



**UNIVERSITY**  
*of*  
**GLASGOW**

## *Approaches to Small Group Learning and Teaching*

---

© Gunn, V.  
Learning and Teaching Centre  
University of Glasgow  
Southpark House  
64 Southpark Avenue  
Glasgow G12 8LB  
Email: [learn@admin.gla.ac.uk](mailto:learn@admin.gla.ac.uk)  
<http://www.gla.ac.uk/learn/>

**CONTENTS**

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 1. Introduction to Small Groups Teaching   | 2  |
| 2. Some useful general texts   |    |
| 3. Another Beginning   | 4  |
| 4. Key Considerations in Small Group Teaching  | 5  |
| 5. Interpersonal Conditions for Effective Small Group Teaching                                   | 6  |
| 6. An Introduction to Group Dynamics Theory and its Application in Higher Education Teaching     | 8  |
| 7. References and Further Reading  | 18 |
| 7. Appendix: Some introductory <b>tips</b> for those teaching in small groups for the first time | 23 |

## **Small Groups Teaching II –**

This handbook is designed to reiterate points made within the small groups II face-to-face session and also to facilitate further reflection on small group teaching for those participants unable to make the taught session.

### **Self-directed learning tasks**

If you are interested in a more in depth reflection on your own practice, please read through the handbook and undertake the activities identified as SDLTs. There are three such activities within this handbook. If, having done this you would like some feedback please contact: Vicky at [vgunn@admin.gla.ac.uk](mailto:vgunn@admin.gla.ac.uk)

### **Qualifications and a caveat**

For the purposes of this handbook 'small groups teaching' refers to any method of student–tutor interaction that involves a group of 3–25 students, which may meet only once or several times throughout a term, and which tends to be focused upon the discussion of pre-defined subject specific material. A wide continuum from non-intrusive facilitation (as in problem-based learning) to tutor-led seminars is assumed, depending upon the discipline.

### **A Few Qualifications**

With the rise in student but not equivalent staff numbers the term small is increasingly used to denote group work with 15 or more participants. Arguably, once 20 has been reached this is no longer a small group, although the division of this group into smaller sub-groups will mean that elements of small group processes will occur.

Small group work can also be used to refer to the method of Problem-based Learning, which is often undertaken in the form of small, student controlled, groups. Many of the processes mentioned in this handbook will relate to these groups as much as tutor oriented ones, as these processes are relevant to groups in general not just to a learning environment where a tutor is present.

### **Using Handbooks and Literature on Small Group Teaching – A Caveat**

The information contained within literature concerning small groups relates more to ideas and interpretations than 'truths'. Suggesting guidelines for small group teaching is always problematic. For a start, it is possible that the guidelines do not reflect the particularities of your discipline. However, more

importantly (for me), it can also lead the facilitator into a false sense of security about their facilitating and limit their listening to the group and its needs. For some groups, for example, an initial interaction / learning / expectations contract is almost a necessity; for others it may feel like an imposition. For the first year groups you may need to direct the structure of the sessions, whereas with Honours groups, groups of postgraduates and clinical groups it may be useful to encourage the group to develop its own structure either formally or merely by reflection upon group process at any given time.

Once guidelines becomes laws of action the facilitation of groups will most likely become something stilted – a situation unsatisfying for both the facilitator and group members. Empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard (described later in this handbook) are arguably attitudinal qualities required of an effective facilitator. To rely on guidelines may well lead to a block of one or all of these qualities. Basically, tips and tricks depend on the assumption that different groups respond similarly. This doesn't always happen. It is, after all, the vibrancy of the group experience that makes it such a valuable learning context.

## 2. Some useful general texts:

In general, then I would be tempted to say: avoid accepting any text books that seemingly provide certainties about how groups can be manipulated into responding the way you want. With this caveat in place, the following are useful **generic texts** which answer some of the basic '*what should I do?*' and '*why is this happening in my groups?*' questions:

Brookfield, S.D. & Preskill, S. (1999) *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for University Teachers*, SRHE/Open University Press

Exley, K. & Dennick, R. (2004) *Small Group Teaching: Tutorials, seminars and beyond*, Routledge

Kirschner, P.A. & Meester, M. (1988) The laboratory in higher science education: Problems, premises and objectives, *Higher Education*, 17:1, pp. 81 - 98

### 3. Another Beginning

*‘Teaching and Learning in small groups has a valuable part to play in the all-round education of students. It allows them to negotiate meanings, to express themselves in the language of the subject, and to establish more intimate contact with academic staff than more formal methods permit. It also develops the more instrumental skills of listening, presenting ideas and persuading’.* (Jacques, 1991)

Thus says David Jaques concerning learning in small groups. In reality, of course, the experience of some small group learning environments does not always live up to such lofty ideals. On occasion, students seem not so much to negotiate meanings as adhere to the ones that we have offered. Likewise, whilst we hope that students will acquire the language of our disciplines, this acquisition can at times seem painfully slow to the less patient of us. Intimate contact with us can also become non-existent as the concept of ‘authoritative lecturer’ is reinforced either by student silence (forcing us to an erudite monologue to avoid the hush), or by us leaping into an erudite monologue before our students have had a chance to breath let alone speak.

At the end of semesters/terms some small groups will dissolve without the students knowing each other’s names, though we hopefully know theirs. At times the notion of listening, at best, can seem to be perceived by our students as a passive state of dependence on us or another talkative student and, at worst, downright non-engagement because of an apparently apathetic approach to preparation.

Despite all of this, small group work can be immensely rewarding for both us and our students. With the right tasks and problems set, students can learn to collaborate with one another, develop interpersonal awareness, debate heatedly about a subject we thought only we were obsessed with, and challenge orally (if not in writing) accepted ideas that they have heard in lectures or read in the literature.

#### Typical Problems

Common issues identified by academic staff as ‘problems’ in their small group teaching environments are usually dividable into two main categories – those which would fall under the heading ‘structural issues’ (such as what impact does the layout of the room or design of the task have on group effectiveness); and ‘interpersonal’ issues (such as what do we do with the dominant students). In actuality, these are often symbiotic.

The most common concerns identified by academic staff with respect to their small group learning environments tend to be:

1. Freeloading:  
generally represented by a number of students staying silent and seeming unengaged whilst others seem to be doing all the work.
2. Distraction from the task:  
characterized by students being able to side-track the facilitator/tutor by engaging him/her in discussion about non-relevant material. In PBL this is more likely to be illustrated in situations where students misunderstand the information they have found or go into depth on a topic not really relevant to the case study they have been set.
3. Vocal dominance by a minority or just one person.
4. Lecturer insecurity.

Despite the variability of the causes of these observable teaching experiences, it is easy to accept the assumption that the solution for all of them is simply better task design. Task design plays a critical part, but arguably so does how we interact with our students and how they opt to interact with us.

#### **4. Key Considerations in Small Group Teaching**

Firstly, we need to remember that there is far more to small group learning than the cognitive aspects of our subjects. Whilst this may sound obvious and our knowing of it may be exhibited in Quality Assurance forms (where we are asked to specify generic skills beyond the cognitive ones traditionally associated with our subject), how comfortable do you feel with the broader interpersonal and facilitation aspects of our small group teaching? How comfortable do you feel, for example, with the thought of having to assess these broader skills let alone encourage other students to reflect usefully on them?

Interaction in small groups can be divided under three broad headings:

- content (subject material)
- task
- processes (the activities and interpersonal relationships occurring)

The 'mini-world' of the small group can also be usefully broken into at least four aspects: physical, cognitive, interpersonal, and experiential. Mapped out as a diagram these four aspects include the following (at least):

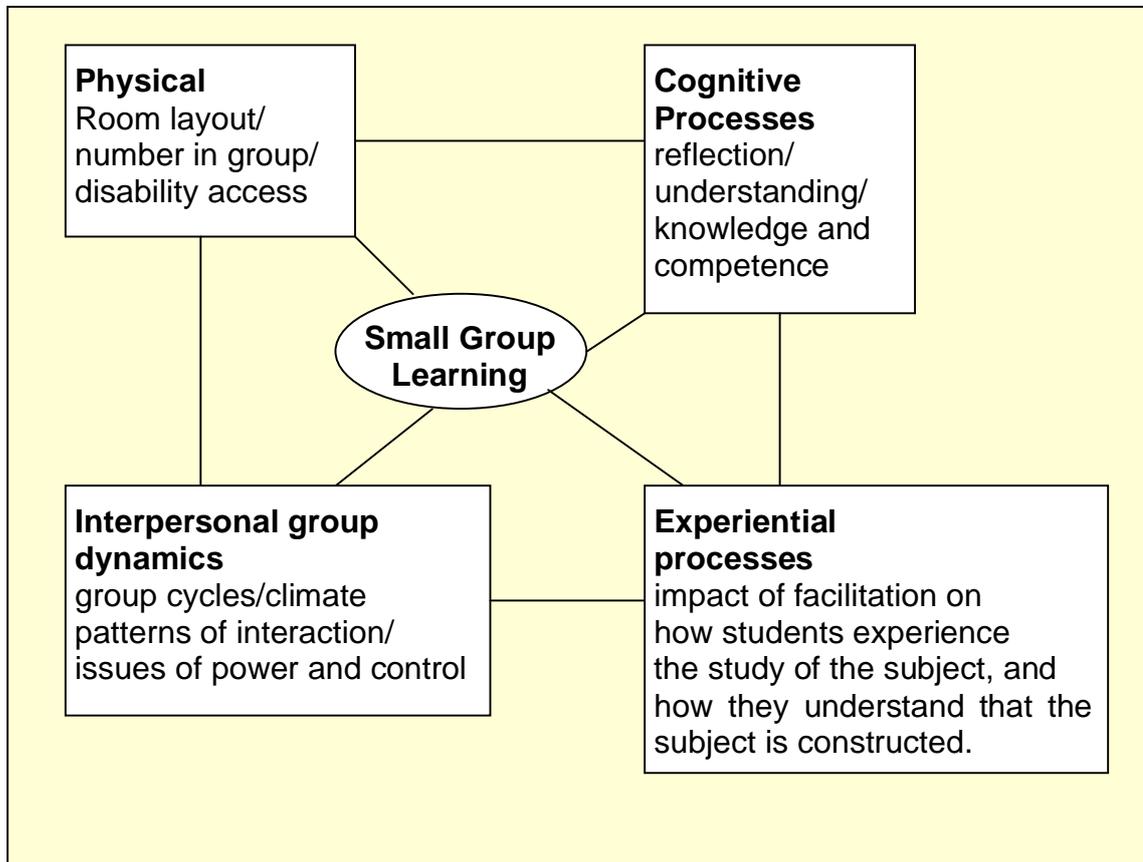


Diagram 1. Aspects of Small Group Learning Environment

### 5. Engaging students' minds in small groups

When considering the design of your small group environment it is worth having the following questions at the back of your mind:

1. What are the links between the small group work and the broader curriculum and how would the students be able to identify these?
2. What task and group atmospheres are most likely to encourage the students to take risks with the ideas being presented to them?
3. How do the tasks in which the students participate encourage them to establish hypotheses about the topics for which they can subsequently present evidence?

## 6. Interpersonal Conditions for Effective Small Group Teaching

### 7.1 Group climate effects how individuals interact with one another.

There is, of course, more to effective groups than just knowing the likely cycles. Group atmosphere and the role of the facilitator's attitudinal qualities in creating the atmosphere also need to be addressed (Douglas, 1978).

'Social climate, threat and trust' – two points to remember:

- Climate has a great effect upon members of a group: In that they will tend to behave according to the way they perceive the prevailing atmosphere.
- Expectations of members of what is about to occur in the group are also very important in determining the climate.

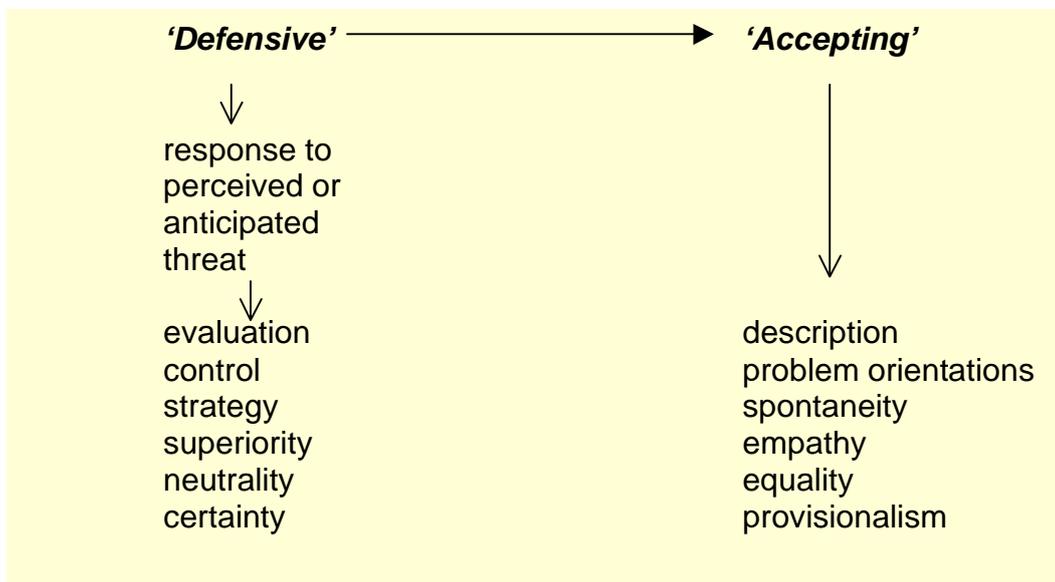


Diagram 2: Group Climate Range

We need also to become aware that certain attitudinal attributes on the part of the tutor impact on how students interact with one another and with the tutor within the group. Carl Rogers (1967) identified certain interpersonal conditions as essential for effective small group teaching. The attitudinal characteristics he outlined arguably help to create an atmosphere of warmth and approachability and helpfully maintain a group climate that feels safe and allows for open discussion.

This is an abridged version of an article appearing in *Humanizing Education: The Person in the Process*. Washington, D. C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. 1967. Reprinted with permission of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and Carl R. Rogers. Copyright © 1967 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Find on-line:

<http://www.mona.uwi.edu/idu/TrashLater/InterpersonalRelationships.rtf>.

## **Respect in Higher Education Small Groups : Professional ethics or not?**

### **Realness in Higher Education (Congruence)**

Rogers suggests that we academics need to be honest with our students about who we are and perhaps also what we know or don't know (ie admitting if we don't know the answer to a question).

However, it also has a more specific definition that relates to the type of relationship a facilitator or tutor has with her students. Carl Rogers identified this as a way of being where the individual is aware of their emotions (or dedicated to becoming more aware), how they act out of these emotions and doesn't pretend to be or feel something in public which they do not genuinely feel. Congruence with your students then is about going to them with honesty about how you feel in that situation – thereby, hopefully, engendering a level of trust. (This is not the same as saying what you're thinking about something you've heard in a seminar, ie *'that's awful'* or *'she clearly hasn't done the work I'd better tell her'*. It's more about recognising how you feel when a student does say something that is wrong (embarrassed for them, irritated by them, apathetic about them) or, through their way of speaking, does seem to have done nothing for your seminar.)

Within this understanding of genuineness should be a recognition that whilst it is desirable to know oneself it is, for professional purposes, not acceptable to act out of an emotion in a harmful way and that, in fact, self awareness should facilitate appropriate reactions to particular situations.

Do you agree with this?

### **Listening**

This needs to be done on several levels. The most important levels include:

- listening for clarity of content / discussion about the subject;
- listening to your own and your students' interactions, eg. verbal and non-verbal communication;
- ability to *empathise* with the student experience (Rogers).

### **Judgements and stereotyping**

Hidden judgements in particular have a detrimental effect on ease of communication in group-work. These judgements need not necessarily come from you. They may be being made by other student members of the group and inhibiting those students who are less confident.

Key judgements that inhibit discussion:

- *'Your not good enough'*
- *'My mind is made up. There is nothing you can say to change it.'*
- *'I don't give a damn about you.'*

- *'I'm in charge and don't you forget it.'*
- *'Don't get ideas above your station.'*
- *'You're a woman what would you know.'*
- *'You're a man what would you know.'*
- *'You're (race / nationality), they don't think analytically.'*

As well as examining and listening to your own judgements of the students, try to hear what each member of the group seems to think of the other members.

## 7.. Using Group Dynamics Theory and its Applications to understand small group learning environments in Higher Education Teaching

### 7.1 Why Bother with Theory?

#### **SDLT**

Read the following publications viewing student learning through group dynamics:

Cartney, P. & Rouse, A. (2006) The emotional impact of learning in small groups: highlighting the impact on student progression and retention, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11:1, pp.79-91. (available on-line)

Knights, B. (1995) Group Processes in Higher Education: The Uses of Theory. *Studies in Higher Education*, 20: 135-146. (English)

Viewing our small group teaching through the window of group-dynamics literature can seem to be a particularly fraught activity. Personally, as we trawl through discussions of Bion's (1961) encounter groups for (often hospitalised) neurotics, we might discover aspects of our own behaviour that are not only less than desirable in a teaching situation, but also generally embarrassing. Additionally, we may find that common Higher Education teaching methods fail to consider enough either the role which emotional responses and unconscious influences play in the learning process of a student, or how group dynamics can interfere with the success or failure of the tutorial group itself. Further to this, we may believe that an examination of underlying group processes in our tutorials is actually separate to the role of a teacher. This is especially true if our teaching philosophy focuses solely on imparting knowledge of the subject.

Institutional and other forces may emphasise the uncertain validity of the psycho-dynamic approach upon which group dynamics is based. Traditional Universities currently do not necessarily embrace psychoanalytic traditions within their understanding of teaching. Such interest is, after all, the preserve of student counsellors and campus Clinical Psychologists. Moreover, persuasive criticisms and challenges to the psycho-dynamic approach, particularly by Carol Rogers and continued by Client Centred practitioners, provide reasonable grounds to approach it with caution.

Whatever our resistance to the group dynamics approach, what is important is to acknowledge that such resistance exists and then, like good analysts, begin our reflection on both our resistance (itself possibly an expression of fear) and the actuality of the small group teaching situation (loaded as it is with group processes that are only now being investigated in the research literature). To do this works such as those of Bion (1961), Tuckman (1965), Mann et al (1967), and Agazarian & Peters (1981) provide useful narratives with which to compare and contrast our own experience. In terms of reflective practice they are thus crucial theoretical texts worthy of engagement (Knights).

Mann is particularly useful because he identifies the different responses experienced by leaders of groups. Arguably, our students responses to us, both in terms of the subject material they present and also in how they act interpersonally, are responses to us as the class leaders. For example, Mann (1967) discusses the responses of group members towards the leader when the leader is named or perceived as the analyst. In his discussion he notes how a group will respond with dissatisfaction when the leader fails to provide the “expected control, direction and mildly nurturant behaviour which many students anticipate on the part of a teacher” (p.75). Mann points out that such a situation often elicits a response of what he terms ‘dependent complaining’ – dissatisfaction/frustration that the leader isn’t being the leader - an extension of Bion’s (1961) similar comments p.29f. Such an experience is worth noting in the transition from tutor-led to student-led teaching.

- **From this we can hypothesise that individuals in groups, who do not have their expectations of how a group tutor should be met, may become resistant and uncooperative.** Imagine the impact this would have on students who in first year receive didactic small group teaching methods and in second year are thrown into student-facilitated problem based learning ones. It is important that such changes are mediated through induction programmes.

One example of this occurred at the beginning of the GTA pilot Module 1A. The first two sessions were undertaken in a facilitative rather than directly led manner. Session two, particularly, was designed in such a way that participants would control the discussion by their input to the debate. Apart from headings on an otherwise blank sheet of paper, it was up to the group to direct the conversation. I chose not to warn them that I was deliberately standing back and allowing them to control the discussion’s direction. At the end of the session, feedback on the methods was received and several of the students questioned the lack of structure, one in particular explicitly commenting on my input:

*The debate was great, but I believe that Vicky should be more strict as a moderator, and she could set some orientations, however flexible they may be, so that we can follow up and save time”.*

In a sense this response is that of frustration and indicates the willingness on the part of some group members to deflect responsibility to another, in this

case identified, individual to orient the discussion. (And why not? After all, this would certainly mirror their previous experience.)

This student's response does have consequences, however, as subsequent frustration with the tutor/leader may become the focus of group activity rather than the task at hand. In an environment where participants expect didactic approaches (even if this expectation has been fed only by hearsay rather than actual experience) but receive student-led ones, there is likely to be resistance and frustration on the part of some participants similar to that identified in the psycho-dynamics literature. For me, this awareness alleviates some of the stress of receiving evaluations that call for more structure in an environment that deliberately sets out to be student-centred. However, one still needs to take cognisance of the fact that some frustration is being expressed and this frustration may act to obstruct learning.

It also challenges me to look at my own behaviour as a participant in learning groups. How often have I become frustrated with the course leader because I have felt they are leaving the structure of the session to the group? If I feel this frustration what does it actually say about me as a participant in groups? How do I bridge the gap of expectation and actuality in my own learning situations within groups? And how much courage is required for taking responsibility for the structure of the session myself (even when someone else is identified as the leader)? If I do not take this responsibility when I am a participant, why should I expect my students to do so?

Further examples of group dynamics hypotheses based on the theoretical literature:

### **6.3 The individual in a group interacts within a dynamic where all the group members are involved in the effective functioning of the group.**

Mostly, the effective functioning of a group is the responsibility of all its members collectively. Rarely is only one person responsible for the complete break down of a group. Essentially, each person in a group interacts within a dynamic of interpersonal relations and, therefore, needs to be aware not only of their own strengths and weaknesses but also of how the group process works.

Most individuals enter learning groups with a wide range of personal experiences, beliefs, ways of being, that interfere with its smooth running. Indeed, often it is only by actually participating in the group that people begin to identify how they behave/what they feel in groups and how this affects their ability to communicate interpersonally. In essence, if you like, you will know more about your strengths and weaknesses as a group facilitator in a learning group by the time of its conclusion.

#### 6.4 Every action within a group has meaning (and consequences)

Most tutors when asked about the core conditions for effective group work would stress that the atmosphere in the group should be 'safe' (Brown & Atkins, 1988). However, a simple action can actually send out a message that the group is not a safe place in which to express ideas. For example, in the second meeting of a seminar group a tutor found herself frustrated by the lack of preparation undertaken by one of the students. She got angry with him, asking in a sarcastic tone, "Is there really any point in you being here?" She then told him that unless he 'buckled down and did some work' she wasn't prepared to continue with him in the group.

In subsequent meetings the students did prepare but their input was highly conventional in nature and once students had said their ideas they didn't engage in further dialogue with one another.

Whilst this may seem to be a caricature of a scenario it illustrates a few useful points:

- ***The facilitator seems to have the power to dramatically alter the atmosphere within her/his groups.*** This is important as "*members of a group will tend to behave according to the way they perceive the prevailing atmosphere*" (Douglas, 1978). In this case students might be scared that the anger would, at some point, be turned on them.
- ***The way a member of staff is with one individual in the group will affect how all the participants think she/he will be with them.***
- ***'Acting out' of an emotion in a manner such as sarcasm does not encourage a sense of safety.*** *Indeed, in a case such as the one above (a worst case scenario) the group can develop an anti-facilitator mentality and actively obstruct subsequent learning. It can, of course, make the students 'gel' as a team because the tutor increasingly comes to represent a common enemy!*

One might argue that such a method encourages active participation exactly because the group develop their sense of safety by conceiving of the tutor as the enemy. In this light it seems to be a motivating factor.

There are, however, a few responses to this claim. Firstly, if one accepts that safety is an integral quality upon which effective group learning depends, then one is unlikely to be encouraging deep learning.

Also, the use of sarcasm can be difficult for students to read accurately. For some the use of sarcasm is a culturally acceptable method of humour, for others it is an insult. This leads to at least two other points:

- ***What is culturally acceptable in one group may not be in a group with mixed cultures/nationalities/ethnicities.*** This is seen to be true not just in the case of face-to-face group work, but also group work facilitated on-

line (Berge, 1996, on-line) where, particularly with distance learning, the possibility of different cultures being represented in the groups may be high.

- ***The way an individual makes a sarcastic comment (or, for that matter, any comment) will affect the way in which it is received by the group members.*** Intent and non-verbal factors such as tone play a crucial role. In this case the staff member acted out of anger. It was not her primary intention to humour her students. Moreover, any form of public humiliation of a student, regardless of the tone and intent, may send out a message to the students that they 'could be next'.
- ***On the other hand, patience, congruence and professional conduct (ie waiting until after the meeting to talk with the student, recognising and being honest with yourself about why lack of preparation angers you, and tackling the student privately rather than publicly) can lead to the group feeling safer and being more prepared to be open in their discussion.***
- ***Often groups' members are inclined to give the facilitator the power to dramatically influence the groups' atmosphere and then be unsure of how or unwilling to change it themselves.***  
In this case the member of staff arguably misuses the power she has as the authoritative figure within the group, but similar situations can and do arise in peer-group learning.

## **6.5 Participants in groups will sometimes avoid taking responsibility for a group activity.**

### **Issues of power and control are always present in groups.**

This is an area to which Carl Rogers paid far less attention than some commentators would like. Arguably, if the core attitudinal qualities he outlined are present in group members there should be an alleviation of the power dynamics. In institutions such as hospitals, schools, ecclesiastic organisations, or universities, power hierarchies are formally established through employment procedures, institutional culture and organisation, societal culture, and perceptions of authority. Issues of power and control within groups are, therefore, an inevitable occurrence! Information on this provided here is derived from Tavistock Institute influenced material (Tuckmann, 1965; Weber, 1982; Johnson & Johnson, 1997).

## Power Dynamics

### (a) Search for a leader -

Identification by group members of the person who has the 'right' qualities in the group, who seems confident, competent.

Where there is no obvious person to focus on team will focus on written directives,  
eg '*but the handout says ...*'

### (b) Start to give power to the leader

*"What do you think we should do?"* Implicit statements: *"You take responsibility"* *"We'll do what you suggest ..."*

### **BEGINNINGS OF DEPENDENCY** - Look to the leader for approval

### (c) Start to take power back.

- Leader makes a suggestion, another member of the group says 'no' or group goes silent.
- Team members place impossible demands and expectations on the leader - when she fails to live up to their expectation – blame/attack her.
- Member of the group becomes increasingly disruptive; changes the subject; starts discussing irrelevant issues.
- Two members showing similar leadership qualities may find themselves played off against one another, or may become the focus of the group's dissatisfaction.
- If the leader is a formal leader may start to see emotional responses to task demands:
  - apathy
  - resentment
  - negativity
- Team members begin to recognise differences in each other. Focus on these rather than similarities.

### (d) Start to genuinely share power and respect each other's attributes. degree of interdependence.

Diagram 2: An Introduction to Power Dynamics in Groups

### **Group processes have observable cycles.**

As well as observing issues of power and control in groups, group workers have also identified what has become known as 'group cycle' (Tuckmann, 1965). This represents a sequence of symbiotic processes (not necessarily in a chronological order), each one linked to and dependent on the other, which seem to be readily observable in groups.

#### **(a) Group Cycle – Stage 1 – 'Forming' or 'Co-creation'**

- *Defining and structuring procedures and becoming oriented*
- *Conforming to procedures and getting acquainted*
- *Recognising mutuality and building trust*

This stage is characterized by inclusion / approval issues, dependency on leadership, orientation and ice-breakers.

#### **(b) Group Cycle – Stage 2 – 'Storming' or 'Chaos'**

- *Rebelling and differentiating*

This stage is characterized by control issues, counter-dependence on leadership, recognition of decision-making processes, attempts to create order and establish operating rules, and emotional response to task demands.

#### **(c) Group Cycle – Stage 3 – 'Norming and Performing' or 'Cohesion'**

- *Committing to and taking ownership of the goals, procedures, and other members*
- *Functioning maturely and productively*

This stage is characterized by affection, interdependence, functional relationships, negotiation, and collaboration.

#### **(d) Group Cycle – Stage 4 – 'Transforming' or 'Change'**

- *Terminating* Once a learning group has accomplished its task it needs to embrace change. This stage is characterized by redefinition and disengagement.

Diagram 3: Group Cycle (Tuckmann, 1965; Weber, 1982; Johnson & Johnson, 1997)

**It is, therefore, advisable for the facilitator of small group learning to:**

- “Introduce, define, and structure the learning group;
- Clarify procedures, reinforce members for conforming to the procedures, and help members become acquainted;
- Emphasize and highlight the cooperative interdependence among group members and encourage their engaging in both trusting and trustworthy behaviours;
- Accept rebellion by and differentiation among group members as a normal process and use confrontation and constructive negotiation to help group members establish their independence from each other and the prescribed procedures;
- Facilitate the members’ committing themselves to and taking ownership of the group’s goals, procedures, and other members;
- Be a consultant to the group, providing needed material and information resources for the group to function effectively;
- Signal termination and help the members move onto future groups.”  
(Johnson & Johnson, 1997)

## 10. References and Further Reading

### 10.1 Further general texts on small group teaching in Higher Education

Brown, G. & Atkins, M. (1988) *Effective Teaching in Higher Education*, London: Routledge

Gibbs, G. (1995) *Assessing Student Centred Learning*, Oxford: OCS D

Jacques, D. (1991, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn) *Learning in Groups*, London: Kogan Page

Johnson, D. W. & Johnson, F.P. (1997, 6<sup>th</sup> edn) *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills*, Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

McKeachie, W. J. (1999, 10<sup>th</sup> edn) *McKeachie's Teaching Tips*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

Rogers, C. (1994, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn) *Freedom to Learn*, New York: Merrill.

### 10.2 Recent discipline-specific case studies

#### Humanities, Social Sciences, Education, Law, Accountancy & Business

Bonanno, H., Jones, J. & English, L. (1998) Improving group satisfaction: making groups work in a first year undergraduate course, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 3:3, pp. 365-382 (Accountancy)

Bunch, W.H. (2005) Changing moral judgement in divinity students, *Journal of Moral Education*, 34 (3) pp. 363-370.

Gunn, V.A. (2000) Transgressing the Traditional? Teaching and Learning Methods in a Medieval History Access Course, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 5:3, pp. 311-322.

Knights, B. (1995) Group Processes in Higher Education: The Uses of Theory. *Studies in Higher Education*, 20: 135-146. (English)

Le Brun, M. & Johnstone, R. (1994) Teaching Methods Which Promote Student Learning, in *The Quiet Revolution: Improving Student Learning in Law*, The Law Book Co., pp 255-311.

Macmillan, J. & MacLean, M. (2005) Making First Year Tutorials count: operationalizing the assessment-learning connection, *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 6 (2), pp. 94-105. (History/Politics)

Timmins, G., Vernon, K. & Kinealy, C. (2005) Seminars and Groupwork, in *Teaching and Learning in History*, Sage (Teaching and Learning in the Humanities in Higher Education), pp. 146-152.

### Sciences, Statistics and Mathematics, Engineering

Pedrosa de Jesus, H. et al. (2005) Organising the chemistry of question-based learning: a case study, *Research in Science & Technological Education*, 23(2), pp.179-193 (Chemistry)

Teixeira-Dias, J.J.C. (2005) Teaching for quality learning in chemistry, *International Journal of science education*, 27 (9), pp. 1123-1137. (Chemistry)

Perrenet, J.C. et al (2000) The Suitability of Problem-based Learning for Engineering Education: theory and practice, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 5:3, pp. 345-358. (Engineering)

Santhanam, E. et al (1998) Concept mapping: How should it be introduced, and is there evidence for long term benefit?, *Higher Education*, 35: 3, pp. 317 – 328 (Genetics)

Spronken-Smith, R. (2005) Implementing a problem-based learning approach for teaching research methods in geography, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 29 (2), pp. 203-221. (Geography)

Brown, G.H. (1999) A Group-learning Approach to Academic and Transferable Skills Through an Exercise in the Global Positioning System, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 23:3, Pages 291 – 301.

Kinchin, I.M. et al. (2005) The evolution of a collaborative concept mapping activity for undergraduate microbiology students, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 29 (1) (microbiology)

<http://www.amstat.org/publications/jse/v1n1/garfield.html>

paper on using small group teaching in *Statistics* (1993 publication)

### Medicine, Vet. Medicine, Dentistry, and Nursing

Fryer-Edwards, K. et al (2006) Reflective Teaching Practices: An Approach to teaching communication skills in a Small Group Setting, *Academic Medicine*, 81:7, pp. 638-644.

Miflen, B.(2004) Small groups and problem-based learning: are we singing from the same hymn sheet? *Medical Teacher*, 26 (5), pp. 444-450.

Moust, J.H.C. et al. (2005) Signs of Erosion: reflections on three decades of problem-based learning at Maastricht University, *Higher Education* 50 (4), pp. 665-683

Visschers-Pleijers, A. et al (2004) Exploration of a method to analyze group interactions in problem-based learning, *Medical Teacher*, 26 (5), pp 471-478.

### **10.3 Psycho-dynamic theory as applied to small group environments**

Agazarian, Y. & Peters, R. (1981) *The Visible and Invisible Group*, London: Routledge.

Bion, W. (1961) *Experiences in Groups and Other Papers*, London: Routledge.

Douglas, T. (1978) *Groupwork Practice*, London: Tavistock

Mann, R.D. et al (1967) *Interpersonal Styles and Group Development: An Analysis of the Mentor-Leader Relationship*, New York: John Wiley.

Tuckmann, B. W. (1965) Development Sequence in Small Groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 63: 284-399.

Weber, R.C. (1982) The Group: A Cycle from Birth to Death. In *Reading Book for Human Relations Training*, eds. Porter, L. & Mohr, B., NTL Institute, 68-71.

## **SMALL GROUP TEACHING - A FEW INTRODUCTORY TIPS:**

The trouble with tips and tricks is that they can seem either patronizing in their obviousness or too ambiguous in their practical implementation. The tips supplied here are intended only as initial support. Please see the handbook on Approaches to Small Group Learning and Teaching for more in depth material and useful references.

- It is important to be well prepared, but it is also useful to show the students HOW to answer their questions when you are unsure of or don't know the answer yourself. As you cannot always be present when a student is thinking about a subject, showing them how to find the answers rather than relying on you to provide them is helping them develop a useful, transferable skill.
- When the group meets for the first time remember that orientating the students to purpose and approach expected helps focus them on what they need to be doing. Creating an effective working atmosphere is, therefore, important from the outset. Welcome your students in and set them an introductory task that will quickly encourage them to talk to a person in the group that they don't know.
- **Icebreaker Tasks** – there are too many to list here, but you might like to try the following:
  - a. 5 mins preparation. Put the students into pairs, get them to ask each other questions, such as name, interests, reasons for taking the subject. Then get them to introduce one another to the whole group.
  - b. 5 mins preparation. Put the students into groups of four and get them to identify one assumption they already have about the subject. These statements can be progressively more complex for different years. Get them to identify their perceptions and expectations about a subject. Then ask each group to nominate a spokesperson who will feed back the ideas to the whole group. (Useful for groups of 10 or more).
  - c. Get the students to physically rearrange (where possible) the room in the way they would like their group to have it.
- **Contracts**: are very useful methods of establishing ground rules and clarifying expectations and aims in groups. Do not be afraid to negotiate the layout of the room, the format of the group, the form of presentations (where possible) with the members. Activity: 30-40 minutes preparation. Get the students to generate ground rules for discussion.
- When negotiating ground rules / layouts, remember to offer the group various scenarios (particularly first year groups where the experience of

group work might be limited) from which they can choose the ones most suited to their needs. Previous experience of groups as passive environments might lead the students to resisting your attempts to engage them (normally by remaining awkwardly silent).

- If you have used a contract check in (half way through the course) with the students that they are upholding it.
- Facilitating discussion is not easy if you talk all the time. Remember to listen to both what students are saying and how they are saying it.
- **Don't be afraid of silence.** Sooner or later someone will give into the irresistible urge to speak. Try to differentiate between a silence caused by fear of speaking and one caused because the students don't understand your question.
- If you promise to find something out for the group, do it.
- **Use leaderless groups** – ie divide group into two sub-groups; alternate between the two (this temporarily removes the tutor from the situation and is, therefore, useful if you have identified that your group is being inhibited by 'you – the tutor').
- Encourage preparation of questions by the students before they attend the seminar.