

Using Small Groups to Promote Learning

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One of the important components of learning is the opportunity for active practice and feedback. As classes get larger and larger, the availability of such opportunities grows less and less. One solution to the problem is the use of small groups in the classroom.

Advantages

When students work in small groups, you as the instructor will find:

- a. students will be more likely to participate because a small group is less intimidating and much harder to hide in;
- b. students can learn a great deal from one another without your intervention, provided they are given clear instructions;
- c. the opportunity to work things out in a group can be a good source of motivation, especially for poorer students;
- d. you will be able to devote more time to those students or groups which need special attention;
- e. group solutions to problems are often far superior to individual solutions, a phenomenon known as synergy
- f. students begin to take more responsibility for their own learning, thus freeing the instructor from having to do it all.

You will undoubtedly find more advantages than those just listed, but these can give you an idea about how useful this technique can be.

Disadvantages

Of course, no teaching method is without its disadvantages and small groups are no exception. The primary difficulties with using small groups are:

- a. the activities are very difficult to evaluate for a grade;
- b. group work takes a lot of time in class;

- c. the instructor must be willing to give up control of the class temporarily and not interfere with group work;
- d. the instructor must plan the group activities carefully since he or she will not be in charge every minute;
- e. the instructor must be prepared to cope with the unexpected from the groups;
- f. sometimes one or two groups will not concentrate on the task at hand and will require more careful monitoring;
- g. classroom layouts often work against group structures since they have been designed primarily for lecture classes.

As with the advantages, you will probably find additional disadvantages of groups should you begin using them. On the whole, however, they offer a very attractive alternative to straight lecture in terms of their conformity to the principles of learning.

Types of Groups

Instructors who use groups in their classes have experimented with a wide range of alternative structures from the simplest buzz groups, a two or three minute discussion involving two or three people in a large lecture, to the elaborate designs discussed in the book *Synergogy* by Jane Mouton and Robert Blake (1984: Jossey-Bass, Inc.). The four designs they propose are briefly described in the accompanying table which type of group you choose will depend on the objective of the instruction. For example, most small group techniques focus on higher cognitive skills such as analysis or problem solving; however, the team effectiveness design and the team member teaching design can be used when the objectives are information transfer or factual knowledge. The clarifying attitudes design is aimed at opinions and attitudinal objectives, while the performance judging design can be used with psychomotor skills.

In all small group designs, however, the key to success will be in the instructor's directions to the group. They need to be clear on what they are to be doing. It helps to give the instructions in writing if prior planning is pos-

sible. Written instructions will always be clearer, if only because they can be reread in case of confusion. Sometimes, of course, your small groups will be spontaneous ones, such as buzz groups, where pre-written instructions are unlikely. In those cases, however, a clearly written question put up on the board or an overhead will serve as a reference for the group's work.

The Instructor's Role

The hardest part of using small groups in your teaching is learning the new role you must play. You are no longer the source of all information or control; you must give up that control to the students themselves, at least while they are working. Your primary tasks come before and after the group work. Beforehand you must plan the group activities and construct the instructions so that the task will be clear. You must decide how to structure the groups (randomly, by interest, by skill level, etc.) and arrange the environment to facilitate the group work. After the groups have done their work, you are responsible for the "debriefing," perhaps the most important part of group work. In this period the groups report back to the group at large on their conclusions. It is the instructor's task to highlight the major points being made, to bring out things which weren't considered and, in general, to sum up what was to be learned from the experience. This takes a great deal of skill and concentration and really forces the instructor to know the content thoroughly in order to fit some of the more bizarre group solutions into the course framework without ridiculing the individuals in the group. This can be a challenge worthy of your intellect.

In Summary

Small group work is an excellent alternative to the lecture, especially when higher order cognitive processes need to be practiced. It is fun for the students and a challenge to the instructor. One thing it won't be is boring.

Team Effectiveness Design*

Type of content: Facts, principles, applications where there is a best answer (Ex: Facts about drug effects)

Before class: Students read materials in preparation

- In class:
1. Each student takes an individual quiz.
 2. Students work in teams to answer the quiz questions.
 3. Correct answers are distributed and students score their own and the team's answers
 4. Team computes the following scores"
 - a. high individual score
 - b. low individual score
 - c. team score
 - d. team average
 - e. efficiency score (team-average/perfect-average)
 5. Interpret scores
 6. Critique team work
 7. Retest individually

Clarifying Attitudes Design

Type of content: Attitudes or Evaluation activities (Ex: What should drug laws include?)

Before class: Possible reading but not necessary

- In class:
1. Write a self-description of attitude on same topic
 2. Rank alternative attitude statements according to degree of endorsement and mark the one closest to written description
 3. Team works to rank attitude statements from sound to unsound
 4. Individual reviews own attitude rankings against group
 5. Large group comparison of rankings
 6. Individual re-ranking of attitudes

*These designs are from the work of Jane Mouton and Robert Blake and are discussed in Synergogy (1984: Jossey-Bass, Inc.)

Performance Judging Design

Type of content: Skill or application of knowledge (Eg. Writing a memo)

Before class: Prepare a sample of skill

- In class:
1. Produce sample of skill or application
 2. Team works to develop criteria for judging skill
 3. Team compares their criteria with external criteria
 4. Large group comparison of criteria to come to consensus
 5. Performance samples are judged by other teams and critiques are summarized in written form.
 6. Samples and critiques are returned to participant
 7. Each participant discusses sample and critique with own team
 8. Repeat sample performance and rejudge.

Team Member Teaching Design

Type of content: Information (Ex: Four different theories on development)

Before class: Each student prepares a part of the content

- In class:
1. Each team member teaches his/her content to others
 2. Team summarizes content overall
 3. Individuals take test and score
 4. Team computes the following:
 - a. team average score
 - b. average score on a part for the one who prepared it
 - c. average score on parts for those prepared by others
 5. Critique of team work.

Classroom Structures that Encourage Student Participation

<u>Method</u>	<u>Definition</u>	<u>When Used</u>	<u>Preparation/Procedure</u>	<u>Limitation</u>
Group Discussion	Opportunity for pooling of ideas, experience, and knowledge.	For majority of meetings because of adaptability to greater group participation.	Preplanning to develop discussion outline. Leader encourages every member to participate by guiding the discussion.	Practical with not more than twenty persons. Becomes disorganized without careful planning of material to be covered.
Buzz Groups	Allows for total participation by group members through small clusters of participants, followed by discussion of the entire group.	As a technique to get participation from every individual in the group. Highly adaptable to other group methods.	Prepare one or two questions on the subject to give each group. Divide the members into small clusters of four to six. A leader is chosen to record and report pertinent ideas discussed.	Thought must be given as to the purpose and organization of groups.
Panel Discussion	A discussion in a conversational form among a selected group of persons with a leader, in front of an audience that joins in later.	As a technique to stimulate interest and thinking, and to provoke better discussion.	The leader plans with the four to eight members of the panel. The panel discusses informally without any set speeches. The leader then opens the discussion to the entire group and summarizes.	Can get off beam; personality of speakers may overshadow content; vocal speaker can monopolize program.
Symposium Discussion	A discussion in which the topic is broken into its various phases; each part is presented by an expert or person well informed on that particular phase, in a brief, concise speech.	When specific information is desired	Leader meets with the three or four members of the symposium and plans outline. Participants are introduced and reports are given, group directs questions to proper symposium members, leader summarizes.	Can get off beam; personality of speakers may overshadow content; vocal speaker can monopolize program.
Debate Discussion	A pro and con discussion of a controversial issue. Objective is to convince the audience rather than display skill in attacking the opponent.	In discussing a controversial issue on which there are fairly definite opinions in the group on both sides to bring these differences out into the open in a friendly manner.	Divide the group into sides of pro and con. Each speaker should be limited to a predetermined time followed by rebuttal if desired.	Members are often not objective towards the subject.
Experience Discussion	A small or large group discussion following a report on the main point of a book, article, movie, or life experience.	To present a new point of view or to present issues that will stimulate thought and discussion.	Plan with others participating on how review is to be presented. Then have an open discussion on pertinent issues and points of view as experienced.	Ability of participating members to relate to others and motivate thinking.
Concentric Circle	A small circle of group members form within the larger circle. The inner circle discusses a topic while the role of the outside circle is to listen. The discussion is then reversed.	As a technique to stimulate interest and to provoke good discussion. This is especially good to get more response from a group that is slow in participating.	Leader and planning group work out questions that will be discussed by the concentric circle and then by the larger circle.	Much thought and preparation must be given to the questions for discussion. Room and movable chairs needed.
Reaction Sheet	A method of reacting to ideas in the following ways: Ideas that you question; Ideas that are new to you; Ideas that really "hit home."	As a way to get the group to react. Combine this with other methods.	Prepare topic and reactions sheets. Explain and distribute reaction sheets with the instructions to write as they listen, watch, or read. Follow with group discussion.	Topic should be somewhat controversial.
Phillips 66	This is a spontaneous method where six people share their opinions of a topic for six minutes.	To add spice and variety to methods of presentations.	Define topic of discussion. Count off six people and allow six minutes for discussion. Allow for group discussion or reassignment of six people.	Must be used somewhat flexibly.
Reverse Thinking	Expression of thought by thinking in reverse.	To gain an insight into others' feelings and to see another point of view.	Prepare topic -- explain to group the theory of reverse thinking. Combine with other methods.	A challenge to group members.

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Role Playing	The spontaneous acting out of a situation or an incident by selected members of the group.	As the basis of developing clearer insights into the feelings of people and the forces in a situation which facilitate or block good human relations.	Choose an appropriate situation or problem. Have the group define the roles -- the general characteristics to be represented by each player. Enact the scene. Observe and discuss such things as specific behavior, underlying forces, or emotional reactions.	Group leader must be skilled so that actors will play their roles seriously, without self-consciousness.
Picture Making	A way of bringing out ideas or principles on a topic by means of simple illustrations made by group members on the blackboard or large chart paper.	As a technique to stimulate, interest, thinking, and participation.	Leader and members of planning group select general principles or questions on the topic which would be suitable to illustrate. Leader divides the group into four or five sub-groups. Each sub-group is given a statement or problem to illustrate. After completing the picture making, each group shows and explains the picture. This is followed by discussion.	Instruction must be clear as to the value of picture making and adequate materials supplied.
Brain-Storming	Technique in creative thinking in which group members come up with as many ideas as they can about possible solutions to a problem.	To get new ideas, and release individual potentialities in thinking up ideas.	Leader and members of planning group select suitable problems or questions on the topic selected by the entire group. Procedure: The Leader explains to the group the meaning of brain-storming and the following rules: Judicial (critical) judgements ruled out. Quantity of ideas wanted. The more ideas the better chance of good ones. Free wheeling welcomed. The wilder the idea the better; it's easier to tame them down than to pump them up. Hitchhiking is legitimate. If you can improve on someone else's ideas, so much the better. Leader rings bell when one of the above rules is violated. Recorder lists the ideas. Follow-up -- type list and bring to next meeting to give to members.	To be utilized as only a part of a class.