Effective Small Group Learning

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Preparation

- What do I want students to learn?
- How do I want them to learn it?
- How will I know if they learned it?

Why Small Group Learning

- Constructive discussions
- Appropriate and effective questions
- Higher order thinking/reasoning/problem solving
- Foster interpersonal interactions (peers and faculty)

Principle of Small Group Design

- Interaction among those in the group
- 6-8 is best #
- Leadership and learning shared by members of the group

Benefits

- Development of discussion skills and thinking
- Exploration of attitudes
- Sharing of experiences
- Reflection on experiences

Note: these benefits on dependent on the skills of faculty and students

Core Discussion Skills

- Asking questions
- Listening
- Responding
- Explaining
- Opening and Closing
- Preparation

Cognitive Skills of Students

- Increased understanding
- Critical thinking
- Reasoning
- Problem solving
- Decision making
- Creative thinking

- Supports:
  - Teamwork
  - Collaborative learning
  - Developing communication competency

Asking Questions

- Arouse interest and curiosity
- Assess knowledge
- Critical thought and evaluation
- Initiate, sustain and direct a conversation
- Types:
  - Narrow-broad
  - Recall-thought
  - Confused-clear
  - Encourage-threaten

Listening

- Skimming
- Surveying
- Sorting
- Searching
- Studying

Responding

- Challenge vs. Support
- Fear of criticism vs. a safe learning environment
- Reflecting back-encourages elaboration
- Perception checking-check understanding
- Paraphrasing-using own words
- Silence- *"let us spend a minute thinking about that"*

Explanation

- Clarity and fluency-defining new terms, avoiding vagueness
- Emphasis and interest-tone
- Using examples-use student responses
- Organization-linking words
- Feedback-check for understanding

Note: Best in summary of a session to avoid passivity and early closure

Opening the Session

- R-establish rapport
- E-discuss mutual expectations for faculty and students
- S-State structure of the course/session
- T-Relevant task and provide feedback on the task

Closing the Session

- Summary of key points
- Identify linkages
- Identify unanswered questions
- Thank the group for discussion
- Point out what was achieved

Common Errors

- Each student contributes their own point of view, with little relationship to the others or overall context (monologue)
- The discussion is a one-to-ne conversation or a series of Q &A between faculty and students

Facilitating Methods

- Plan the seating arrangements
- Pose a problem or question
- Allow think time
- Foster student to student discussion

Techniques

- Buzz groups (think-pair-share)
- Snow balls
- Jigsaws
- Fishbowls
- Concept maps
- Brainstorming

Note: decide if you need a small plenary as an opening or summary

Research

- Success depends on the skill sand motivation of the faculty and to a lesser extent on the skills and motivation of the students
- Effectiveness is dependent on how the method is used

Dynamics of Groups

- Forming-requires more direction
- Norming-developing a mutual understanding
- Storming-rebellion or disagreement/controversary
- Performing-commitment and productivity

Note: Reflect on learning process and not just be task oriented; promote cooperation vs. competition

Evaluation

Types

- Processes
  - How did the group perform today?
- Product
  - Formative
    - **What was learned today**
    - **What is unclear?**

How to collect data?

- Qualitative/Quantitative
- Students/facilitator/peers

Summary

- Faculty and students have roles that overlap
  - **TO DISCUSS…**
  - **TO THINK …**
  - **TO REFLECT…**

Summary-continued

- Prepare the learning environment, provide a structure that is friendly and focused, keep discussion moving forward, summarize discussions and develop student thinking
- Students contribute to discussions in a thoughtful way, ask questions and provide comments