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Facilitating small groups: Key concepts and practical strategies

Northern Constellations 2018

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Conflict Disclosure

We have no financial or personal relationships to disclose.



Learning Objectives

- Identify fundamental concepts essential to small group facilitation.
- Discuss techniques to establish the small group learning environment and facilitate learning.
- Illustrate strategies to manage common challenges of small group learning.



Outline

Introductions

- Review of small group sessions
- Suggestions and Tips
- Case Consideration / Group Discussion



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Didactic Lectures vs Small Groups

- Didactic Lecture
 - Teacher-centred approach
 - Imparting knowledge to learners
 - Knowledge transfer
- Small Group Learning
 - Student-centred
 - Group discussions and exploration
 - Active and engaged learning process



Outcomes of Small Group Learning

- Development of social and interpersonal and skills
- Enhance problem-solving skills and critical thinking
- Ability to cope with uncertainty
- Innovative thinking and creativity
- Ability to reflect on own abilities and attitudes
- Ability to work collaboratively as a member of a team



Case-Based Learning Approach at NOSM

- Students are provided with a "case" that situates the learning
 - Information provided to both students and facilitators
 - Provides some guidance to learning
 - Ensure that key learning points are covered
- Apply knowledge to the cases
- Problem solving is often required, but aided
- Working in groups, learners identify, find, and use appropriate resources.



Examples of Small Groups at NOSM

- Case-Based Learning (CBL)
- Topic-Oriented Sessions (TOS)
- Structured Clinical Skills (SCS)
- Virtual Academic Rounds (VAR)
- Journal Club



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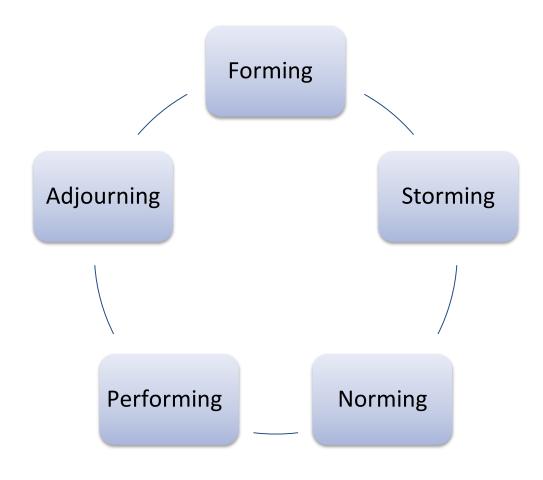
Common features at NOSM

- Facilitator / Tutor guide
- Facilitation approach and/or notes
- Learning objectives
- Session resources



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Tuckman's Model of Group Development



(Tuckman & Jensen, 1977)



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Role of Facilitator

- Manage and guide the process of group development
- Forming
 - More direct leadership
 - Provide direction/suggestions for task completion
 - "Telling"
- Storming
 - Moderator
 - Release of group tensions
 - Identify students who are struggling



Role of Facilitator

- Norming
 - Supporting group decisions and processes
 - Keep the group on track
- Performing
 - Non-interfering leader
 - Devil's advocate
- Adjourning
 - Facilitate reflection
 - Provide feedback



Role of the Learner

- Active partners in own education
- Be willing to work collaboratively
- Bring prior knowledge to build new skills
- Give and take constructive feedback



Your Turn!

What small group facilitation challenges have you faced as a faculty member?



Facilitator Challenges Associated with Small Group Learning

- Can deteriorate into mini-lectures
- Managing group dynamics
- High demand for many teachers
- If students don't know what is expected, they may prefer lectures (Harden & Laidlaw, 2012)



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Setting the Stage

- Take time for introductions and group formation
- Create an effective working atmosphere: ground rules, student role, role of the tutor
- Resist the urge to be the 'sage on stage' and rather 'guide from the side'
 - be the 'neutral chair'
 - Question, listen, reinforce, summarise
- Don't be afraid of silence
- Remember you can say 'I don't know'



Facilitation Approaches

Help guide the students accomplish the following:

- clarify the learning issues, pose key questions, discuss what they know and would like to know more about
- determine the intended learning objectives for the case
- assign responsibility for key questions, such as pursuing resources
- share findings, explore new information and knowledge



Getting the most out of a session

- Requires students to be actively involved in collaborative group work.
- Active and immersive process in which the students must take significant responsibility for their learning.
- Help students develop into reflective practitioners.
 - ability to define problems, gather and evaluate information, develop solutions
 - ability to use all of the above to address problems in a complex real-world setting



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Small Group Discussions

Meet Cindy Lam...





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Scenario 1

Cindy notices Joey has been particularly vocal in the last few classes. He responds fairly well to Cindy, but doesn't take well to being questioned by his classmates. On a few occasions, the harsh tone of his responses seems to have subdued the class discussion. Finally the issue becomes more serious when he and Sundeep disagree over his differential diagnosis. He pushes the boundaries of professionalism by loudly questioning the validity of her sources without cause. Cindy notes the rest of the class looks a bit stunned.



Question

What action(s) would you recommend Cindy take to address Joey's difficulties with conflict?

Discuss and come up with three ideas to share with the larger group



Potential Answers

Some possible courses of action:

- Identify openly to the class that the discussion has gotten heated
- Clearly restate Sundeep and Joey's positions as objectively as possible. Ask the rest of the class for their thoughts.
- Take Joey aside after class and talk with him directly, opening a dialogue about his behaviour.
- Decrease Joey's participation grade.



Scenario 2

Cindy is disappointed by the level of collaboration and problem solving she is observing, particularly in one of her classes.

Cindy notices her class seems to have been dividing the project work and working independently with minimal interaction. In addition, she's overheard Peter making a comment to the effect that he doesn't waste time with group work.



Choose your action!

Discuss each option and choose an action

- A) Check in with Peter's group to discuss the process they are using to make group decisions.
- B) Do nothing.
- C) Initiate a full class discussion about the value of group work in medical education.



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Potential Scenario for A

Peter's group effectively dodges the discussion and denies working independently. They commit to having more group discussions in class, and Cindy notices a moderate improvement in their interactions.



Potential Scenario for B

After his next presentation, Peter mentions that he did the work all himself. The rest of the class looks exasperated, they put time and energy into working together, even though it isn't always easy. Cindy notices another group starting to behave in the same way as Peter's group, and fears her class is missing out on the benefits of small group learning.



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Potential Scenario for C

The discussion turns into a debate about the value of group work as compared to the time it takes to complete the work and the variety of pressures of medical education on learners. Overall, Cindy feels the discussion helped create common language for future discussions and gave her the opportunity to make sure the course requirements are clearly understood by learners. Learners felt their voices were heard, which positively impacts their motivation.



Scenario 3

During the class introduction Sylvia brings up a clinical question. She wants to know how seriously to consider the potential impact of visiting a doctor's office on blood pressure readings, as compared to taking the readings in a patient's home.

Coincidentally, Cindy has just handled a case where patient anxiety had been important to consider in a hypertension diagnosis. A few relevant resources are at the top of her mind.



Question

What action(s) would you recommend Cindy take to address Sylvia's question?

Discuss and come up with three ideas to share with the larger group



Debrief

1) How could the scenarios have been made more relevant to your work at NOSM?

2) One thing I learned...

3) One thing I will do differently...



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