Practical Tips to Increase the Effectiveness of Small Group Teaching and Learning

Cynthia Kreger, M.D.
February 2012


----

Goal

- To present systematic way of thinking about and planning for small group leadership
- To highlight core leadership tasks and strategies which can increase effectiveness of teaching and learning

----

Objectives

At the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Describe the characteristics of effective small groups
- Describe strategies for facilitating learner engagement and participation
- Describe strategies to deal with disruptive behavior in small groups
- Describe strategies to consolidate learning

----

Benefits and Rewards of Small Group Learning and Teaching

- The right conditions and context for:
  - Meaningful, lasting learning
  - Teamwork and collaborative learning
  - Person centered learning
  - Examining expectations, assumptions, beliefs, values
  - Identifying what is still needed

----

Unique Challenges

- Very demanding, multiple roles
- Requires thinking in the midst of action
- Requires different teaching repertoires
- Can be messy
- If unprepared, can be overwhelming

----

Bad education conducted consistently for a sufficient number of years can take on the aura of worthy tradition.

Westberg and Jason
Effective small group leaders
- Possess an understanding of leadership tasks
- Have a repertoire of strategies
- Have a plan but are able to modify spontaneously
- Demonstrate a collaborative versus authoritarian approach

4 Key Leadership Tasks
- Facilitate trusting relationships, collaborative learning, and safe risk taking
- Facilitate engagement and active participation
- Monitor group process and respond to disruptive behavior
- Summarize, solidify and consolidate learning

4 Key Leadership Tasks
- Facilitate trusting relationships, collaborative learning, and safe risk taking
- Facilitate engagement and active participation
- Monitor group process and respond to disruptive behavior
- Summarize, solidify and consolidate learning

The importance of the first session
- Sets tone for future sessions
- Only one chance to create first impression
- Preventive strategy
- Goal to create an environment that supports risk taking
  - Obstacles:
    - authoritarian style of leadership
    - competitive learning environments
    - not allowing enough time for this task

Room Set Up:
- Minimize authoritarian stance
- Maximize dialogue and collaborative interaction
- Will vary with the learning activity

Introductions:
- Sets the tone
  - What type of leadership do you want to convey?
  - What type of relationship do you want to establish with the learners?
- Process of unmasking
  - Demonstrates we are all more than we seem
  - Paves the way for acceptance and sharing
Introductions

- Choose a low risk activity
  - Personal but not necessarily intimate
  - One that requires each person to make a statement
  - Once people have spoken they find it easier to speak again
  - Helps your diagnostic task

Strategies for Building Trust and Fostering Collaboration

- If needed legitimate small group process/learning activities
- Clarify expectations
  - Roles and responsibilities
  - Expectations/guidelines for behavior
    - Learner’s often do not know what it means to be an active participant

Strategies for Building Trust and Fostering Collaboration

- Help them understand relevancy of the topic
- Help learners feel ownership for learning goals and process
- Can be hard due to “unconscious incompetence”

Help learners recognize that they are being collaborative

- They often do not know what this looks like
- Be explicit
  - Whenever learners build on each other’s thinking, or help each other think through a problem – point it out
- Use everything to teach

Subsequent sessions: “check in” with group members

- How they are doing
- Any new ideas or important thoughts since last session
- Solicit input into process – What’s working? What isn’t?

4 Key Leadership Tasks

- Facilitate collaborative learning and safe risk taking
- Facilitate engagement and active participation
- Monitor group process and respond to disruptive behavior
- Summarize, solidify and consolidate learning
Facilitating and Encouraging Participation

The ultimate nightmare:
Being faced with a group of silent, seemingly bored learners, who have no interest in the topic.

Strategies for facilitating participation
It’s all about risk taking
- Acknowledge preparations
- Identify issues which emerged
- Emphasize areas which interest them
  - helps build relevance, ownership
  - allows you to identify learning edge, target teaching to specific needs

Strategies to facilitate participation
Grab attention with case or critical incident
Focus attention with priming/framing the question
Modify session around groups concerns
Remember the power of wait time – 3 seconds makes a difference
Listen actively & non-judgmentally

Ways to encourage depth
- Build what students say into conversation using specific words
  - “as Cathy has said…”
- Ask others to build on contributions
  - “John has shared…who would like to build on this…”
- Make clear your statements (and others) are open to challenge
  - “here is one approach, but what are other ideas about other approaches…”

More tools to encourage depth
- Ask probing questions and ask student’s to do the same
  - “Say more…; “Explain what you mean by…”
  - “What do you want to know further about what John has said?”
- Help student’s become aware of underlying beliefs or assumptions
  - “What led you to that conclusion…”
To get more learners involved

- Scan the group
  - "Anyone else have anything to add?"
  - "Anyone have a different view?"
- Reinforce the quiet group member
  - "Someone who has not had a chance to speak..."
  - "John, it looks like you have something on your mind..."
- Maintain neutrality

To foster interaction among learners

- Break into subgroups
- Build in reflection breaks
- Encourage group members to ask each other to clarify points – or constructively challenge views presented

Common complaints of SG members

- Questions were not answered
- Ideas were ignored
- Conversation was disjointed and disconnected

Behaviors inconsistent with active listening

- Interrupting
- Going off in a new direction
- Responding in ways that disregard contribution
- Ignoring or disregarding attempts to add something
- Texting, reading, sleeping, cross talking

What can you do?

- Model desirable behavior
- Monitor the process and if needed explicitly address - educate students, actively intervene

4 Key Leadership Tasks

- Facilitate collaborative learning and safe risk taking
- Facilitate engagement and active participation
- Monitor group process and respond to disruptive behavior
- Summarize, solidify and consolidate learning
Monitor the Process

- In relation to goals and schedule
- Be aware of non-verbal messages
- Observe group members
  - Demonstrating facilitative behaviors?
  - Any negative impact on the group?
  - Adoption of consistent roles?
  - How are learners affecting each others’ behavior?
  - How are they relating to each other and to you?

Responding to disruptive behavior

- Be diagnostic
  - Observe what is happening
  - Characterize the problem
  - Get to the source
    - Lack of buy in? Generational issue?
    - Competition in the group?
    - Other “elephants” in the room?

Responding to disruptive behavior

- Facilitate group members intervening
  - “what is facilitating your learning and what is hindering it?”
- Intervene in stages
  - Catch eye
  - Catch eye and frown
  - Draw attention of the group
  - Remind group of ground rules
  - Describe what is happening and how you feel
  - Meet privately

4 Key Leadership Tasks

- Facilitate collaborative learning and safe risk taking
- Facilitate engagement and active participation
- Monitor group process and respond to disruptive behavior
- Summarize, solidify and consolidate learning

Process, Summarize, Solidify Learning

- Unexamined experiences do not provide reliable learning
- Be sure to allow time for this, otherwise:
  - Students leave without sense of what was accomplished
  - Different students have different views of take home message
  - Valuable events and learning quickly fade
  - Students leave without a sense of closure

To enhance the lasting value of the session

- Reflect with learners what group accomplished
  - refer to goals
  - use of white board can enhance sense of accomplishment
  - use technique of scaffolding, comparisons, contrasts
- Ask group members to identify key things they are taking away
  - helps reinforce message as well as promotes consideration of other benefits
More tools to solidify learning

- When providing your take home point:
  - Tie comments to groups or individuals insights, previous comments, or learning goals
  - Tie comments to “next steps” for individuals or group
  - Take home principle which can be generalized to novel situation

- Ask the group to reflect on the process
  - What did you or they do that helped or hindered learning?

Preparing for Small Group Leadership: What is your predominant leadership style?

Why is this important?

- Meaningful learning is not an automatic outcome of our teaching
- How we teach today predicts how we teach tomorrow
- We often function out of habit

Common underlying beliefs about learners and learning

Authoritarian teachers tend to see
- Learners as vessels
- Main role as providing learners what they need to know
- Learners job is to listen and absorb

Collaborative teachers tend to believe
- It is essential for learners to do own learning
- Learners can make contributions to group process and build knowledge together
- Their main role is guide or coach
Characteristics of Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pure Collaborative</th>
<th>Pure Authoritarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learners are</strong></td>
<td>Active participants in their learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learners are</strong></td>
<td>Engaged with each other and the task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When Q's are</strong></td>
<td>Group tackles question, responds to each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>raised or invited</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Style of leadership</strong></td>
<td>Situated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructional Strategy</strong></td>
<td>Selected in response to learners</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why is this so important?

As authoritarian style increases:

- Safety and harmlessness goes down
- Learners become more careful about "exposing" shortcomings
- Confidence in problem solving goes down
- Active, meaningful participation goes down
- Dysfunctional behavior can increase

Additional Resources