

Principles and practice of teaching in groups

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Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs

One approach to understanding students' needs in the learning situation comes from Maslow's work. His approach as a psychologist suggested that all humans are motivated to fulfil certain needs and that these needs are hierarchical: it is not possible to address higher order needs if the ones lower down the hierarchy have not been met. The diagram on the next page shows how this works.

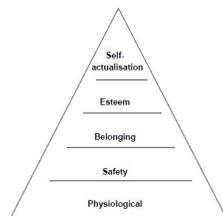
At the most basic level we have physiological needs: food, drink, appropriate temperature, rest etc.

Once those basic needs are satisfied people turn to the need to feel safe and secure. In an HE teaching environment this will rarely mean physical safety but might mean psychological security.

At the third level, according to Maslow, there is a need to belong, to feel part of a group.

At the fourth level this need to be part of a group becomes more specific – the need to feel valued and respected by others.

At the top of the hierarchy comes the need for self-actualization. What he means by this is the need to use one's talents and abilities to the full. Since most higher education is asking students to operate at this level it follows that we must do what we can as tutors to ensure that the needs at the other levels of the hierarchy are met.



Tuckman's stages of group development

Bruce Tuckman, in a seminal work from the 1960s, suggested that groups of people whose goal is to work together go through a series of processes before they are able to operate successfully together. If this is the case it would go some way to suggesting ways in which we might help small group teaching situations to work better.

Stage 1: Forming. In this stage the group members are new to each other, and there is likely to be a measure of wariness and uncertainty. Group members are likely to be polite but slightly distant from each other.

Stage 2: Storming. As group members get to know each other better tensions start to emerge and there may be a degree of conflict.

Stage 3: Norming. The group starts to develop ways of working together. This may be done explicitly, through the agreement of ground rules or particular processes.

Stage 4: Performing. Only once the first three stages are complete can the group work most effectively together.

Tuckman suggests that groups often get stuck at particular stages. The 'storming' stage may be so extreme that the group breaks up and members refuse to work with each other. Or they may remain at the 'forming' stage and never get to the point of being able to constructively challenge and work through issues.

Enhancing the effectiveness of the social processes in small group learning (1)

Consider what are the social processes that you expect in this learning situation and think of ways of making these explicit

- Discuss with the students the purposes of the group work
- Establish your expectations of them, and elicit their expectations, seeking to reconcile differences where these become apparent
- Agree a set of 'ground rules' with the students as soon as you can, that all can refer to when uncertainty or inappropriate behaviour occurs
- Ensure that students have the opportunity to learn each other's names early on.

Enhancing the effectiveness of the social processes in small group learning (2)

In small group teaching what each student brings to the experience is particularly significant. In lectures or other large group work students are frequently passive participants. In small group work we are asking them to share, to test and to refine their knowledge and skills.

Gender: there is plenty of evidence that male students are more vociferous than female students in learning situations. There is also evidence from schools that teachers pay more attention to boys than to girls. You may like to reflect on how your facilitation style is affected by gender.

Cultural origins: it is very likely that your groups will be made up of students from different UK cultural and socio-economic groups as well as including international students. Different cultures view what is appropriate behaviour in a learning situation differently. The Confucian legacy in China, for example, means that many Chinese students will view their teacher as an authority to be listened to and will certainly not challenge your ideas. Students from the US are likely to have been encouraged from an early age to speak their views in a forthright way. Similarly, some UK students will be the first in their families to attend university and may be less confident than other students for whom a university education is a much more familiar idea.

Disabilities: students are invited to declare a disability when they apply to university. It is likely that you will have been informed about students with particular disabilities in your groups. However, there are many students who do not wish to declare, or who develop a disability during the course of their studies. In thinking about how you plan and manage small group teaching it is important to remember that there may well be students with particular needs. Being open with students will help them share with you what those needs are, but also maintaining a responsive and considerate attitude will mean that learning needs can be addressed. In your planning you may wish to consider having materials available in different formats in advance and devising activities which students can engage with in different ways to accommodate any impairments or disabilities.

As well as thinking about particular categories of students it is important that we remember that all students are individuals, even though the pressures of a mass system of higher education mean we often have to deal with them as a homogeneous mass.

Structuring small group work

It is important that small group learning is structured in some way, so that students can make sense of the activities and capture their learning for future development. Amorphous discussions which simply peter out at the end of the seminar are unlikely to leave a lasting impression on students!

Include an explicit structure in your planning of small group work which will lead students into an effective learning process. Don't forget that your students will arrive at your session from another experience and will need to find a way of settling into the work you are asking of them. The following structure can be a helpful starting point:

- a. introductory activity
- b. main activity
- c. closure activity

(a) *Introductory activities*

- Name-learning activities
- Review of last session
- Brief clarification of points from the lecture
- 'What's on top' round where each student in turn says what they are thinking about at the moment: the next essay, revision for exams, trying to find a text etc. This gives you the opportunity to judge the mood of the group and make any adjustments in the activity.

Rounds are a versatile technique which can be used at various points in a session, e.g. as an introduction to see what students expect of the class ("*what I'd like to discuss/work on today/on this topic is...*"), to check progress and understanding ("*Where we have got to so far is...*"), to take the discussion on ("*To help us move forward it would be useful to...*") and finally, to check out the session as a whole ("*What I've got out of today is...*").

- Questions in a hat: students write down things they want to address which are then put in a 'hat' (or box etc). Each student picks out a paper and reads out the question. This has the advantage that students can display uncertainties without undermining their confidence or being exposed.

Introductory activities should be confined to the first 5-10 minutes of a 50-minute session so that students do not feel they are just passing time. It is important to make links between this part of the session and later parts where possible: using names, responding to points from previous sessions or lectures and also to students' expressed concerns.

(b) *Main activity – activity*

In a traditional seminar the main activity will be the presentation of a pre-prepared talk by one or more students, followed by discussion. There is lots of evidence that this approach does not always

involve students or provoke discussion in the way desired by the tutor. Below are some alternative activities which can provoke good discussion:

Addressing the 'questions in the hat' - using any of the following activities, students can work on the issues that have been raised in the introductory activity

Buzz Groups - these involve usually two or three students throwing out ideas to each other for a short period. Buzz groups do involve students, break up large groups into smaller ones and, used judiciously, can often produce stimulating ideas. The groups may all be working on the same material (case study, article, set of questions, problems to address) or different groups may be given different activities, or different versions of the same activity (e.g. a range of articles from different publications on the same topic).

Pyramids/Snowballs - the aim here is to start students off in a small group (say a pair), then to build on this in a middle-sized group (4-6), before finally reporting to a plenary session.

Syndicates - these are teams of students working parallel on the same task, usually a problem or a case study. The tutor produces the task and resources, then students report to the group.

Fishbowls - this involves an inner circle of a small group of students acting as discussants while the rest sit around them and listen until they want to contribute, whereupon they change places. This can be useful to generate discussion, but a problem can be that the same people predominate among both the discussants and the listeners, which to some extent defeats the object.

Debates - students can be formally organised into debating teams and asked to present cases and counter-cases and deal with questions from the "floor". Again, this can be extremely useful for looking at (say) two sides of an argument, but it also needs active management to secure wide involvement.

Line-up – students are asked to physically position themselves on a continuum in relation to a particular issue. This involves them discussing with other students the strength of their views on a particular issue. The group then discusses generally the issue under consideration. This may be informed by material you give them. You may wish to close by getting students to line up again, to see if their views have changed.

Main activity – questioning

There are many ways of approaching questioning to encourage good discussion and you may want to experiment with different approaches. It is possible to use questions badly: asking too many questions, asking several questions at once, asking confusing questions, not allowing students time to think. It is important to *plan* how you will use questions so that you bring out the best in the students. The following suggestions might help.

1). Use questions which scaffold student discussion up to greater levels of sophistication. Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives gives a useful approach to this: You might consider, for example, using a taxonomy like Bloom's to scaffold questions from the very simple to the more complex. Look at the list below of questions and prompts about J.S. Bach's music which illustrates the use of questions at each level of Bloom's cognitive taxonomy:

Knowledge In which period was Marx writing?

Comprehension What was distinctive about Marx's work?

Application Can you give examples to show how Marx influenced activists of later generations?

Analysis What distinguishes Marx's work from Jeremy Corbyn?

Synthesis Write a short two-part counterpoint using Marx's main ideas.

2). The philosopher Socrates suggested specific types of questions to elicit a range of responses. This model is used in the training of barristers in the UK and in other educational contexts in many parts of the world. This model covers questions:

- of clarification
- that probe assumptions
- that probe reasons and evidence
- about viewpoints or perspectives
- that probe implications & consequences
- about the question

(c) Closure activity

It is important that the learning in a discussion is captured in some way. Where groups are reporting back on activities there is often a loss of energy and students may not listen well to each other. The following suggestions are ways of helping students capture their learning:

- A closing round of 'the key things I learned from today were...' or 'the issue I want to follow up from this discussion is...'
- One or two students are asked to summarise the key points from the discussion
- A volunteer keeps notes during the whole seminar and writes these up to go on the module web site, or to distribute in some other way
- Students produce flip chart posters of key points
- Tutor summarises what the group has achieved in the session and indicates work for next session
- Discussion of preparation necessary for next session.

Practicalities checklist

It is important to arrive at your teaching sessions, on time, calm and relaxed. To help with this, the following checklist might be useful to run through a day or two before your teaching session:

- Do you have a lesson plan?
- Do you know where you are going to teach your session? Which building? The room number?
- How do you get in to the venue? Does your swipe card give you access? Is there a key to collect?
- Will you be co-teaching this session?
- Which students are you teaching? Do you have a register?
- Are there any particular needs (e.g. disability) that you need to be aware of / cater for?
- If you are a seminar leader, how do you want the room to be set up?
- Is this different to the normal set up of the room or will you have to arrive early to make any changes?
- Is there any specialist equipment to pick-up or to arrange to be portered?
- Do you need access to a whiteboard? Projector? Visualiser?
- Do you know how all the equipment works?
- Are there any specific health & safety precautions for the session? Is there a planned fire alarm during your session?

Dyslexia friendly teaching resources and slides

- Paper should be thick enough to prevent the other side showing through. Use matt paper not glossy.
- Use a plain sans serif font such as Arial, Verdana, Tahoma, Calibri.
- Font size should be 12 for handouts, 24 minimum for PowerPoint slides.
- For PowerPoint slides use dark coloured text on a light (not white) background.
- Avoid green and red/pink as these are difficult for colour blind students and dyslexics.
- Avoid underlining and italics as these tend to make the text appear to run together. Use bold instead.
- AVOID TEXT IN BLOCK CAPITALS: this is much harder to read.
- For Headings, use larger font size in bold, lower case.
- Use left justified with unjustified right edge.
- Avoid narrow columns (as used in newspapers).
- Lines should not be too long: 60 to 70 characters.
- Avoid long, dense paragraphs - space it out. Bullet points ideal. Be concise.
- Line spacing of 1.5 is preferable.