

Leading a Small Group Discussion/Tutorial University of Maryland School of Medicine

Small group learning is an effective educational method by which learning takes place among a limited number of participants, preferably with no more than 5-8 students per group.

- Small group learning can be found in medical education for two different reasons:
 - o **Social** – provides social contact with peers and teachers as a way of learning with and from each other.
 - o **Educational** - provides an avenue for learning reasoning and problem-solving skills while encouraging leadership skills among group participants.
- Effective small group teaching/learning involves:
 - o Active participation among group members;
 - o A faculty leader who facilitates rather than dominates discussion;
 - o A focus on application of knowledge or problem-solving
- Learning is enhanced when a small group:
 - o Has a non-threatening group climate.
 - o Approaches learning as a team rather than as individual competitors.
 - o Covers content adequately and efficiently.
 - o Is attended by all students and a single, long-term faculty facilitator.
 - o Has students and a faculty facilitator who are prepared.
 - o Has active participation by all.

**Source: A Handbook for Medical Teachers, 4th Edition. 2001 (available in OME Library).*

Some additional thoughts: pertains to small groups in medical education as well as in other settings

Perhaps the most important general question the discussion leader faces is whether his/her role is to direct closely or to mediate loosely the students' contributions in class. Will you try to steer students toward certain agendas or answers? Or will you act more as facilitator, stepping back to let the class set or select goals at the outset, and encouraging them to arrive at their own conclusions in their own ways? Obviously, there is no simple answer. The following was expressed by a preceptor:

As a preceptor, you should talk as little as possible. You are somewhat similar to the referee in basketball, although you may at times be compelled to participate in the play. You should always keep the ball within the bounds prescribed by the reading and lecture material, and you should do everything possible by short verbal directional thrusts to keep the game moving and to obtain full coverage. Sometimes, however, the score becomes

too one-sided, or the action tends to concentrate in one end of the court. Then the preceptor should jump in to rectify.

How do you control the overly talkative student, including the one who tries to capture the sole attention of the preceptor?

You will need to make it clear to the overly talkative one(s) that the floor belongs to everyone. Thank the talkative student for his comments, but then divert the conversation to other members of the class, calling on specific students by name if need be. Ask other members of the class to answer his question. If the student still does not take the hint, talk to him privately. Explain your position clearly: although the student's comments in class are valid and welcome, he must allow others to participate as well. Also stress the fact that listening to other students is an important feature of the discussion format. Because overly talkative students may often be insecure, you want to avoid personally attacking them; tactfully point out the situation and work together toward a solution.

How do you draw out the shy student?

Clearly shy students need extra encouragement to participate in class. If you encounter such students, try to bring them into class discussion by asking questions (easier ones at first to help boost confidence). Encourage students to relate classroom discussions to their own experiences. Also, students will feel more connected to you and the class if you try to make eye contact with them. If you still do not make any headway, talk to the student privately. Explain why class participation is an integral part of the course and that it will count in your final evaluation. Ask if there are reasons why the student does not participate. If there are, you might be able to help by discussing the problem, or you might suggest a range of other resources such as tutoring sessions or an appointment with a Dean or a Director of Studies and, if you are certain that it is appropriate, the University counseling service.

What about the lazy student?

All students must be held to the standards of the class. If a student does not meet these standards -- i.e., arrives at class late, misses classes without an excuse, fails to do the reading and written assignments -- you must meet with that student as soon as possible. If the student needs additional help with the material, suggest a tutor, or invite the student to meet with you during your office hours for extra help. Let the student know that her unpreparedness for class affects the entire class since time is taken away from the prepared students by discussing material that has already been covered in the past. The student's courseload may be too heavy during the current term, in which case the student should take the matter up with a faculty advisor, Director of Studies, or Dean.

How do you respond to the student who keeps challenging you?

If a student is in the habit of disrupting your class by arguing irrelevant points, or challenging everything you say to try to boost his ego, you should talk to the student out of the class during office hours. Be frank. Point out examples of the disruptive style, and try to agree on a solution that you can both live with. The

student may not agree with the general approach of the course (which is okay) but needs to understand that the approach of the course is not likely to change, and that the student should consider adjusting his/her expectations in order to derive some benefit from the course. If a student asks a question in class to which you do not have an answer, don't be afraid to say so and that you will need time to find the answer. If someone asks an irrelevant question that requires a lengthy explanation, suggest some resources, which the student could use to find the answer, or suggest a meeting with you during your office hours. Be firm, but not confrontational.

All of the problem situations above need to be dealt with as quickly as possible so that one or two problem students do not create a problem class, precept, or lab for you. Do not make the mistake of avoiding them in hopes that they will correct themselves. At times you may want to talk to the course head directly about a problem student. The professor may want to meet with the student personally, or talk to the student's advisor, Director of Studies, or Dean of the College. Keep in mind, however, that sometimes you may be waging a losing battle, and after exhausting all attempts to change your teaching strategies, or the student's behavior, you may be forced to concede that the situation is out of your control. Do not despair. In most cases, your efforts will pay off, and you will find that your class as a whole will function better.

<http://www.princeton.edu/~aiteachs/handbook/facilitating.html>