small groups are applicable. The chapter on 'When groups go wrong' was particularly helpful.

Tiberius RG (1999). *Small group teaching: A troubleshoot guide*.

As the title suggests this book concentrates on 'When things go wrong'. It consists of three parts, group goals, group interaction, group monitoring and emotion. An especially good read for anyone having problems in their small group work.

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Steinert Y (1993). Twelve tips for using role-play in clinical teaching. *Medical Teacher* 15 (4): 283-291.

A brief but useful article giving tips to using role-play.

Crosby J (1997). *Learning in small groups*. AMEE Guide No 8, Association for Medical Education in Europe.

This guide introduces the theory underpinning small group work and the benefits of this learning strategy but is essentially a practical guide.

Walton H (1983). *Small group methods in medical teaching*, Fifth Edition, ASME Medical Education Booklet No 1. Dundee, Association for the Study of Medical Education.

A booklet focused on the use of small group methods in medical education. A useful resource for planning and delivering small group sessions.

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Centre for Medical Education (1997) Small Group Teaching. *Unit TL:4 in the Diploma in Medical Education*, Centre for Medical Education, University of Dundee, Dundee

Why not build on your learning and gain accreditation towards a postgraduate Certificate/Diploma/Masters in Medical Education? All can be studied through distance learning. Small group teaching is one of the modules that can be studied towards any one of these qualifications.

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The international database TimeLIT (Topics in Medical Education Literature) www.timelit.org gives free access to articles relating to education in medicine, dentistry, nursing, patient health and the professions allied to medicine.

Other useful websites for those interested in Medical Education are that of the Association for the Study of Medical Education www.asme.org.uk and that of the Association for Medical Education in Europe www.amee.org

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Units

The units below cover topics relevant to small group learning. You might wish to take a look at them.

**Questioning
& Listening**

Aims & Objectives



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roup activity

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Think about small groups you have been part of. These may be educational or social. Think about how the group developed. What was it like when you first met? What difficulties did you encounter? Also think about what made the group work well or badly. Reflect on past experiences you have had in small groups and consider how you will use these experiences in future whether as a group member or facilitator.

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Small group work is an ideal approach for the development of the social and interpersonal skills necessary for good communication and teamwork.

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