

Maximizing learning in small groups

“Many people fail because they conclude that the fundamentals simply do not apply in their case.”

ML CICHON

This outline provides the most important tips and facts for faculty to maximize learning in small groups.

Fundamentals

- Arrange the seating such that each participant can maintain eye contact with the others (circle or horseshoe).
- Learn participants' names. Get participants to learn each other's names.
- Find out how knowledgeable participants are about the subject matter.
- Make the subject relevant to participants' interests. If you don't they will forget it all.
- Disturbances and excitements must take precedence. If they are ignored you will lose the participants.
- Clarify the goals, learner objectives, or outcomes for each session.
- Be enthusiastic about the course material. Enthusiasm is contagious.
- You may initiate a discussion by setting a problem, by asking an open-ended question, or by beginning with a controversy. Invite the participants to speculate. Allow them to play with ideas.
- Talk less and listen more to increase participation. Try not to be the center of attention. Try not to make decisions for the group. Decisions should be made cooperatively through discussion.
- Do not set yourself up as an authority (even though you may be one). This produces anxiety, discourages participants, and invites resentment.
- Don't rush to cover all the content. It is more important to be effective than efficient. Use praise often and recognize minority opinions.
- Allow periods of silence to occur. The participants may be thinking!
- Summarize when a clear breakthrough in learning has occurred, a key learning point is discussed, or an important piece of expert opinion is explored.
- Summarize or clarify the topic of discussion, when needed, to keep the conversation moving.

Considerations

Reward—Social rewards such as praise and recognition lower anxiety, raise self-esteem, promote more active participation, and produce a comfortable climate in which creative work emerges.

Activate—At all times try to get the participants to be active (thinking, feeling, speaking). If they are not active they will not learn.

Feedback—Give constructive and timely feedback. The more feedback the faster the learning. The less feedback the greater the confusion.

Allow them to fail—Establish a comfortable atmosphere in which the learners can risk failing. Safe failing is conducive to learning and creativity.

Leadership and resources—Groups with leaders function better than groups without leaders. However, do not monopolize the role. For maximal performance the group should exploit the resources (natural abilities, unique experiences, knowledge, diversity) of its members.

“If you give a man a fish, he will eat it and soon be hungry.
If you teach a man to fish he will never be hungry.”

CHINESE PROVERB