

# Small Groups

## A Guide to Facilitating Small Group Activities

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### What Are “Small Groups”?

Small group instruction typically involves working with 2-10 students at a time. Small group work focuses efforts on individual learning and skill development and can be a very useful approach when otherwise working with large cohorts of students.

Benefits of small group instruction include the ability to address gaps in student knowledge, allowing students to



understand concepts and test their understanding against that of other students, and interacting with a range of student perspectives, ideas, and backgrounds. Working in small groups encourages students to share ideas and perspectives while receiving feedback from others. Small groups help students become more self-directed and independent in their learning. In addition, small group work helps students develop skills in critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and teamwork.

Challenges of working in small groups include a lack of diverse perspectives to shape interactions, a tendency to use small groups for mini-lectures and other teacher-centered activities, and more attention being paid to the facilitator, who is expected to fill in knowledge gaps and keep the group on task.

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### How Are Small Groups Used in Medical Education?

Common uses of small groups in medical education include team, case, or problem-based learning and ward or bedside teaching. These small group approaches allow the instructor to use questioning to ascertain knowledge levels and target instruction accordingly. In small group learning, students take an active role in the entire learning cycle.

Small group learning in medical education encourages critical thinking, reflection, and ownership of the learning process. It fosters development of higher-order skills such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. It develops skills in teamwork, communication, leadership, time management, and problem solving.



A student’s understanding of the material is enhanced when they can actively compare it to their peers. Small group work thus fosters deeper learning while helping the student to build valuable teamwork skills.

## How Can I Facilitate Small Groups Successfully?



When first forming groups, it is important to establish expectations and ground rules for interactions. Ground rules should include issues such as preparedness, individual contributions and participation, respect for others, guidelines for dealing with difficult/sensitive subjects, use of technology, and the facilitator's role in the group learning process.

Early group work should include students learning about one another to form solid relationships. This is an opportunity for the facilitator to learn about students' prior experiences with group work, what worked well for them and what did not. At this time, student roles such as scribe, timekeeper, etc., can be established.

Be sure to establish and communicate clear learning objectives for each session. This helps the students to know what is expected of them, both from a participation and a learning perspective. Help the students understand how the learning activities are designed to help them meet the objectives.

Wait to fill in silences, allowing the students to grapple with the information on their own. Encourage students to ask one another questions, clarify other's points, and give examples from other people's ideas. Let the students lead the conversation, intervening only to help redirect or clarify concepts as needed. Ask questions such as, "What do you think?" rather than simply answering student questions. If the group starts to veer off track, redirect them with questions such as, "Are there other ways you can think about that?" or "Have you considered X?" Reflect information back to students by saying, "It sounds like you think..." These questioning techniques place the onus back on the learner, helping to facilitate critical reflection on their learning.

Redirect attention away from students who may be dominating the conversation by asking other students what their thoughts are on the topic at hand. For students who are not participating, watch for reactions that could invite them into the conversation. For example, "I noticed you smiled when Chris said that. What are your thoughts?" Positively reinforce their response to encourage more participation.

Avoid using loaded questions that suggest you have a strong opinion on the topic. Rather, try to ask questions that encourage higher-order thinking, such as, "How does that relate to...?" or "What happens if...?" Acknowledge student effort even when answers are incorrect by validating their participation. For example, saying, "I can see why you think that. Have you considered...?" This encourages continued participation and engagement in the learning



At the end of each session, have students summarize the learning points to ensure common understanding and reinforce concepts. Identify any areas of uncertainty or confusion that should be addressed in future sessions or through independent study.