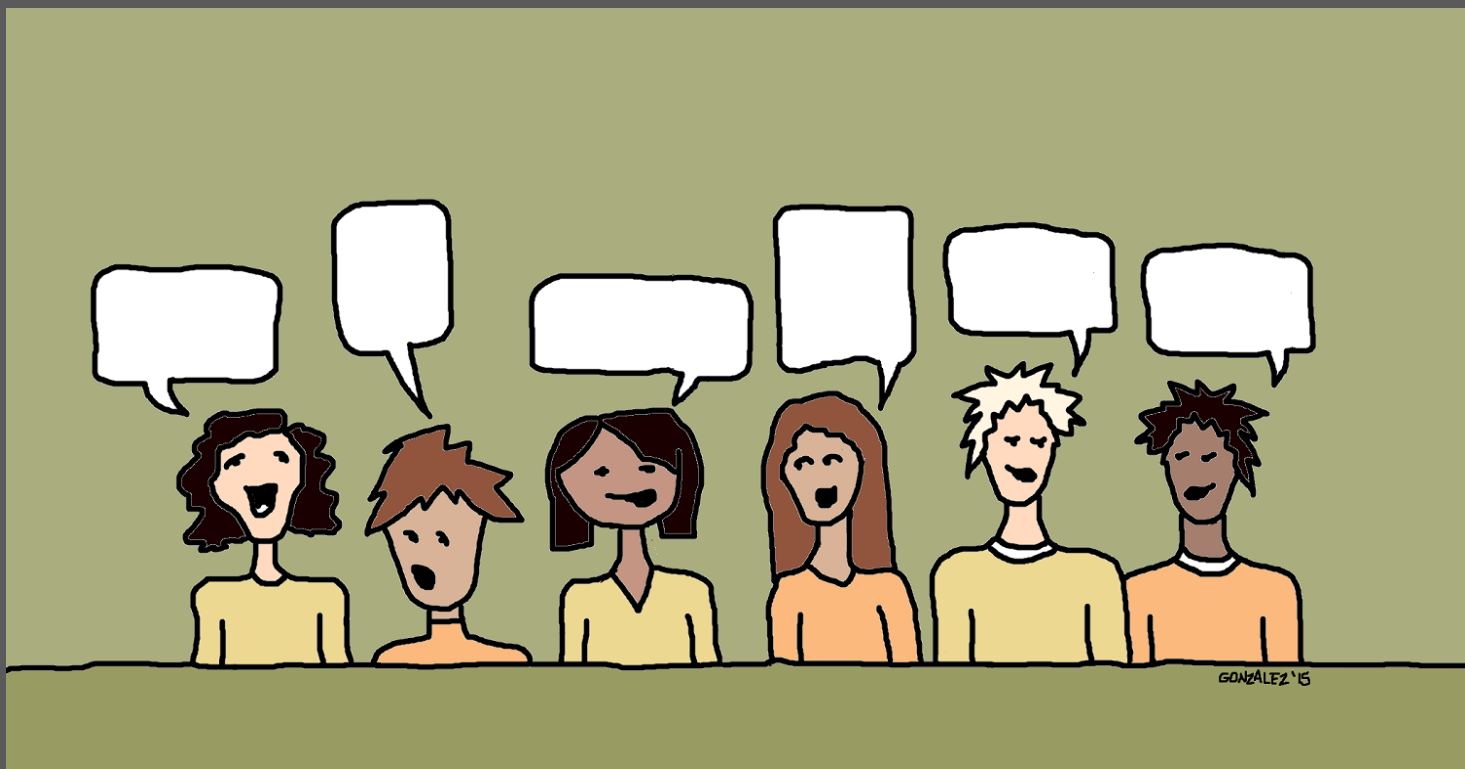




BROWN
Alpert Medical School

TEACHING IN A SMALL GROUP

A GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUP FACULTY FACILITATORS AT THE
ALPERT MEDICAL SCHOOL OF BROWN UNIVERSITY



SMALL GROUP TEACHING AT ALPERT MEDICAL SCHOOL

Small group sessions are an essential part of the preclerkship curriculum and serve several very important functions. Small group work 1) reinforces basic science content; 2) helps to place that content into an appropriate clinical context; 3) provides students with the opportunity to work collaboratively with, and learn from, their peers; and 4) allows for a high degree of student-faculty contact.

The Alpert Medical School model of small group learning is primarily based on a form of problem-based learning known as “case-based” learning, but the way in which small groups are structured varies from course to course.

In some courses, “cold” clinical cases are provided during small group- this means that students are provided no information ahead of time and spend the small group session working collaboratively through the case.

In other courses, students are provided a “hot” case, partial case, or a set of problems that they work through on their own prior to the small group. Students then come together to discuss the problems, and their solutions, with their peers and with the faculty facilitator.

Each preclerkship course at AMS has small groups that are designed in a way that best fits the content being taught, as well as the length and frequency of the small group meeting times. For example, a small group curriculum in which the groups meet for only an hour may be very different from one in which groups meet for two hours, and a small group curriculum in which the groups meet twice may be very different from one in which the groups meet six times.

However, there are important elements that are common across all small groups at AMS, and we will consider these here:

1. Evaluating Student Performance
2. Active Learning
3. Faculty Facilitation

Small group facilitation takes a great deal of skill, practice and patience. The tips and examples we include in this guide are based on observations of actual small group sessions and are offered in the spirit of helpfulness as you embark on this challenging and rewarding task.

Good luck and have fun!

1. EVALUATING STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Why start with evaluation? We mention evaluation first because evaluation is a process, not only an end-point. Evaluation is something you need to be thinking about from the first day of small group to the last. Why? Because in order to evaluate student progress, students must be allowed ample opportunity to demonstrate their level of mastery. The way in which you run your small group must give students the opportunity for peer-to-peer discussion, Q & A, and review. If you allow students the opportunity to demonstrate what they know, you in turn give yourself the opportunity to observe their behavior, and to provide students feedback and the chance to improve.

TIP:

There is nothing worse than having to evaluate a student and realizing that you have nothing to write! Prior to each small group session, identify particular students, or behaviors, upon which you are going to focus during the session.

Let the form be your guide. You will ultimately be required to formally assess students' knowledge and skills and complete an evaluation form for each student. Fortunately, this evaluation form is actually a tool that will help you decide how to run your small group. Confused about what students should be learning? Uncertain which student behaviors or skills to look for? All of these are outlined in the student evaluation form. Let this form be your guide as you and your group work through the material at hand.

For example, one of the Abilities on which you will need to evaluate students is Effective Communication. Students are unable to provide you with evidence of their skills in this area if most of the session is taken up by faculty presentation of material. Instead, encourage students to address each other with questions and comments. Allow time for them to discuss the material, and take note of their contributions. Ask students to briefly present to the group on a particular topic and assess their ability to describe, clarify, integrate and summarize.

Open-ended questions that allow you to assess student knowledge might include:

"What evidence can you cite to support your idea?"

"Can you tell us more about X?"

"I'm interested to hear how you came to that conclusion- can you describe your thinking?"

"What do you think are the most important aspects of X?"

Share the evaluation form with students as a means of communicating expectations. Discuss the learning objectives outlined on the form. Students will then understand the criteria on which they will be evaluated, and can plan accordingly.

Also, when observing students' behavior, be on the lookout for any "red flags." Behavioral red flags may include:

- Tardiness
- Missed sessions without timely notification through the proper channels
- Lack of accountability to peers on shared work
- Late submission of work

- General disengagement with the group process
- Deterioration of quality of work
- Inappropriate monopolization of discussion
- Lack of follow-up and/or improvement after constructive criticism or feedback
- Avoidance of assistance/support

If you observe any of these “red flags,” be sure to inform the Course Director, as the behaviors may be indicative of a larger issue and could require some remediation or intervention.

*** Take-Home Message:** Don’t wait until the midpoint or end of the course to be thinking about evaluation. Know what you are looking for in terms of student knowledge and behavior, communicate those expectations to students, and then spend ample time assessing their level of mastery.

2. FACULTY FACILITATION

While small groups are not mini-lectures, the role of the faculty facilitator is by no means a passive one. The faculty facilitator role involves:

- Setting expectations and educational goals for the group
- Setting the tone of the group in terms of enthusiasm, respect and openness
- Asking probing, open-ended questions
- Encouraging participation
- Monitoring student progress and ensuring that the session’s learning objectives are addressed
- Redirecting the discussion if it gets off track
- Correcting misinformation
- Providing clinical information and examples
- Modeling appropriate reasoning, prioritizing and planning
- Observing student behavior and assessing student knowledge and skills

Small group facilitation requires a dual focus on both *content* and *process* to a degree that is generally not found in other forms of teaching such as lecturing. A lecturer’s role is to provide information. A facilitator’s role is to focus on reinforcing concepts through discussion, questioning, guidance and observation. Facilitators help students to work through the basic science and clinical content in each case, while at the same time monitoring the small group process. They encourage student participation and assess the ways in which each student contributes to group learning, interacts with peers, and utilizes the expertise of the facilitator.

Skillful facilitation of a small group discussion is not as easy as it sounds. Luckily you will largely be working with very bright, very motivated students!

Start the first meeting. The first meeting of your small group is an opportunity to outline ground rules, communicate expectations, and set the tone for future sessions.

Introductions are a good way for you to get to know a little bit about each student and his/her background or interests. Students may already know each other, but introductions create a congenial atmosphere for the group.

Students might be asked to:

“Tell the group your name, your hometown and your college major.”

“Share your name and one thing you no one here knows about you.”

“Tell us your name and what you would like to get out of this course.”

Set expectations. Together, set expectations for the group. The more explicit you are now, the better. Expectations for students may include:

- Students are expected to arrive to small group on time.
- All students will be expected to be prepared and to actively participate in the group.
- All comments and contributions will be received respectfully.

You might also want to take a moment to explain to the group how you see your role. Outline the extent to which they will be responsible for the group process, and the times in which you foresee yourself offering a contribution to the group (for example, to redirect the conversation or to correct misinformation).

TIP:

Ask for volunteers to read aloud. You may have students with reading disabilities in your group. Compulsory reading aloud can be highly stressful for these students, which will prevent them from being able to concentrate on the material at hand!

Assign student roles. You may wish to assign student roles. Prescribed roles such as Leader, Scribe, Time Keeper, etc., can be a good way to encourage student participation and leadership, especially in the students' first few experiences with small group learning.

A quick conversation about the expectations for each role, and the expectations for other students (active listening, contributions in the way of questions, information, etc.) will be helpful. As students become more comfortable with small group learning in their second year, these roles may arise more naturally.

TIP:

Assign student roles through the drawing of numbers (the student who draws the number “1” will be Leader for the first small group session, etc.) or by birthdays (the student with an upcoming birthday will be the Leader for the first session, etc.).

Start each session. The beginning of each session is a good time to provide the group with an overview of how you see the group running that day, and the goals for the session. Tell students what you would like to get accomplished.

For example:

“I would like us to get all the way through Part 3 of the case, discuss the slides that come along with this part, and make sure that we have time at the end of the session to talk about assignments for next time.”

“Today some of you are going to give your presentations, and then we’ll discuss Part 2 of the case. But before we start, are there any questions that we didn’t get to last time in our discussion of X?”

“As we move on to the next few problems in the set, I would like us to focus on getting everyone involved in the discussion. One of my goals today is to hear from each of you.”

Setting goals and providing an overview can be an efficient way of getting the group all on the same page. In the future, perhaps the student Leader could take on this responsibility.

Avoid the trap of the dominant student. Groups often have one or two dominant students (and several quiet students). While dominant students often have excellent contributions, in this situation group learning can suffer and quiet students can become even more passive. Open up the conversation to all students by asking to hear from someone else, or by calling on a quiet student. You might ask (perhaps via email) to have a private discussion with the dominant student before or after class to encourage his leadership in ways that are constructive to the group.

Potential conversations starters include:

"I want to commend you on your high participation in the group and on the quality of your contributions. I worry a bit about making sure that everyone has the same opportunity to contribute. What do you think?"

"I wanted to talk with you a bit about the group and how it is going. I feel really comfortable with my assessment of your knowledge base. However, I am hoping to focus a bit more on some of the quieter students during the second half of the course."

Model clinical reasoning. One of the most important functions of the faculty Facilitator is to provide students with clinically information relevant to individual cases. Faculty relay information to the group that they would otherwise not know, and would have a hard time finding out from texts. Faculty help identify clinical red flags and priorities, and model the way in which clinicians think through the information at hand. Facilitators contribute clinical knowledge and anecdotes, and clarify questions regarding clinical tests and the meaning of certain clinical phrases.

Incorporate student presentations. Brief student presentations (4-6 minutes in length) can be a good opportunity for you to observe students' communication skills. Students investigate a topic independently, and then come back to the group and share their knowledge. If student presentations are going to be a part of your small group, you will need to decide if all students will present in the first hour, or if you want to embed the presentations within the context of the case. Be aware that the group's attention may wane after the first few presentations if presentations are done one after the other.

Students should be encouraged to bring in journal articles and other original sources rather than a simple outline of the topic content. As part of their presentations, students should also cite their sources, and engage their peers through the use of visual materials, smartboards, chalkboard drawings, or other teaching tools.

TIP:

Two hours is a long time to sit still, especially if small groups follow a long morning of lectures. Students should be encouraged to move about the room, and to utilize any resources in the area to further the group discussion.

End each session. Many times, especially if the group is involved in an interesting discussion, the session ends in a hurried fashion, as someone realizes the time and students immediately begin packing up and leaving.

TIP:

Spend 5 minutes after each session writing down your observations. What impressive contributions did you hear? What skills did you see demonstrated? Which student needs extra help? Be as specific as possible- this information will come in handy on your mid-point and end-of-course student evaluations.

Try to wrap up the discussion a few minutes prior to the end of the session. Spend the last 5-10 minutes summarizing the discussion and planning for the next meeting. You can even ask the students to provide what they think are the "take-home messages" from the day's session. Review assignments and roles for the next meeting, and make sure that students understand what is expected of them.

If you have any extra time, now is a good time to check in with students about their satisfaction with the group process.

You might ask:

"How are you all feeling about the way the group is going?"

"Does anyone have any suggestions about how we could do things differently?"

"What are your thoughts about the pace of the group?"

Some students may not be comfortable sharing their thoughts in the group setting. You may need to inform students that their feedback will in no way affect their final evaluation. Be sure to mention that students can come speak with you privately or give suggestions via email.

Finally, students are highly aware that small groups and small group discussions vary across a course. While complete standardization is not our goal, if your course provides any list of core concepts, make sure to distribute these to your group so that they understand what all students will be expected to know from the session.

***Take-Home Message:** There are many ways to facilitate a successful engaging small group. Do what feels right to you, but be open to suggestions on how to change the format of the group. Students sometimes know best how to help facilitate their learning!

3. ACTIVE LEARNING

Learning is an active process. Learners need to wrestle with content - they need to contribute what they know, ask each other questions, present new information, challenge each other's thinking, and help guide the discussion. They need to make connections, analyze, synthesize, and compare. So in order for small groups to be successful and for active learning to take place, students must do the vast majority of the work.

Encourage students to own the group process. It can be very tempting to always provide students with the answers they need. You are the expert, and students will look to you for information at every turn. But student participation is highest if they have ownership of the group and its work. Use the student Leader to help move the group through the case. Students should be demonstrating their ability to prioritize: What are the *most important* things that they need to know? What tests might they run in order to get the information they need?

Again, this type of student participation provides good opportunities for you to assess student knowledge and skills, and will contribute to your evaluation of their performance. Without it, you will not have any real information about what they know or do not know!

Deflect a question. Admittedly, this can feel a bit awkward. You get a question from a student (yay, someone is paying attention!) and your instinct is to launch into the answer. Resist this urge and try deflecting the questions back to the group. Now the whole group is thinking about the answer! You've gone from two people being engaged (you and the student who asked the question), to many.

You might say:

"Great question. Does anyone want to take a stab at it?"

"What do others think?"

"I'd like to hear from someone who hasn't contributed yet today."

"Anybody want to try to answer this one?"

Pose a question. By far the easiest way to promote active learning is to ask a question. Push students to really think through what they know and provide opportunities for them to identify what they do not know. Do they really understand all of the terminology? Are students

making assumptions about the patient or the patient's behavior that may be misleading? Are students jumping to conclusions already about what they think is going on?

Questions can be open-ended:

"Why do you think this mechanism is clinically important?"

Or close-ended:

"What percentage of the population suffers from malnutrition?"

TIP:

The key to using questions is to actually wait for answers! Let the silence go for longer than feels comfortable. Resist the urge to fill the silence yourself.

***Take-Home Message:** Small groups work best when learners are engaged and challenged. On balance, you should be doing more asking than telling.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Don't hesitate to reach out if you have any questions about leading small groups, or if you would like to have someone from our faculty development program come give feedback on your facilitation.

We greatly appreciate your contributions to the education of our medical students. Please know that you are playing an important role in their development as future physicians.

Thank you!

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