



Internet Journal of Medical Update

Journal home page: <http://www.akspublication.com/ijmu>

Editorial

Small group teaching and learning

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Teaching and learning is not just a one-way process as is the case in the traditional lecture, and the medical student is more than a listener¹. The call to reduce reliance on lectures by providing active learning instructional formats is well documented^{2,3}. Traditional lectures are criticized for promoting student passivity in a 'banking education' that seeks to transmit and deposit knowledge in students⁴. In contrast, small group learning in its various kinds has attracted great attention because it is believed to be amenable to active learning pedagogies. These pedagogies are believed to promote continuity of educational experience that fosters growth rather than arrest it⁵.

Small group discussions brainstorm ideas and solve problems. A small group method of teaching is an effective approach adopted by different schools with expected learning outcomes⁶. There is no set number for an ideal small group. We usually define a small group as 8–12 learners facilitated by a teacher. Small group teaching is a student-centered approach where all students join together in a free discussion on a particular topic and engage in active learning. Properly designed small group learning activities create an active and safe learning environment with beneficial opportunities for peer-peer interactions.

There is enough evidence to suggest that teaching and learning in a small group is an excellent method for developing communication skill, critical thinking, team work ability, decision making capacity, and the retention of knowledge^{6,7}. Studies demonstrate that small group learning improves students' knowledge acquisition and retention, and enhances their academic performance and attitudes toward group work^{8,9}.

There is no ideal way to teach in a small group. Different types of methods facilitate different kinds of student involvement and opportunities to learn. Some important methods of small group teaching and learning are tutorials, seminars, workshops, problem-based learning (PBL), team-based learning (TBL) and tutoring (self-help group). In many small group sessions, the teacher acts as a

facilitator and manages the learning process by promoting discussion among students, encouraging them to think and share their ideas with each other through the learning activities. Small group learning thrives when students take their learning responsibilities seriously. The responsibilities range from a willingness to collaborate with peers and facilitator, trusting and respecting each other, having the ability and willingness to deal with conflict constructively, and upholding a common sense of purpose to investing time in reflection on their work^{2,3}. Additionally, the preparedness of students before meeting, and discussion and dialogues among themselves are key to the success of small group activity. The readiness of students can be assessed through review of a task (prework), which was assigned to them to complete before starting an activity¹⁰. If the students know that they will be asked about these tasks, they will more likely contribute to the activity.

Similarly, the productivity of small groups depends on upholding responsibilities of good facilitation rather than the knowledge of contents¹¹. A facilitator needs to have competencies that help students engage with the learning material and with each other. The facilitator serves as a catalyst to lead the group by promoting meaningful discussion and dialogue among group members, and encouraging students to vocalize and evaluate their views. To achieve these outcomes, the facilitator should be able to ask clear and open-ended questions, promote debate and critical thinking, give constructive feedback, and practice active listening¹². Thus, an effective facilitator can create an engaging learning environment without the need of didactic teaching. It is encouraging to know that facilitator knowledge and skill can be developed through training, reading and reflecting on successes and challenges experienced during facilitation.

To conclude, small group learning is unique in engaging students to promote meaningful learning. However, it takes a great deal of work to successfully design and implement. Without

putting enough effort in designing and developing well thought-out small group learning activities facilitated by competent facilitators, the passive learning that characterizes traditional lectures may persist in small group learning activities.

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