Ideas for effective small-group learning and teaching

In the first meeting of a small group:

Negotiate or brainstorm with your students the expectations and ground rules that will guide the group's discussions and activities during the semester. You could even record these expectations and ground rules and display them every time the group meets. Ground rules might cover:

- preparation for classes
- timely arrival at and departure from classes
- individual contributions to and participation in classes
- respect for everybody's ideas and backgrounds
- topics that might make people uncomfortable
- your role as teacher/tutor

Also in the first meeting:

- ask students to discuss their previous experiences of small-group learning. What worked for them and what didn't? Why?
- use an icebreaker to help students feel comfortable with you and each other. You could try a name game to help people remember names.
- to help you remember people's names in subsequent classes, draw a map of the room and pass it around, asking people to write their names in the appropriate spaces so you can refer to it during class.
- in the first or subsequent classes when appropriate, use a questionnaire or other activity to check students' prior knowledge and understanding of the topic area

Use language that students can understand.

Articulate clear aims and learning outcomes for each small-group session.

- Clear statements of aims and outcomes will not prevent the class from achieving unexpected outcomes, but they will help students understand what they need to do to learn. They will also help you to identify or devise learning activities that will most benefit students in each class.

Experiment with different class structures and activities

- For example, role-plays, impromptu or organised debates, oral presentations or reports, fishbowl discussions, brainstorming sessions, and so on. Choose structures and activities that support your aims and outcomes for that particular class.
- At regular points in the semester, ask for anonymous feedback from students on group processes and group dynamics – students could note a couple of points and drop them in a box as they leave the room. This can help you identify and address any problems that you're not aware of.

At the end of small-group learning and teaching sessions:

- use minute papers to gain feedback on students' learning and level of understanding. At the beginning of the next class after the minute paper, take five minutes to follow up on outstanding issues.
- summarise the main points at the end of each class or, better still, ask students to summarise.

Make the most of the physical environment. If possible:

- consider whether students really need to work behind desks
- don't sit behind a desk yourself
- rearrange the room to encourage maximum communication among students – a circle or semicircle of chairs is most effective
- change your seating position in every class and encourage students to do the same
- control disruptive external factors, such as noise, heat, light, and so on.
Ideas for better communication and participation in small groups

If your small group feels too large to accommodate full and equal participation from all members, consider:

- splitting it into subgroups for certain tasks or topics
- using a pyramid structure – begin by asking students to consider an issue individually, then ask them to form pairs to discuss it, then groups of four to summarise ideas, and so on.

Monitor how much you contribute to discussions

- Wait before you jump in to fill silences in the room, and avoid minilectures. Many people find it helpful to videotape themselves teaching small groups so they can become more aware of their own behaviours.

Assist students to communicate with each other rather than always addressing themselves to you by encouraging them to:

- ask each other questions
- clarify each other's points
- build on each other's contributions
- give examples of other people's ideas.

Encourage students to think for themselves by:

- deflecting their questions to you. Instead of answering, say, "What do others think?"
- not correcting them straight away if they're not on the right track. Instead, try saying something like, "Are there other ways you could think about that?" "How does that fit with what you were saying earlier?" "What about x consideration?" "What do others think of this proposition?"

Handle an overly dominant student by:

- using non-verbal communication to discourage the student – for example, look or turn away
- glancing around the whole class – this opens the conversation to everybody and allows you to monitor the reactions of others
- overtly encouraging or asking other students to contribute
- asking the student to wait while the class hears from others
- asking the student to take a recording role for a while
- establishing rules for contributions – students must wait for a certain number of contributions before they speak again or they can only speak for a certain number of minutes at a time
- speaking to the student outside class about her/his behaviour – this is probably a last resort.

Handle a student who does not participate by:

- using non-verbal communication to encourage the student – for example, draw her/him in with hand gestures
- watch the student for responses – for example, "Jai, you smiled then what were you thinking?"
- asking the student direct questions
- positively reinforcing answers the student gives
- breaking the class into pairs or subgroups, which the student might find less intimidating.

Encourage students to clarify their ideas:

- by actively listening and reflecting, rather than always questioning – for example, when a student says something, reflect the idea back by saying, "Chris, it sounds like you think/feel...".

Use questions appropriately:

- try to avoid overly academic, complex questions at the start of a class
- try to avoid loaded questions that suggest you have a particular opinion
- ask questions that encourage students to engage in higher-order thinking – for example, "How does that relate to what Jo was saying before?" "What happens if we combine that theory with this application?"
- use closed or convergent questions when you want straightforward, factual answers – for example, "Has everyone done the reading?" "Did everyone get x as the answer for problem y?" "In what year did ... ?" "What theorists proposed y?"
• use open-ended or divergent questions when you want to encourage students to elaborate or further pursue their ideas – for example, "What were your responses to this text?" "What did you think about ... ?" "How would you handle that situation?"

Respond positively when a student answers your question
• this does not necessarily mean endorsing an incorrect answer, but acknowledging the student's effort and making the most of her/his contribution.

Online resources
Flinders University Teaching for Learning, Tutorial Resources.
Honolulu Community College Faculty Development, Answering and Asking Questions.
Honolulu Community College Faculty Development, Effective Techniques of Questioning.
Honolulu Community College Faculty Development, Types of Questions Based on Bloom's Taxonomy.
Honolulu Community College Faculty Development, Difficult Behaviours in the Classroom.

E-mail an idea
Have you developed an idea for small-group learning and teaching? Why not share it by e-mailing it to lt@unsw.edu.au.

Document version: BA040508