
Managing Small Group Discussion

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Introduction

It is possible to encourage some form of discussion in both large and small group teaching situations although this is often limited in large groups because of the physical layout of lecture halls and the number of students involved.

Small group work on the other hand provides opportunities for intellectual and personal growth which cannot be achieved so easily in the standard lecture situation. Because the small group is a more personal situation, it provides opportunities for interaction between tutor or lecturer and students and among students. Such interaction can foster active learning and learning at a high conceptual level, and can help students to achieve a sense of independence and responsibility for their own learning.

To optimise the work of the group, however, teachers need to be conscious of their dual roles as subject matter experts and as group managers, and to plan the group's work both in terms of the content to be covered and the strategies which will be used to achieve the learning aims of the group.

Where the aim is to understand a body of knowledge and its associated methods and skills, it is easy to ignore the fact that the human dynamics of the group will invariably influence its work in achieving learning goals. The situation is much clearer in groups whose learning aims are process-centred: for instance in some aspects of professional studies such as management, law, medicine, social work or teaching where the students need to focus on group processes such as interpersonal relations, group dynamics and professional communication skills. It is not so clear in disciplines like foreign language learning, engineering, science and mathematics where the main focus is on learning the content and methods of the discipline.

Yet, even in disciplines where the content of a learning task is the central focus of group work: understanding a text, solving academic problems, writing essays, applying knowledge, and so on, basic ideas about the way in which groups function need to be considered both to optimise the work of the group and to avoid unnecessary disruption.

A central issue which runs through this discussion is that of the tutor or lecturer as the authority figure and energy source in a class and ways in which this can affect participation by group members.

It is the aim of this booklet to suggest strategies for discussion management in small groups which teachers can incorporate into their work fairly easily.

The first section deals with points to consider when planning a series of sessions and the essentials of preparing for specific sessions.

Next we present some discussion group formats appropriate to small groups and point out their advantages and disadvantages. This is followed by an illustration of the effect of the physical environment on interaction within small groups.

We then discuss some strategies which can be used to enhance the work of the group by taking account of its dynamics, for example, methods for getting the group started, ways of stimulating and regulating participation, and concluding the session.

Lastly we present a checklist which teachers or observers may use to monitor the group's progress and assess whether there are factors which are inhibiting the desired level of participation of students in the group.

We anticipate that this booklet will be useful to teachers working individually with discussion groups and to groups of lecturers who wish to work together to improve their teaching using techniques such as peer observation.

Planning and Preparation

. . . preparation for a discussion class needs to marry process and content — we are looking for ways to communicate, to enliven, to bring home the content; we want to find ways to help students to internalize the theory. (Welty, 1989, p. 199)

Planning a Series of Discussion Sessions

In our previous booklet on *Teaching and Learning in Small Groups: An Introduction* we pointed out that small groups provide opportunities for interaction among participants. But we also made the point that groups where all participants contribute equally to the discussion take some time to develop and that they are influenced by the students' previous experience of education and their level of personal and intellectual maturity.

We advocated that lecturers and tutors plan to work towards student-to-student discussion groups gradually, possibility moving first through tutor-to-students groups (where attention is given to students as individuals in the group) to tutor-to-group groups (where the tutor responds to the group as a whole entity). Trying to achieve fully functioning discussion groups too early in the

students' experience of higher education can easily lead to disappointment and frustration for both teacher and students.

In addition to the students' maturity, the culture of the institution needs to be taken into account as Welty (1989) points out:

. . . in planning the semester, remember that you are probably struggling with an institutional culture that discourages active participation. Work up to it slowly; schedule topics and discussions keeping in mind that you are reorienting behavior patterns and that this will take more than one class. (p. 203)

Hence, in order to prepare effectively for a series of discussion sessions teachers need a good appreciation of the level that students have reached, based on their previous experience and the values of the institution in which the work will occur. Inevitably these factors will place limits on what can be achieved early in the semester and often a creative approach is required to help students move towards more mature learning behaviours.

In deciding how a series of sessions will be conducted the following questions may be helpful:

1. How is the module structured in terms of the sequence of topics and timing of assessment?
2. What content will be covered?
3. What are the aims and objectives of the module?
4. What other teaching methods will students encounter in the module, for example, lectures, tutorials, laboratories, fieldwork?
5. What are the assessment methods and schedules?
6. How will the design and furnishing of the teaching facilities affect group work, for example room size and layout, availability and flexibility of furniture?
7. What experience does your team have in discussion group teaching and what are their attitudes towards working to promote active learning in their small group work?

When such issues have been considered, it should be possible to arrive at an informed opinion concerning the likely success of particular types of group work. If, for instance, you are aiming for group discussion situations in which all members participate actively, what is the probability of success?

Preparing for Individual Sessions

There are certain basic things that teachers need to do in order to be prepared for each small group session.

1. Review the assigned learning material and highlight or make notes on the main points that need to be known or understood by students.
2. Decide on an outline for the lesson.
3. Develop a series of group activities, demonstrations or questions related to the main concepts to be covered in the lesson.
4. Decide on the order and timing of the activities.
5. Have a clear idea about what kind of group session you will be conducting and what teaching strategies you will use to promote active participation by students.
6. Tell students in advance what is going to happen in the lesson and what they need to do to prepare themselves for it.
7. Find out where the class will be held and ensure that the activities that you have planned are feasible in that Context.

Structuring Sessions

It is clear from the above that in addition to the details of what will be taught, in what order and by what means, tutors and lecturers need to consider how they will structure the group sessions to achieve the desired learning outcomes. It is a mistake to think that unstructured group discussion automatically leads to learning. Clearly not all groups require the same amount of structure. This will depend on:

- how experienced the group is;
- how mature the participants are;
- how experienced the lecturer is;

and

- the level of the coursework being undertaken.

However, in most cases some degree of structure is needed and this implies preliminary work by the teacher. The process of structuring the group's experience is not rigid but rather involves preliminary structuring — observing the effect — restructuring. Flexibility is implied but a basic structure is needed to work from.

Some issues to consider in structuring the lesson are:

1. Will the session be formal or informal? (Informal sessions do not imply a lack of structure and formal sessions do not imply a high degree of structure. Formality refers to the tone of the sessions.)
2. How will roles and responsibilities be allocated among students?
3. How much will the experience of group work be emphasised compared with learning the course content?
4. What kind of interaction will be encouraged among participants? (For example, work in small sub-groups or in pairs, individual discussion with the teacher, whole group work and reporting back etc.)
5. What role will the teacher play? (For example, instructor, participant, role model . . .)

Discussion Group Formats

There are a variety of discussion group formats each of which have their own distinctive features and which allow for different degrees of teacher control and student control. Several of these are described below. Each have their advantages and disadvantages.

Controlled Discussion

This technique is often used to check whether a topic is understood. It can be used in large group situations as well as in small groups. Discussion is under the control of the teacher while students ask questions or make comments or respond to questions from the teacher.

If practised at the end of a mini-lecture or video presentation, for example, the lecturer can obtain feedback quickly about how well the material has been understood.

It is a limited form of discussion and does not allow for full participation.

Step-by-Step Discussion

Once again this format is appropriate for large and small groups. A topic is broken down into several segments and the lecturer alternates between presentation of subject matter and discussion periods in which students can respond to questions or make comments or ask questions. The focus of discussion may be notes, a text passage, videotape and so on.

While it makes use of opportunities for discussion in large groups, the structure and content of the discussion made not meet the needs of all group members.

Buzz Groups

During the course of a lecture or a discussion led by the tutor students are asked to turn to their neighbours for a few minutes to discuss problems in understanding, or to answer a prepared question, and so on.

Buzz groups enable students to test out their understanding and to discuss difficulties that they might have been unwilling to reveal to the whole class.

Such groups also provide the opportunity to stimulate the group by changing the focus of attention away from the lecturer. However, the timing is important since, rather than providing a needed break in proceedings they may cause students to lose concentration.

Snowball Groups

Buzz groups can be extended by progressively doubling the group size so that pairs join up to form fours, then fours to form eights. These larger groups finally report back to the whole group in a plenary session.

This technique allows ideas to unfold gradually and allows students to think for themselves before bringing their ideas back to the whole group. However as the groups increase in size the nature of the discussion task may need to be changed to prevent boredom.

Horseshoe Groups

The class can be organised so that attention can alternately focus on the lecturer and group discussion. Rather than students sitting in rows facing the front of the room, they sit around tables arranged in a horseshoe formation with the open end facing the front.

The lecturer can talk from the front for a time before changing to a group task such as discussion or problem solving or practical work.

In science and engineering courses in particular this method can be used effectively. Also the teacher can circulate easily to clear up any problems that may arise.

Arranging the Physical Environment for Small Group Work

The above formats imply a certain type of seating arrangement and a degree of flexibility in arranging the furniture in a class situation. In addition, it is generally agreed that the physical setting is an important component of successful small group work.

The arrangement of furniture in the classroom is probably the single most important factor in determining the success of the tutorial. (Habeshaw, Gibbs and Habeshaw, 1987, p. 55)

All the trouble that you have taken in preparing for the discussion class will be for naught if you are trapped in a physical setting that impairs the discussion process. (Welty, 1989, p. 203)

When considering the physical environment we need to think about the impact of seating arrangements plus the associations which may exist in the minds of students regarding the room.

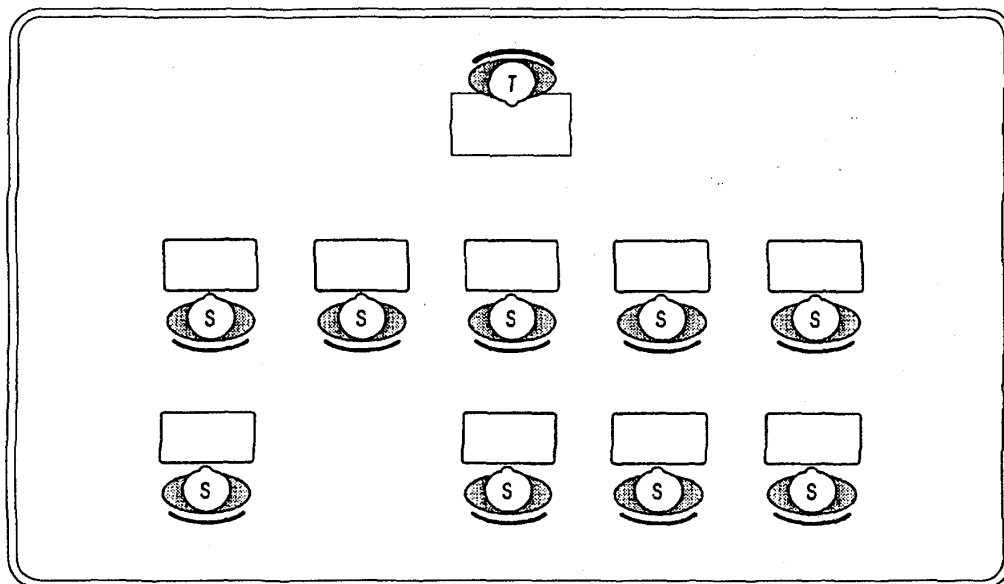
When considering this matter the tutor must have a clear idea of what kind of group he or she is trying to conduct. For example, is it a tutor-to-student group, a tutor-to-group group or a student-to-student group? Which of the formats discussed above will be used?

Some seating arrangements either make discussion in groups impractical or send out unintended messages to students about who is in control and what behaviour is or is not expected of them.

Effect of Seating Arrangements

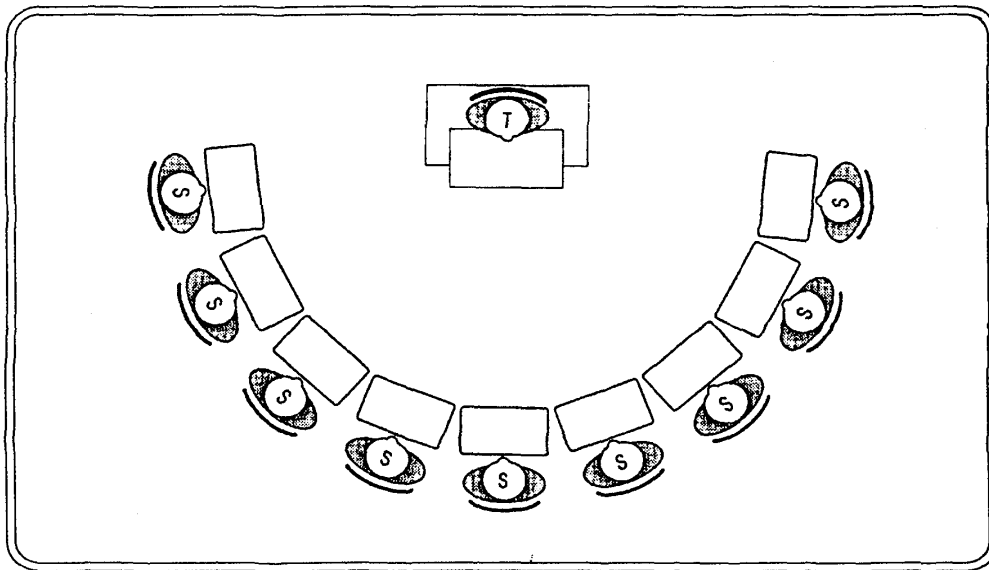
In the instance shown in figure 1 the instructor sits or stands in front of rows of students. Communication is more likely to be directed at the instructor and back from the instructor to a group member or the group as a whole. Direct communication between group members is far less likely to occur. This is fine if a tutor-to-group arrangement is desired but not if student-to-student discussion is an aim of the group's work.

Figure 1



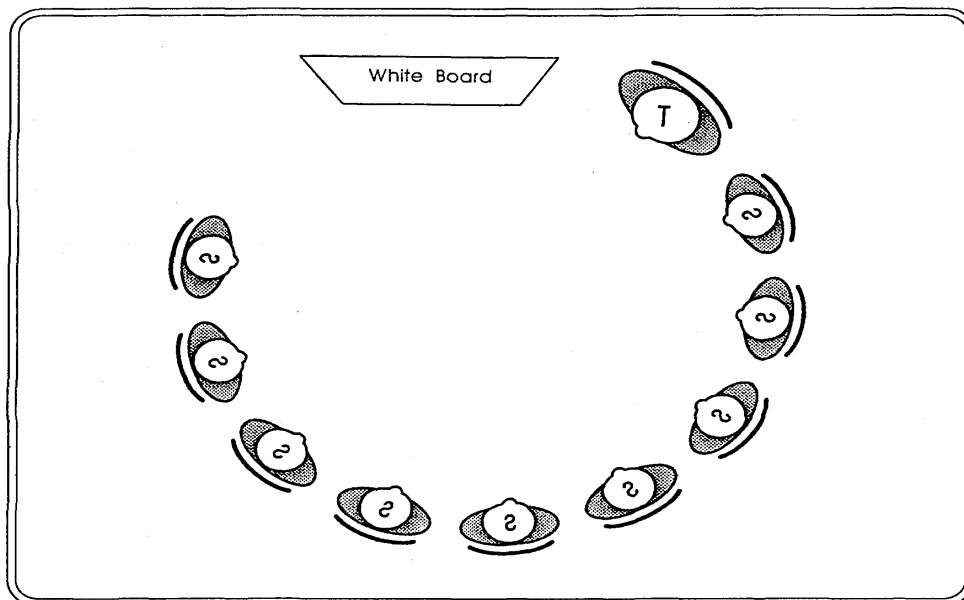
Even when students are arranged in a semi-circle (as shown in figure 2) which is more likely to promote talk among group members, it is still possible for the teacher to place him- or herself in a prominent position onto which attention is focused by either sitting on a raised platform, or behind a long table or large desk, or in a position which is isolated from the group as a whole.

Figure 2



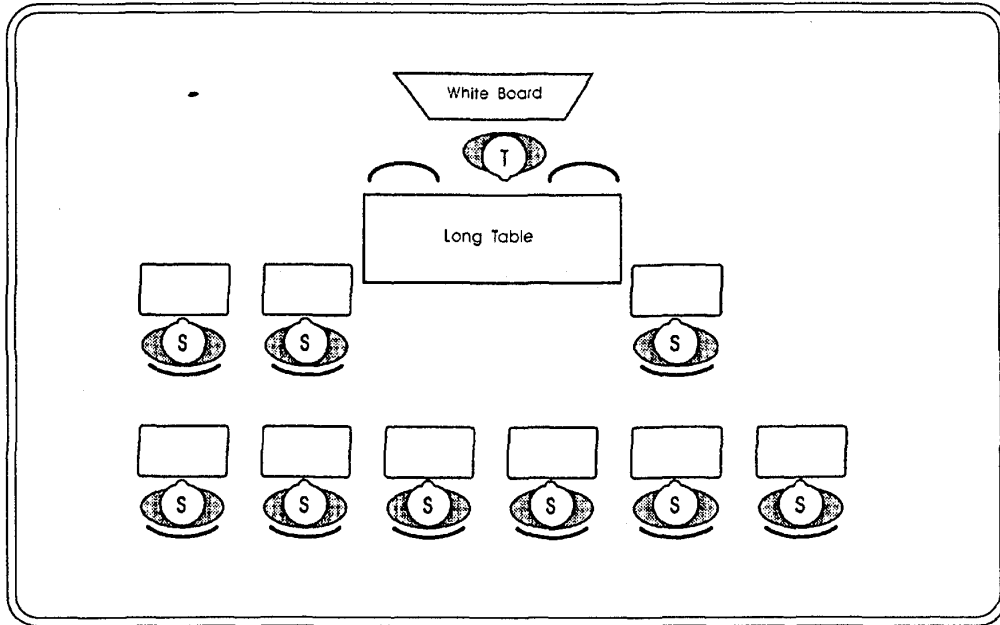
To encourage participation and talk between group members, sit in a circle if possible, so that everyone can see and communicate with everyone else, with no seats having special status. (See figure 3.)

Figure 3



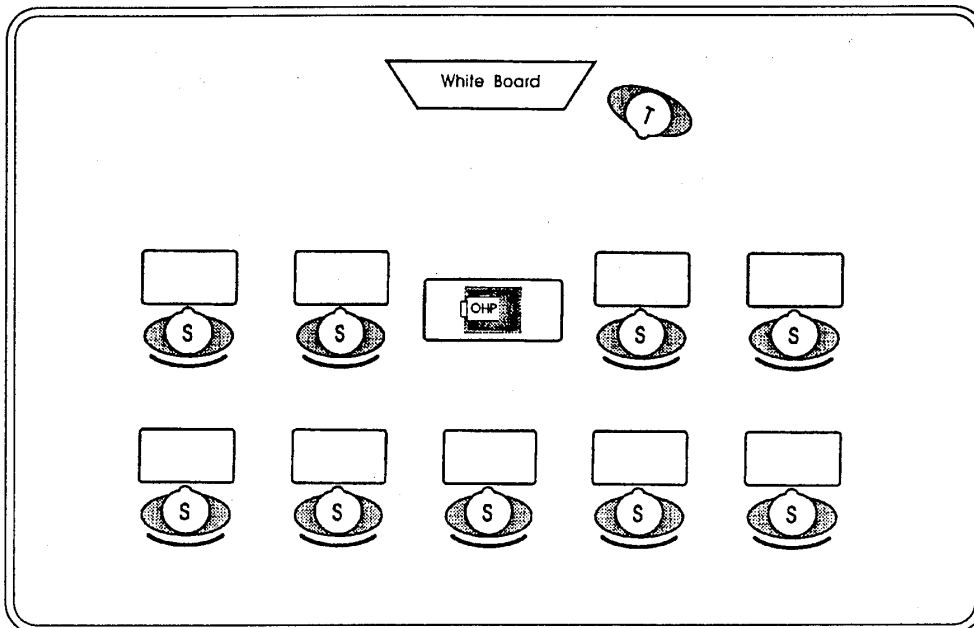
Another way in which teachers can unintentionally raise their status and authority in the group is to sit in front of the white board or whatever is being used to display information, thus appearing to be the "guardian of knowledge". (See figure 4.)

Figure 4



To allow students the freedom to approach the board and the front of the class, position yourself some distance away from the board or beside it, leaving a gap so that any group member will feel free to use it. (See figure 5.)

Figure 5



The ways in which students are positioned in relation to each other also has an impact on how the group functions. For example, if there is a large distance between the participants, or they cannot see each other's faces, or if the seats are uncomfortably cluttered and close together it will be much more difficult for them to communicate with each other. (See figures 6 and 7.)

Figure 6

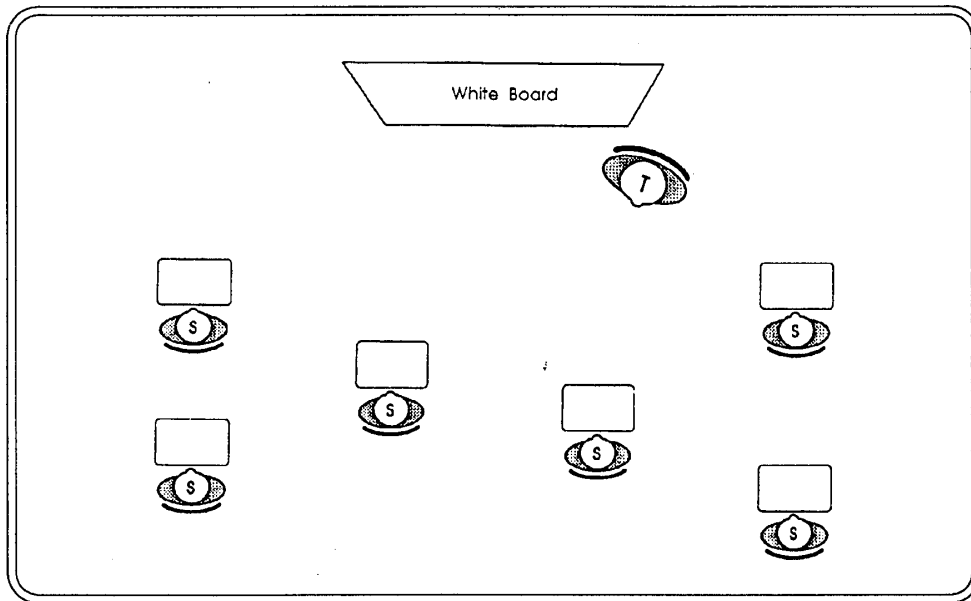
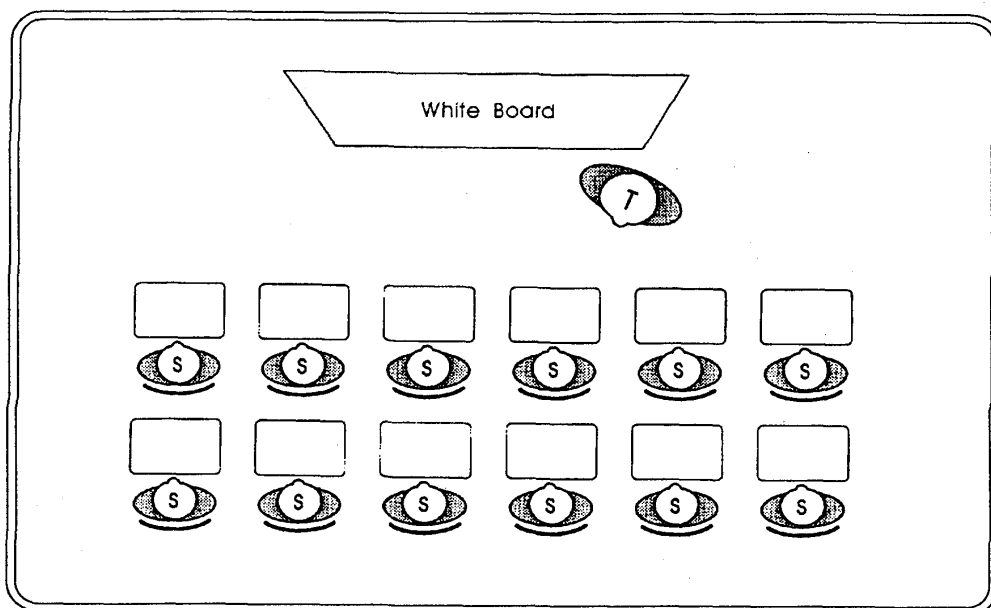
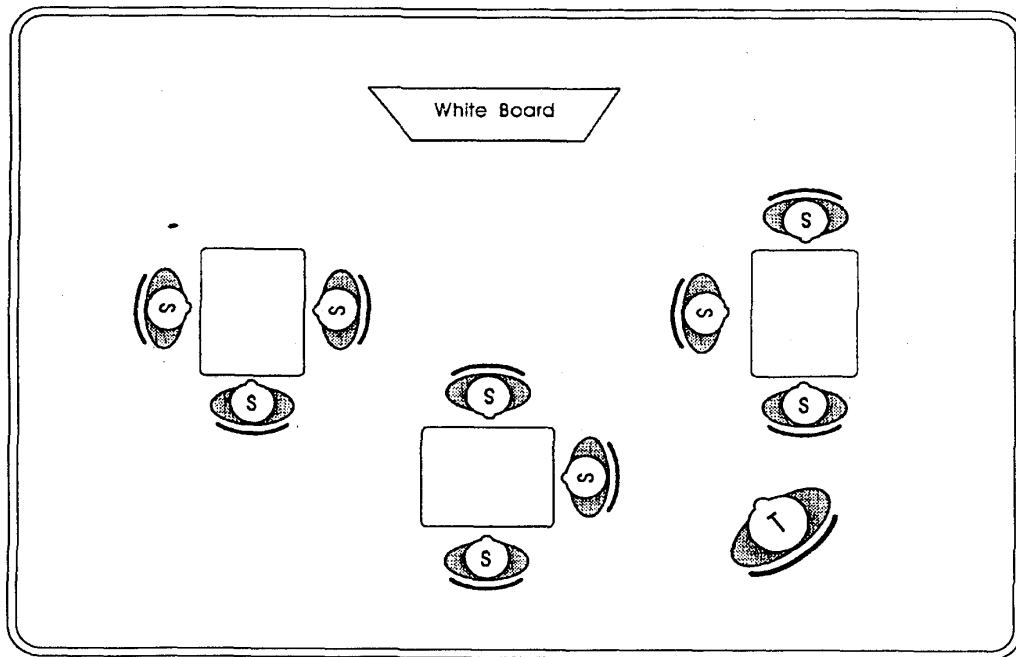


Figure 7



If you wish the group to function in small sub-groups some of the time, give the sub-groups a physical identity by seating them together and apart from other sub-groups. (See figure 8.)

Figure 8



Just as the furniture arrangement needs to echo the activity of the group, so the furniture needs to be rearranged when the group activity changes. If the group is not to engage in the same type of activity through the whole session, the issue of how you make the transition from one type of activity to the next is important. Habeshaw, Gibbs and Habeshaw (1987) write:

. . . if students have been sitting in a circle or round a large table listening to an introductory briefing, they can find it difficult suddenly to engage in group work with their immediate neighbours: the change of intellectual demands and the change of social relations can be too great to accommodate. The transition will be eased if there is a corresponding alteration in the physical arrangement of the group. This can be achieved by students moving their chairs away from the table and into groups and then returning to the table for the pooling of ideas. (p. 57)

Finally, Welty (1989) gives some good advice:

Whatever your room assignment, never let the space in which you are scheduled to teach surprise you. Know ahead of time what will be there and what you will need to do to improve it. (p. 203)

Strategies to Take Account of Group Dynamics

In higher education, a small group may be used to assist students to learn a body of subject matter and develop intellectual and practical skills. However, inevitably we need to take account of the fact that all small groups are social groups and will be affected by the dynamics of the group. For this reason we devote some attention in this section to aspects of small group work which can be enhanced by recognising and taking account of group dynamics. These include starting up and closing down group sessions, and ways in which participation can be facilitated.

Getting the Group Started

People who do not know each other, or who come together for the first time to carry out a specific task, do not naturally form themselves into a cohesive, functioning group. What happens the very first time the group meets is crucial to its future work. Care needs to be taken to see that introductions are carried out and that ground rules for how the group will function in future are clearly established.

Introductions

The following techniques can be used for introductions.

- individuals introduce themselves to the whole group;
- people pair off and talk to each other and report back;
- small groups discuss what they have in common and report back.

It is sometimes difficult for the teacher to remember the names of all students or for students to remember the names of their peers. The following techniques will assist in this matter:

- use name cards;
- display a seating plan;
- ask people to use their names when they speak;
- ask a name when you forget.

Ground Rules

Teachers should make clear to the group at the first meeting what is expected of them and what rules will govern future group meetings, for example, what are the rules governing lateness,

disruption of the group's activities, methods of participation, as well as rules for speaking in the group, seating, cancellation of class, and so on. If the group is sufficiently mature, it is also a good idea to provide group members with the opportunity to discuss and modify rules for operating before a final "contract" is agreed on. Once the ground rules are established, it is up to the teacher (or the group as a whole) to make sure that they are reinforced.

Subsequent Meetings

Each subsequent meeting needs a general format which will make the teacher's intention clear to students, reinforce the ground rules, provide a working structure and link the sessions to previous and future sessions. For example, the following plan might be displayed on a poster, on the Whyteboard, or on an overhead transparency.

1. Introduce new members or visitors;
2. Resolve administrative issues;
3. Review previous week's work;
4. Students report on progress with a task or report unfinished business;
5. Outline the task for today;
6. Today's task performed;
7. Review progress;
8. Project forward to next session;
9. Conclude session.

Restarting After a Break

Some groups stay together over more than one teaching semester or term and if there has been a break for any reason, you need some procedures for bringing the group together again, no matter how cohesive it was when you last met. You also need to conclude any unfinished business and to signify that the group is moving forward. If students have been on placement or on vacation or doing work experience you might elicit comments like the following:

- One thing I liked about our group sessions last term was . . .
- The best thing about my placement was . . .
- This term I would like to achieve . . .
- During the break the most interesting things I did were . . .

Encouraging Participation

Getting Students to Speak

Some individuals find speaking out in groups difficult. If students seem reluctant to participate then ask yourself:

- Have you made the ground rules about participation quite clear?
- Do you have a policy for what to do if the ground rules regarding participation are broken or ignored?
- Have you clearly established the rules for speaking in the group, for taking turns, for limiting contributions etc.

Problems of Participation From the Students' View

In many cases students may be reluctant to participate in group discussion because they are not sure of the conventions for speaking, for example, how to take turns, when it is permissible to interrupt, and so on. Furthermore they may think that they do not know enough to make a contribution and fear being assessed negatively on the basis of their spoken contribution.

In her study of how students view participation Ruddock (1978) made the following comments regarding making a contribution and understanding the conventions for discussion.

- Students testify to the difficulty of actually talking in groups, especially when they have had little previous experience of discussion or are uncertain in what ways learning through discussion in higher education will be different from discussion work in secondary education (p. 12)
- In small group discussion, students have to learn to balance courtesy with self-interest and at the same time be mindful of the need to listen as well as to frame and feed in their own contributions. (p. 12)
- One difficulty derives from common assumptions about the linear nature of discussion. By the time a nervous student has put his thoughts together, and had a silent rehearsal, they have lost their aptness. The discussion has moved on and he keeps his silence. (pp. 12-13)
- A different tactic is employed by the less sensitive scholar who has difficulty in getting his toe in at the door of the discussion. He will store up his remarks and when he does win the floor will unburden himself of a number of points, not necessarily related to each other nor to the present focus of the group's attention. The logic of discussion is threatened as participants are offered a number of new starting points, some of them pursuing lines of argument which the group has moved beyond. (p. 13)

- Another major difficulty for undergraduates in small group work is in becoming proficient in the language of their discipline. (p. 13)

Hence, even though it may seem artificial at times, the teacher needs to adopt a strategy by which there is an opportunity for every member of the group to say something early on in the class. By this means individuals will have heard themselves speak in the group at least once and may not be so fearful of making their next contribution.

Ruddock (1978) has some further insights about students' difficulty with understanding the conventions of group discussion, particularly if they are new to higher education:

- Video-tapes of undergraduates at their first seminars show how guarded the students are about making moves. (p. 13)
- Students often confess to being uncertain as to how to respond in a seminar if the leader does not lecture to them and it is noticeable how frequently in their early experience of small group work students resort to note-taking — but invariably on the points made by the seminar leader. (p. 14)
- There are particular conventions that students say they are uneasy about. For instance, how far should one go in acknowledging confusion or misunderstanding — or whether in a higher education seminar there is a tacit agreement that one disguises uncertainty or ignorance and talks only from relative certainty. (p. 14)

Getting Students Not to Speak

Some highly articulate students can present as many problems as those who refuse to speak at all. Though at first teachers may be pleased to have a student who is keen to interact, if the student cannot make room for others to participate the overall effect on the group is a negative one. Other students may be discouraged in the presence of someone who appears to “know so much”.

This situation can be handled in several ways:

- distribute the speaking time among students;
- set up sub-groups so that high contributors work together and low contributors work together;
- establish a time when students may not speak a second time until everyone else has spoken;
- if all else fails speak to the individual in private.

Optimising Contributions

While students' contributions are valued, not all contributions lead to productive learning. For instance, if students merely repeat what they have learned during lectures', many of the benefits of small group work will be lost. The goal is to assist students to develop their own view or interpretation of what they have learned through attending lectures, reading texts and so on. Furthermore, a very talkative group does not necessarily mean that learning has taken place and teachers need to be aware of this.

To ensure that students learn how to make the best contributions that they are capable of, teachers need to develop skills in listening actively and responding to what is said. Welty (1989) writes:

. . . teachers can learn much from the counselling profession, especially the process called active listening. In that process, you as teacher must communicate back to the speaker that you understand what was said — text and subtext. But beyond that you must communicate what is important to you, the teacher, so that you and the student can work together to take some action — to learn, in this context. (p. 207)

Use can also be made of the board in a variety of ways to assist participation, for instance:

- to help organise a discussion which may appear disjointed;
- to control the level of participation, for example, to boost a shy student's self-confidence by writing his or her contribution on the board in a prominent place. At times it may be wise to not write the contribution of a student who appears to be dominating the discussion at the expense of others.

Closing the Session

Time should be made to bring the group session to an adequate conclusion. This will involve:

1. Summing up/reviewing the work of the session;
2. Answering any residual questions concerning the session;
3. Previewing the work of the next session and showing how it relates to this session;
4. Giving guidance on what background reading etc. will be required of students in the interim.

Monitoring the Group's Progress: Checklist

In an academic learning group, most of the group's energy should go into thinking about the course content and contributing ideas to discussion. However, it is important to step back occasionally and monitor the progress of the group in terms of its dynamics. For example, a teacher who wants to minimise his or her authority role and encourage independence among group members may ask the following question from time to time:

Are their signs of students' dependence on the group leader?

- Are contributions directed to the leader with little or no cross-group discussion?
- Are eyes fixed on the leader?
- Do students take notes but only about a comment by the group leader and not of other students?
- Do students contribute less than half of the total talk?
- Do students try to force the seminar leader to work through the agenda in a series of mini-lectures?
- Do students throw back the leader's questions seeking through clarification the right or expected answer? (Adapted from Ruddock, 1978, p. 73)

Is the leader unknowingly doing things to inhibit participation by students?

- Does the leader also present himself as assessor of the work of individuals in the group?
- Does the leader open with a long and learned contribution which inhibits subsequent discussion?
- Does the leader interrupt students and is generally not interrupted by students?
- Does the leader often rephrase contributions by students while giving them no chance to disagree as to what they meant to say?
- Does the leader exert power through language, for example, by pouncing on students and demanding an answer?
- * Does body language, spoken language and gesture communicate boredom and low expectations? (Adapted from Ruddock, 1978, p. 73)

Conclusion

Small groups can be an effective learning situation in which students learn both through instruction from their teachers and from interaction with each other. The group also provides opportunities for individuals to speak in front of others and to receive feedback from teachers and peers.

Most important for the teacher is an understanding that from the students' point of view entering into a discussion may be difficult because the conventions of discussion such as taking turns, thinking quickly, making appropriate comments at the right time are not well understood or practised. Making public statements in this way can also be threatening if the student is unsure of his or her own grasp of the subject. These obstacles can be overcome with time and if the learning environment is a secure one.

The main point made in this booklet is that though the aim of the group may be to learn about a body of knowledge, the dynamics of the group need to be understood in order to optimise such learning. Hence we have considered the importance of the physical environment including seating arrangements as well as strategies which can be used to encourage effective participation by all members in the group.

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