

Theory Into Practice Strategies:

Small Groups



Teaching and learning in small groups provides opportunities for students to be more interactive than in settings such as large group lectures. Generally the intention of small learning groups at Flinders is for students to

- discuss issues, questions or problems
- examine their personal views about course topics
- clarify their own understanding through comparing and contrasting their own views with those of their teachers and peers

Small group settings and the interactive nature of tutorials can, however, present cross-cultural challenges for tutors and students. When expectations and intentions differ widely between students and teachers, successful interaction is challenging and sometimes difficult. This is especially the case when expectations are tacit or taken for granted. It is important for teachers in small group settings to **monitor** participation patterns and to be aware of and **anticipate** cross-cultural barriers to learning. It is equally important to look for opportunities and engage with the diverse cultural knowledge and experiences represented in the class.



Small group classes frequently expect students to **engage in debate and critique of ideas**. Academic debate can be difficult because it may produce conflicts of ideas or values between students or between the teacher and students. Debate and critique can produce considerable anxiety for students who do not expect to disagree with or query what is said by the teacher or who might feel that it is unsafe to do so. Such students often expect to reserve questions, if they have any, for private discussion with the teacher. Variable cultural attitudes towards knowledge also shapes students' understanding of and willingness to engage in questioning of ideas.

Teachers and other students can **unknowingly contribute to the difficulties** that international students, Indigenous students and students from non-English speaking backgrounds face in class. It is easy to forget that Australian English, the Australian accent, speed of speech and examples we use might be hard for international students or students from non-English speaking backgrounds to understand. Students from some cultural backgrounds have reported feeling 'invisible' or not valued by their local colleagues. This occurs when others do not listen to or understand what is said by students from diverse cultures, do not take up their points in the ongoing discussion, or do not address questions and comments to them. Furthermore, in seeking 'the familiar', all students, including local students, tend to form cliques and fail to include others in their conversations or small group related study activities.

Initial difficulties experienced in small group settings can have a **cumulative impact**. Unfortunately, students from diverse cultures are often 'defined' by their initial responses to small class activities and this can lead to or exacerbate the interpersonal gulf between themselves and their teachers and fellow students. Their initial reticence can also contribute to poor basic conceptual understanding of course material at a critical point in their study, which can have considerable impact on further conceptualisation in later segments of their student program. In addition, the problem might be invisible to the tutor until it is too late to help the student successfully manage the situation.

Issues with small group discussion

A common concern in small group teaching is that some students are **reluctant to speak**. There are many causes of students' hesitance to speak in class and unless one has been in similar situations, it is difficult to understand and empathise. Some students might not understand the need to initiate interaction, or may feel uncomfortable doing so because it is so different from their previous educational experience or because they lack confidence using English publicly. For example, some international students may have difficulty speaking in class because their personal educational culture dictates that students don't speak unless asked to by their teacher. International students have also reported that sometimes they struggle to find appropriate words in English, or feel they can't compose their ideas in clear sentences on the spot, or feel self-conscious about their accent.

Strategies and tips for inclusive small group teaching

Inclusive small group teaching requires advance preparation to ensure that the content and materials are inclusive and that expectations are articulated and clarified. Use inclusive teaching and learning strategies and activities, such as those described below to overcome the barriers to effective participation and to provide effective feedback. These strategies are designed to assist all students to

- feel more comfortable about contributing
- avoid 'talking off the top of their head' and instead use evidence to support their views
- prevent the 'talkers' from taking over

Advance preparation

- Find out about your students' cultural and educational origins and experience to provide information to support your planning
- Design a brief needs analysis questionnaire for your students to complete at the start of classes (or on-line beforehand), for example
 - ask students to report/rate their level of confidence about communicating in English orally or in writing or about any other core skills for the topic
 - ask students about their previous educational experiences and, if they're not in their first semester, what they find different or difficult about learning at Flinders
 - ask students to estimate their current understanding of cultural interests, values and experiences
- Provide material to help students **prepare** before classes, such as
 - a list of terms and concepts that are central to the topic of discussion
 - guiding questions to focus students' reading of journal articles or texts for the small group discussion (use these in class also to focus discussion)
 - a question or statement to consider (or develop a brief response about) that will form the basis of discussion
- Plan alternative or supplementary activities for students who might have difficulty with any core activities

Tutorial environment

- **Establish a safe, culturally inclusive tutorial environment** (See TIPS Teaching and Learning: Designing Culturally Inclusive Environments)
- **Establish a culture of questioning**
It is reasonable in a learning context for students not to know the answers. The goal is not for you as teacher to provide answers, but for all students to add what they know to construct correct answers. Your expert contribution is quality control of questions and elaboration on students' answers.
- **Set up brainstorming groups**
Ask students to go into small groups at the beginning of class and brainstorm all the issues about which they feel unsure from lectures, other course activities and the recommended readings.
- **Ensure Inclusive Discussions**
 - Ask students to write (or pre-prepare) a question from the last lecture for the whole group to discuss
 - Provide students with a chance to **prepare contributions** before presenting to the whole group
 - Give students **thinking space** to ease the pressure of speaking spontaneously
 - Give students a minute or two to **think** or to **make notes** or jot down some **keywords**
 - Ask students to **share in pairs**
 - Provide pairs/sub-groups with **overhead transparencies** to make notes on and then share the conclusions of their discussion. This way students become familiar with standing up and making brief presentations
 - Use '**buzz groups**' (small sub-groups, formed for a few minutes) so that students can discuss issues and answer questions before **reporting back** to the whole group
 - Provide time for students to **review their presentation** with others in the class before the whole group discussion
- **Structure activities so that no one becomes 'invisible'**
 - Assign a range of roles and responsibilities for group discussions, where students are encouraged to experience different roles over time. Possible group roles could include
 - leaders** - to ensure the task gets done
 - recorders** - to make notes of the discussion
 - observers** - to ensure everyone gets a voice and their ideas are recorded
 - counter-arguers** - to ensure alternative views are canvassed
 - summarisers** - to present the group's conclusions to the group
 - reporters** - to present the group's conclusions to the whole class
 - Have debates where all students argue only **one side of the debate**. Students are invited to imagine who would have a stake in arguing that position and what evidence they might use. Next, students generate counter-arguments for the **other side of the debate**
 - Provide clear guidelines for pair work, including the components of the tasks and the roles and responsibilities of group members



Cross-cultural learning

- **Use activities to foster genuine collaboration**
 - Invite and provide support for Australian students to **buddy** an international student during tutorials to encourage participation and check back with the buddy to assess its effectiveness
 - **Pair** proficient and less proficient English **speakers** in tutorials to encourage understanding and language development but give roles for the partnership so that there is mutual benefit
 - Establish **study groups**, especially for first year students, which have a special responsibility for the next class discussion
 - Plan mini-projects to be completed in pairs between tutorials, **pairing students** from different cultural origins
- **Include students' cultural and personal knowledge and experiences**
This can provide valuable insight for local students about their own assumptions and foster cross-cultural understanding in the group.
- **Ask all students to prepare for the following week a comment or question from their own cultural viewpoint and experience**, especially focussing on what seems to be taken for granted, or what seems 'strange'. Remember that students are speaking as individuals from a particular culture, not as a representative of their culture.
- **Address cross-cultural perspectives and potentially controversial issues in a positive way**
Discussing these issues can help students develop their own perspectives beyond mere dualistic, right/wrong thinking (Perry 1999) and develop their capacity to provide a theoretically defensible rationale for their own views and to consider the viewpoints of others. However, only do this if you feel able to manage it successfully. See <http://www.flinders.edu.au/teach/teach/inclusive/controversial.htm>
- **Use a range of methods to explore different positions on topics eg**
 - role play
 - debates
 - brainstorm
- **Manage any conflict that arises**
Both teachers and students should be aware of and moderate their own 'over attachment' to ideas or arguments and moderate their 'overemotional reaction to criticism or challenges' (Boice 1996). These may manifest as
 - students expressing biased or prejudiced views
 - disagreeing in non-constructive ways
 - offending other studentsEncourage the students to listen to other viewpoints and to argue from a view supported by evidence.

Small group teaching review

To what extent do I..... Highly evident = 5 Somewhat evident = 3 Hardly evident = 1 Not evident = 0	What evidence do I have that my approach is effective?
Find out about the students' expectations of small group teaching and learning. <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0
Adopt tutorial activities that all students can participate in successfully. <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0
Plan to support effective classroom debate as well as sensitive and respectful recognition of difference. <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0
Favour all students equally when asking for contributions to discussion. <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0
Provide support for students who are adjusting to the demands of an Australian classroom. <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0
Support the building of sensitive cross-cultural awareness and relationships among students. <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0

References and further resources

Ballard, B. & Clanchy, J. (1991). Teaching Students from Overseas: A Brief Guide for Lecturers and Supervisors. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.

Boice, R. (1996). First-Order Principles for College Teachers: Ten Basic Ways to Improve the Teaching Process. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company.

Perry, W. G. (1999). Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in College Years: A Scheme. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.