



## Practical teaching How to lead effective group discussions

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**Small groups give learners the opportunity to share experiences and observations**

An animated group discussion can stimulate thinking, promote deep engagement with subject matter, overcome misunderstandings and motivate learning. This is possible, in part, because learners in effective small groups are actively involved in the process of learning: articulating what they know, wrestling with the limits of their understanding, and engaging with others while seeking solutions to a problem. Small groups give learners the opportunity to share experiences and observations, ask questions, get feedback, and learn from their peers. Their active role in the learning process allows them to take more

responsibility for their own learning. Because learners work together, group discussions can also foster collaborative and interactive skills, which is good preparation for future team work.

Within medical education, a wide variety of discussion formats are used, including problem-based learning, discussion of problem sets and cases, project-oriented learning, and clinical skills development. Although the structure and purpose of these groups vary, all require effective facilitation skills on the part of the teacher. The role of the small group leader is NOT to lecture, but to listen, question, make visible

and challenge underlying assumptions, encourage balanced discussion, allow silences, and speak judiciously. Mastery of content is not sufficient to ensure a successful small group; attention must also be paid to learning climate, group process, and the concerns, interests, and experiences of the learners.

Small groups that promote active discussion require teachers who: prepare for their group facilitation role; preview the content of the discussion; actively involve all participants in the discussion while monitoring group process; cover the content; and summarise the discussion.



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## PREPARATION

Most faculty members spend far less time preparing for a discussion than they do for a lecture. Yet the success of a group discussion is dependent upon adequate preparation, including careful consideration of content, learners, and process. Great teachers understand their content well enough to convey essential concepts clearly to learners at a variety of levels and are able to utilise common misunderstandings as instructional tools for stimulating deeper understanding of content. The essential planning skill is to trim and organise key concepts and to determine what can reasonably be discussed in the limited time available.

An equally important task is understanding the learners' prior experiences and current learning needs. If connections can be made between the experiences of the group members and the subject matter, the exploration of the

topic becomes more immediate and significant. Questions to consider are: What experiences have group members had with the topic? What have been learners' experiences with this kind of group and learning format? Is the discussions session part of a larger course? What activities will be concurrent with the group?

Since discussions can only work effectively if there is a common ground of preparatory reading or experience, handouts or syllabuses should be provided in advance, allowing learners to review the material and prepare for the discussion.

The next planning task is to decide how to engage the learners in processing the concepts. Teachers should identify a set of instructional strategies (e.g. questions, learning tasks) for each segment of the discussion and estimate how long each segment will take. This will ensure all of the content will be covered

effectively. Since the trajectories of small group discussions are inherently unpredictable, it is difficult to foresee the exact flow of a discussion or plan for the vicissitudes of group dynamics. Anticipating this uncertainty, a teacher can prepare for a group discussion by exploring multiple lines of inquiry and developing a repertoire of teaching strategies to hold in reserve in case the initial plan does not adequately engage the learners.

## PREVIEW

There are four tasks to be accomplished during the introductory phase of a group discussion. First, leaders should introduce themselves, including their expertise and interest in the topic, and have all group members introduce themselves. This is particularly important if it is the first or only session of a group. Second, a review and preview should be provided, connecting prior learning to the topic at hand and



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describing the objectives and processes to be used during the session. Sometimes it is helpful to write the objectives on the board, so that as the group progresses its members are aware of what remains to be covered. Third, the leader needs to create a positive learning climate that encourages participation by establishing a friendly and non-judgmental atmosphere and by setting ground rules or expectations for group behaviour. Finally, the leader has to capture the attention of the students and launch the discussion, which can be done through the use of a compelling case, startling statistic or surprising finding.

## INVOLVEMENT

Instructors are responsible for actively engaging learners and managing group process as well as covering the content objectives of the group. Ideally, they want to create small groups where there is constant interchange, and learners feel comfortable and secure enough to test and share ideas with their peers. To actively involve learners, teachers should be enthusiastic about their topic, employ a variety of strategies to promote participation, and skill-

fully use questions and silences to prompt thinking and engagement.

### Enthusiasm

The strongest correlate of student ratings of overall teaching effectiveness is enthusiasm. Enthusiastic teachers engender excitement for learning, infuse the discussion with energy, inspire learning, and engage learners by capturing their hearts as well as their minds.

### Participation

Encouraging active and balanced learner participation in discussion is a major task of the instructor. It is their responsibility to keep the discussion rolling, encourage the more silent group members to speak, and keep some learners from dominating. The challenge for teachers is to engage all learners and keep them talking to each other. Strategies for promoting active involvement include:

- **Subgrouping.** Create subgroups, assign learners a task or problem to solve, and then have them report back to the whole group.
- **Quick write.** Have students spend two to five minutes writing down their thoughts about a particular question,

case or issue; and then have them engage in subgroup and/or total group discussion.

- **Critical incident.** Ask students to write or verbally share in pairs or trios a personal experience related to the topic.
- **Brainstorm.** Have students write down or rapidly call out as many ideas as they can think of related to the topic. These ideas can be used to fill in and frame the subsequent discussion.

### Questions and Silence

One of the most versatile teaching strategies is to ask questions. Questions can stimulate thinking, encourage the group to make connections among concepts, probe for underlying reasoning, and achieve balanced participation. Both questions and the strategic use of silence can encourage thinking and discussion. Consider the following tips when asking questions:

- Use open-ended questions more frequently than closed-ended questions.
- Wait 3–5 seconds after asking questions to allow adequate think time.

The success of a group discussion is dependent upon adequate preparation

- Ask the question before calling on a learner to ensure that everyone is thinking about the answer.
- Redirect questions to other members of the group instead of answering them yourself.
- Rotate how you use questions: calling on those who volunteer; calling on participants randomly; and going around the room in order.

## COVERING CONTENT

In addition to monitoring participation and process, the teacher must also guarantee that the learning objectives and predetermined content are being covered. Careful lesson planning is essential to achieving this task, as are pacing the discussion and managing the time for each segment of the discussion. By outlining the objectives and topic areas for the discussion in the preview, the outline of content is made public and the group can help self-monitor progress. Tracking the conversation on the board and checking off the content covered as the discussion progresses keeps things focused on the key ideas. Periodic summaries and bridges to each new section can also help, as does limiting digressions and tangents.

Instructors must also decide which teaching strategies will help them stimulate thinking and clarify ideas as the group progresses through the content. Techniques include: modelling the desired thinking and reasoning process; providing analogies, examples, or supporting data; rephrasing or simplifying complex statements; and using visuals to capture main ideas.

## SUMMARY

Unlike a book that can be re-read when understanding fails, a discussion is verbal and unless a

summary is provided learners may leave without knowing what the essential points were. The closing summary should show learners how the discussion progressed through the key points, which can be summarised either by the teacher or group members. Sometimes it is useful to ask learners to identify one idea or learning point that they will take from the discussion. If questions and unsettled issues remain, they should be acknowledged and in some instances assigned as learning tasks for the next session. If the discussion group is ongoing, the conclusion is the logical place to provide a bridge to the next session and/or to the larger course. This can be done by previewing assignments, activities, or key concepts to come.

Leading a group discussion can be an exciting and challenging experience. Careful planning and skilful facilitation can stimulate learning and inspire the imagination, for both teacher and learners.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### What do you do when learners come unprepared?

- Allocate different tasks to students based upon preparation but all related to central topic
- Allow for individual reading at the beginning of the session before discussion starts.
- Assign one or two students beforehand to lead the discussion
- State at the outset that only those who have come prepared can participate.

### How do you respond when one or two group members monopolise the discussion?

- Ask for balanced participation and call on others

- Redirect comments and questions from monopolisers to others
- Avoid making eye contact with the monopolisers
- Meet with monopolisers privately and ask for their help in encouraging others to participate by limiting their participation

### How do you encourage the more silent members of the group to participate?

- Ask: 'How do you feel about that?'
- Break class into smaller groups that require participation.
- Ask for contributions from those who have not contributed, e.g. 'Would anyone who has not spoken care to comment?'
- Invite silent members to participate by calling them by name

### What do you do when discussion falters?

- Sub-divide and assign a learning task
- Provide a more concrete example to stimulate discussion
- Change the task

### What do you do when learners talk only to you, not with each other?

- Turn learners' questions back to the group
- Wait several seconds to see if anyone else responds
- Don't stand up and lead the discussion and don't sit at the head of a conference table
- Emphasise learners should be active participants in their own learning

### How do you intervene if the discussion digresses or if information shared is wrong?

- Remind group of the objectives of the session and the need to stay focused in order

**Teachers should skillfully use questions and silences to prompt thinking**



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to ensure that the key concepts are covered.

- Assign someone to research the tangential topic and bring the report back to the next session.
- Ask the group if the digression is helpful and if they want to pursue it at the expense of the rest of the topics.
- Ask the group if they agree or have a different understanding of the misconception. Ask for the source of the information and when necessary cor-

rect errors. Normalise the response, 'many people think that is true but the evidence supports a different conclusion.'

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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## DISCUSSION OBSERVATION FORM

FACULTY NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

GROUP SESSION: \_\_\_\_\_

Describe specific observations in relation to each element of the discussion.

PREVIEW NOTES

1. Introduced self and topic, offered rationale for learning content and made connection to larger course clear
2. Stated objectives and provided preview of session content and process
3. Established positive learning climate and expectations for participation
4. Initiated discussion and captured attention

INVOLVEMENT OF GROUP MEMBERS NOTES

1. Encouraged active and balanced participation through in-class assignments, sub-grouping or other teaching techniques
2. Used questions and silences or posed problems to stimulate thought and discussion
3. Exhibited enthusiasm and stimulated interest in content
4. Managed group process issues

COVERED CONTENT NOTES

1. Progressed through content and focused discussion on main points
2. Directed and paced discussion; managed time for each section
3. Used teaching strategies to stimulate thinking and clarify ideas (e.g. provided analogies, examples or supporting data; rephrased and simplified complex statements; modelled reasoning process)
4. Used visuals to capture main ideas
5. Summarised periodically and bridged to next topic

SUMMARY NOTES

1. Summarised key points and provided closure
2. Bridged to larger course or next small group session
3. Reviewed learning issues and made assignments
4. Elicited feedback on session

STRENGTHS RECOMMENDATIONS