Small Group Facilitation

UCSF Bridges Curriculum

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Objectives

- Describe characteristics of effective learning in small groups
- List stages of small group formation
- Set a group up for effective learning
- Ask questions that facilitate discussion
- Recognize and tackle common group problems
Effective Small Group Learning

- Active participation by all
- Collaboration, not competition
- Team members and facilitator come prepared
- Focus on application of knowledge and/or problem solving
- Facilitator enables discussion and does not dominate
- Safe learning climate
Understanding Group Formation

Group formation progresses through 4 stages:

1. **Forming**
   - Group members get oriented, test boundaries & roles, establish a safe environment

2. **Storming**
   - Group members resist social pressures, polarization may occur

3. **Norming**
   - The group becomes cohesive and performs effectively

4. **Performing**
   - Group functions independently

_Tuckman Psychol Bull 1965_
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Preparing for Small Group Facilitation

- Know the goals, objectives and content
- Understand the small group’s place in the bigger context of the curriculum
- Know students’ prior knowledge and what preparation they received
An Effective Facilitator

- Guides, models, encourages, supports
- Is flexible, patient, friendly, enthusiastic
- Can be silent, resists the urge to dispense information
- Makes learning a shared responsibility, engages the entire group
- Uses open-ended questions to promote discussion
- Refocuses the group when needed, reminds group of session goals
- Discusses problems that arise
- Lets the group decide on group activities
Setting up for success

- Group in a circle, facilitator is part of the group
- Don’t let people sit outside the group or form inner/outer circles
- Address the whole group, even when responding to one person’s comment or question
Starting your small group: the forming stage

- Introductions, check-in
- Shared understanding/agreement of goals
- Elicit and address questions about preparation work
- Divide any roles that need dividing (scribe, time keeper, reporter)

Ground rules, for example:

- All are invited but not forced to talk
- Give each other space, no one dominates
- Disagreement about an issue okay, judgment of a person is not
- Rules about use of phones, computers etc.
Checking in: The storming phase

- Facilitators may need to be directive
  - Find balance between those who tend to dominate, and those who are quiet
  - Identify and resolve conflicts
- Closely observe, use open-ended questions, role model and provide feedback
Open Ended Questions

- **Expanding**: What other research designs might have been used for this question?
- **Clarifying**: Can you rephrase this using an example?
- **Explaining**: Why do you think this is important?
- **Defending**: Can you defend using Drug X with Patient A?
- **Hypothesizing**: How do you think factor Y contributes to disease B?
Redirecting questions to the group

- What do other people think about...?
- Let’s see what ideas the group has about this.
- That is a good question. Why might this be important?
- I don’t know that I have the answer. Maybe we can think together about possible solutions.
Getting the discussion to the next level

- Encourage creative thinking, curiosity and new ways of thinking:
  - Can we think of pros and cons...?
  - To play the devil’s advocate....
  - How else might we approach...?
  - Let’s challenge our assumptions, what if...?

- Split group in smaller groups/pairs to work out (parts of) a question/problem
Dealing with problems

The group is:

- Unfocused:
  - *Redirect, restate goals of session*

- Slow to warm up:
  - *Be patient. If discussion does not pick up with open-ended questions, make questions more focused*

- Hostile:
  - *Find out the reason and discuss it openly, without defensiveness or judgment*
Dealing with problems

A person is:

- Timid:
  - Be patient. Find opportunities to include her/him in the conversation: “What are your thoughts on this?”

- Dominant:
  - Try to involve others in the conversation, elicit alternative opinions: “What do others think of this?” Can also take person aside, encourage “step-up and step-back”, revisit ground rules
Ending the group session

- Allow time for a summary of what was accomplished.
- Ask for feedback on what worked, what worked less well, and what can be done to make future sessions more effective.
- Review the goals for the next session (if applicable) and any prep work needed.
Working with a co-facilitator

- Discuss the session plan ahead of time
- Divide roles according to strengths/expertise
- Debrief at the end of the session
Excelling at small group facilitation

- Get feedback:
  - From the students
    - Formal evaluations
    - Informal at the end of the session
  - From a colleague (co-facilitator/observer)
  - Yourself
    - Reflect on what you did well, what you could improve on
    - Take notes and review prior to the next session
Further reading:

- Tuckman BW. Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin* 63.6 (1965): 384.


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