

## Small Group Facilitation: Why and How?

### I. What advantages does teaching/learning in a small group offer?

- SG discussions can foster **higher-level cognitive skills**, promote **greater retention** and transfer of knowledge by allowing learners to:
  - Construct knowledge by connecting new information to what they already know
  - Be actively involved in learning activities that are motivating and cause them to struggle with learning
  - Practice applying their ideas in different contexts
  - Provide opportunities for learners to clarify, refine, and present their ideas
  - Apply concepts and practice skills
- SGs promote teamwork rather than competition (obviously important to learners as future health care providers)
- SGs can increase motivation by promoting learner participation/involvement
- SGs can facilitate changes in attitudes due to the input of group members with different perspectives (difficult to foster attitude change using lectures alone!)
- SGs allow teachers to diagnose gaps in learning, and provide helpful feedback

### II. What are some challenges in teaching/learning in a small group?

- Teaching using SGs is inherently more 'costly' in terms of time and people power
- Determination of amount and level of content to be covered
- Quality of teaching can be inconsistent
- Group dynamics can be a challenge to manage
- Can't guarantee consistency in learning
- Time management

### III. Small group learning is MOST effective when:

- The *expectations* are clear and the group engages in determining whether expectations are being met
- The *environment* is collaborative and 'safe'
- Learners are *actively engaged*
- Content is *covered* in a *timely* manner
- Content is at appropriate level and builds on prior knowledge

### IV. Tips for effective facilitation in each of the above areas:

#### 1. Establishing expectations

- In your first session:
  - Explain the purpose of the group, your role and expectations of learners, elicit their expectations (can accomplish all of these things with a carefully planned introduction)
  - Discuss and agree on "ground rules" – examples:
    - Every member of the group is responsible for making sure the group works
    - Everyone should listen carefully to others
    - No one is allowed to dominate the conversation
    - Anyone can call for help from others in the group
    - Rotate roles among learners (time keeper, scribe, etc)
- In every session:

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- Identify specific learning objectives and desired outcomes – content and process
- Close with a check in “How did things go today? How can we do better next time?”

### 2. Promotion of a collaborative and ‘safe’ learning environment

- Show interest in the learners
- Use effective interpersonal skills (eye contact, kindness, courtesy, respect)
- Demonstrate that all opinions and ideas are valued, even if not correct; thank them for their contributions
- Provide non-judgmental, specific feedback
- When a difficulty is encountered, help the group be aware of what it is doing or not doing by voicing your observations (“This side of the room seems quiet today;” “I’m noticing that there are only a couple of learners doing the talking;” “How are people feeling?”)
- Don’t jump to conclusions about learners’ behaviors or actions – consider formulating a differential diagnosis and approach student in a neutral manner (exemplified in the video clips by the different styles used by Dr. Badger and Dr. Doe in managing the student Vic).
- Be respectful of different cultural, ethnic and gender sensitivities.

### 3. Active engagement of all learners

- Set context (why is this content important?) and activate prior knowledge; ideal to do this in the introduction
- Be enthusiastic about the content and about the learning process
- Encourage all learners to get involved and take different roles
  - Pre-determine learner roles, pre-assign tasks, break into smaller groups
- Ask learners to define terminology, use the board, answer each others’ questions
- Explain difficult concepts only after learners have struggled with them first
- Don’t respond immediately to questions! – allow 3-5 seconds then:
  - Ask what s/he thinks
  - Ask if anyone else can answer
  - Ask if anyone else can find the answer (can it be looked up?)
  - Answer the question after all other avenues are exhausted
- Use non-verbal cues to encourage participation (e.g. maintain eye contact, smile and nod expectantly)

### 4. Cover the content (in a timely manner)

- Be prepared, both in terms of the content and discussion logistics
  - Identify the learning objectives for each group, if they are not already provided (What do you want the learners to be able to do?)
  - Determine the amount of material that can reasonably be discussed in allotted time, provide a time line to the learners
- Periodically summarize or ask a learner to do so
- Be honest if you can’t answer the question; you will find out and answer later.
- Keep the discussion focused: relate details to the larger picture; some details may need to be ignored in order to meet the stated objectives (“This is a really interesting question, but I want to be sure we complete our objectives. Do you think further discussion will be useful?”)
- Help the group re-focus (“What do we need to know to go forward?”)

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### 5. Tips for Managing Group Dynamics

- Leaders should be AWARE of their group's dynamics and to be prepared to manage them appropriately, jumping in if necessary so the group's learning is not impeded.

#### (a) Engaging quiet students to participate:

- Identify if student is quiet because they are shy, vs. if they are unprepared, confused by the material, or aloof and uninterested.
- Encourage their participation in a non-threatening manner; avoid singling them out, cold-calling on them to answer a specific question or putting them on the spot.
- Ask them to read a case or question out loud.
- Ask if those who have not yet contributed have anything to add to the discussion.
- Give them a lead: "Do you agree?" "How would this fit with your own experience?"
- When they do contribute, reinforce and support it.
- Break class into smaller groups of 3-4 that require participation of all, and may allow quiet students to feel more comfortable contributing.

#### (b) Responding to students who dominate the discussion:

- Open up discussion to larger group, e.g. "That's an interesting point, what do others in the group think?"
- Use non-verbal cues to invite others to participate in discussion, avoid eye contact with monopolizer and look to others to contribute.
- Redirect comments and questions from monopolizers to others in the group, avoid 'one-on-one' conversations with monopolizer.
- Meet privately with monopolizer, acknowledge their contributions and ask for their help in encouraging others to participate.

#### (c) Dealing with tangents:

- Defer to later, e.g. "That's an interesting point, but it's out of scope of today's topic. Let's keep focused on the topic at hand, and if time permits we'll come back to that later."
- Make a connection back to the main topic.
- Ask for clarification; politely ask relevance to current case/topic.

#### (d) Managing misinformed and/or headstrong students:

- Clarify misconceptions for entire group; prevent misinformation from being perpetuated.
- Put viewpoint out to entire group - let other students straighten them out.
- Acknowledge that it's OK to have varying viewpoints, and that it's important to examine issues openly.
- Tell them time is short, you'll be glad to discuss later; ask them to accept group viewpoint for the moment.

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### V. Why things go wrong

- Goals unclear
- Process unclear
- Lack of preparation by learners or facilitator
- Facilitator lectures
- Learners do not participate
- Talk dominated by 1-2 learners
- Facilitator ignores emotions expressed by learners
- Discussion is too unfocused
- Too many questions asked at once
- Facilitator too critical of learner contributions
- Facilitator's questions too difficult or vague ("Guess what I'm thinking?")
- Facilitator answers questions immediately
- Facilitator's tone is threatening or demeaning
- Facilitator does not confirm correct answer and learners leave confused
- Content not at appropriate level (too advanced, too easy)

### VI. Basic Format of SG Discussion & Role of Facilitator

- Opening the discussion: Introduction, Welcome, Preview, Context
- Keeping the discussion moving and on target, keeping learners involved
- Summarizing and concluding a discussion, bridging to larger course

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