Benefits of teaching in small classes

Learning in small-group contexts enhances students’ overall learning experiences in several ways. For example, it can:

- address gaps in students’ knowledge
- allow students to discover and engage with a range of perspectives, ideas and backgrounds
- assist students in clarifying their attitudes to and ideas about the subject matter, as they test their own ideas and attitudes against those of others
- help students develop a sense of academic rigour and a willingness to share ideas
- provide opportunities for students to receive feedback on their learning
- encourage students towards self-directed and independent learning
- help students develop skills in critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, interpersonal relations, teamwork, team leadership and lifelong learning skills, which are all highly valued by employers.

Challenges of teaching in small classes

While challenges in small group teaching are not as obvious as in Large Classes, this context is not entirely problem free. The most common frustrations are:

- the lack of diverse perspectives to draw on
- the lack of opportunities to form groups and engage in other active and peer learning activities; this can lead to repetitive and dull learning and teaching experiences
- the tendency to overuse teacher-centred strategies and turn small group teaching into mini-lectures
- more attention being directed to the lecturer, who is expected to fill the gaps and keep the class moving.

How can I address the challenges?
Our 3-page printable resource discusses useful Ideas for Effective Small Group learning and teaching.

The Tutorials page discusses a range of Student-Centred active learning strategies you might integrate into your small classes.

While small group learning and teaching is commonly associated with tutorials and seminars, it may also include learning and teaching contexts such as Studio, practicals and Laboratory teaching.

The Teaching Small Groups page within the Diversity Toolkit section of this site gives you some ideas about making your smaller classes inclusive of, for example, international students and students with disabilities.

Further resources

- Small Group Teaching by David Jaques, Oxford Brookes University