



Teaching toolkits

Small group teaching

Small-group teaching is probably the best space for students to digest, think through and integrate ideas they've encountered from other sources such as lectures or textbooks.

It's usually the best way for students to grapple with tricky ideas that, once understood, transform students' perspectives on a subject.

Your role as a teacher in a small-group setting is ideally to:

- get a discussion started
- step back into a more responsive, listening role
- give students plenty of time to really think about the implications of new ideas
- help students integrate the discussion with their existing knowledge and understanding
- provide prompts, where necessary, to keep the discussion going and sometimes to move it in a new direction
- draw the session to a close by helping students acknowledge what they've learned (and where to go next to keep learning).

What small-group teaching means

Small-group teaching is a distinct mode of teaching and is closely linked to active learning.

It allows students – typically in groups of eight to 12 – to practise, make mistakes and work out how to think about what they're learning, on their own terms.

Small-group sessions are often run as a follow-up to a lecture, perhaps a day or two afterwards.

They allow students to get instant replies to queries or misunderstandings and to see that they're not alone in being confused or unsure.

People learn from what they do more than from what they hear.

A small-group session can make a difference between students being able to repeat what they've been told and actually mastering it.

Putting it into practice

First, decide whether small-group teaching is an appropriate way for students in your subject to learn.

If students need to get to grips with difficult concepts rather than just learn new material, small-group teaching may well be the best way.

Next, work out how much time and resources you have to devote to it.

If your module or programme includes a very large cohort of students, make sure there are enough colleagues to enable all students to take part.

Help students build knowledge gradually

Consider which themes or ideas are most appropriate for the whole set of sessions. This might be decided by lectures. Look for a logical sequence.

It can be more useful for a small group to cover a narrow subset of a theme, rather than the whole of a lecture. Generally, people learn best when something is a mixture of the familiar and unfamiliar. This is known as 'scaffolding'.

Within each session, try presenting a paradox, dilemma or apparently impossible problem (a problem that can be quickly solved can shut down inquiry as soon as it's answered).

Depending on the challenge, you could try:

- picking up an idea presented in a lecture and putting it into an unusual context
- taking a new idea and making it more familiar
- asking someone in the group to explain an idea, and then asking 'does anyone have anything to add?' or 'can anyone think of a situation where this doesn't apply?'

Get students to do some preparation

One way to encourage more discussion in the group is to ask students to prepare some work beforehand, such as reading an article.

Inevitably some students won't do this. You could:

- make the reading optional, but refer to it in the discussion to demonstrate its usefulness
- find a way to make it compulsory (e.g. through a Moodle quiz)
- have one or two students do a brief informal summary of an article each week so you know students will have read at least some of the items over the course of a module

Look for different approaches to a subject.

1. On your own, do a 'free-writing' exercise on how you came to understand the concepts you want your students to discuss. See if you can retrace your steps, without assuming your students will make the same journey.
2. Consider using tangible objects, models or artefacts in a session. For example, get students to discuss the significance and meaning of an everyday object, such as a coin.
3. Identify supporting materials, such as summaries, articles and related modules within the programme (even if not all the students take them).
4. Ask your colleagues about their understanding of a concept.
5. Use Google Scholar to see if there is scholarship on teaching the identified themes.

Let students do the talking

Your role will be to give the odd nudge, reassurance or minimal answer to a question.

Find a style that comes naturally to you. Some teachers like to joke or share their own disasters (to be more approachable). Others offer themselves as a more expert, quiet but shrewd guide.

If you find yourself giving mini-lectures, try changing tack and asking more questions.

Be comfortable with silence

This is perhaps the greatest skill in small-group teaching.

Count in your head after asking a question, or after a student says something and there's no response. Let one of them crack before you do! Some people need a lot of time to gather their thoughts.

If there's complete meltdown, ask them what is not working. Are your questions too vague, perhaps?

Top tip

Identify three aspects or facts about each concept so that you can introduce them at intervals during the small-group session. This will give you a sense of structure, help keep the discussion relevant and give students space to do the talking.

Dealing with problems

One or two students dominate the discussion

Possible solution: ask them to take a step back (perhaps have a word outside the class).

The discussion grinds to a halt

Possible solution: Try to get students thinking about the subject in a new way, or to draw out their confusion (which they're likely to be embarrassed about).

You might approach the theme counterfactually: 'What would have happened if Hitler had not risen to power?'

Other 'emergency' questions might include: 'What struck you most about this week's lecture?'

You could also try relating the subject to something in the news.

Some students don't say anything

Possible solution: If appropriate, gently ask the student what they think about the discussion.

Choose your moments carefully, as putting a student on the spot can make them uncomfortable and even less willing to participate.

Students get distracted

Possible solution: Have a brief activity where students talk to the person next to them about a specific question.

Ask them to put away their phones.

Where to find help and support

arena@ucl.ac.uk: contact the UCL Arena Centre

For more ideas and guidance about running small-group sessions:

- speak to your programme director or module leader about the themes they'd like to see covered
- ask colleagues informally about what has worked well for them, or about problems you might be having
- attend an Arena event, see the events calendar on the Teaching and Learning Portal.

bit.ly/SmallGroupTeaching: to access this full online guide, including links and further resources.

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