H850 Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

Pack 5
Parts 1 and 2

Ways of Teaching

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Course Chair (2003)
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Introduction
Jo Tait

This introductory overview of the pack, *Teaching Methods and Approaches*, aims to provide a context for your reading, and suggests some ways to engage with the ideas and reflective activities contained within and available on the Programme website.

The other packs in the set are exclusively text-based (though supported by web-based resources). They focus on:

- professional capability
- student learning
- assessment, feedback and learning
- design for learning.

There are inevitable overlaps between the different perspectives addressed by each pack. We have designed every pack as a stand-alone resource to support and inform your understanding of students learning in higher education (and in other adult learning contexts), whether or not you are working towards a formal qualification.

Our readers

There is a broad range of readers who may find this pack useful or rewarding. You might be:

- a lecturer or tutor with a particular disciplinary background
- relatively experienced or fairly new to your role
- a supervisor in charge of students in work-based practice
- a librarian or IT resources manager with responsibility for supporting students who need to manage information
- a guidance professional with a generic interest in student learning, OR
- you may have another role that we have not yet imagined.

Working with this pack

As with all the other packs in this series, the materials contain a mixture of theoretical materials and practical suggestions for your teaching. This particular pack is probably the most practical and has a mixture of print and online resources: for this reason, what were called chapters in previous packs are called parts in Pack 5. We anticipate that you will continually consult and use the various resources in Pack 5 for your assignments and to support your day-to-day teaching.

The first Part of Pack 5 (in hard copy) will be helpful if your work involves getting students learning together, in whatever way (although the author, Andy Northedge, tends to talk in terms of a tutorial). It is hard to imagine, these days, any teaching context in which group learning is not part of a programme. In higher education, learning is increasingly seen as a social *and* a cognitive practice, while 'employability' agendas require students to have developed abilities to work together. Part 1 will help you understand, plan for and manage group learning. The appendices provide a range of practical resources that we recommend you dip into, probably with a particular question in mind.
Part 2, the other hard-copy resource in Pack 5, is about lecturing. If your role in higher education is described as 'lecturer' this will obviously interest you; however, many other practitioners will find that they need to give presentations of an inspirational or information-giving nature and this Part will be useful for these contexts too. The body of the Part will help you think through the circumstances in which lecturing is the best support for learning, what students should expect, how you can engage them in active ways with your lecture and, finally, how you can gather feedback about whether your lecture has been successful. Again, the appendices to Part 2 provide advice and practical hints that will support you by addressing many of the most common problems that we experience in presenting and lecturing.

‘Resources for teaching and learning’ forms Part 3 of this Pack. In teaching at a distance (as this Pack, essentially, tries to do), there are particular challenges that you may want to appreciate as you engage with our ‘teaching’. Of course, even in traditional classroom environments, the designer or teacher is not able to control the curriculum that is ‘received’ by the reader, but this is even less within our control in distance learning. Your reflections on your own learning may become particularly apt as you work with Part 3, focusing on resource-based learning, including a range of new media. Here you have an opportunity to experience learning from resources and to consider your own selection and use of material – written, online, audio-visual and interactive.

Parts 4 and 5 have been freshly rewritten and designed as ‘learning objects’ by Chris Pegler, the new Chair of the Programme. Her previous work with online learning includes a lead role in H806 Learning in the Connected Economy and here you have an opportunity to experience one of the newer modes of eLearning – as an environment and as a process. All should become clear when you follow the links. We hope that you will take every opportunity to experience and reflect on your learning in this new environment: please use the conference to share your reflections, your ideas for improvement and any ways in which you hope to use what you have learned in this innovative mode of teaching and learning. We will also be interested to hear how you used the online resource: did you print all or some of it, or did you study it online?

Although Parts 6 and 7 are provided online, this is more because their content is not necessarily of interest to all participants in the programme: they have been adapted and redesigned as learning objects from their original print format.

Part 6, ‘Demonstrating’, will be useful if your work involves practical demonstrating or fieldwork. Inevitably, there are overlaps between these practices and Part 1, in its consideration of group working. In Part 6 and its related appendices, you will find many ways to support and encourage practical learning, whether or not you consider that demonstrating is part of your primary role.

Part 7, ‘Supervising’, focuses on a range of different supervision roles, primarily workplace supervision and research supervision, and includes undergraduate project work. The quality of teaching in these areas has become increasingly important as funding councils work to raise standards of research and, at the same time, practitioner expertise in the workplace is more highly valued for its vocational and professional relevance. This online pack offers focused and practical advice for different contexts and to address specific problems.
As you have probably found in earlier packs, the seminal theories and research dotted throughout these materials will only come to life when you try them out in your own practice or use them to try to resolve your own questions. You will find that the Activities (in hard-copy and online) suggest ways in which you might do this, at a range of levels. Do engage with some of these activities: experiment and work with them to challenge and vivify the ideas. Adapt the suggested activities to make them appropriate. Or, having read the theories that seem to give rise to a suggested activity, feel free to make an informed decision that this particular one really doesn't apply in your environment.

The continuing construction of the materials

At this point, you may find that some understanding of how these materials have been produced may help you decide how you wish to use them. In this pack, as in each of the others, every part will have originally been written collaboratively, as is the tradition in the Open University. Even where a single academic has been named as the author, materials are produced through the interaction of groups of experts – a Course Team. For this pack, we have re-ordered (and re-edited) materials originally produced by different teams in another format and sequence, so a new level of collaboration has emerged since the materials were first written (between 1997 and 1999). And, as you can see, new materials will continue to be added in new modes and formats.

Minor changes to the content of each part in this pack have largely resulted from our re-structuring of the Certificate Programme. In making our amendments to the structure of the Programme and its assessment, we have listened and responded to evaluations and feedback from students, tutors and examiners. And, in the wider environment, we recognise that changes to higher education and the accreditation of teaching in higher education have influenced the needs and expectations of participants. All these factors have affected the pack you now hold in your hands. Its current format allows it to continue to improve in response to feedback and changing needs, so we hope the course will become even more participative, with your engagement and contributions. Please send your comments to iet-pgctlhe@open.ac.uk
Part I Teaching in groups
Andy Northedge

Overview

The tutorials are where you realise what the subject is really all about.
The tutor feels he has to answer all his own questions. We used to try to join in, but we leave it up to him now.
I do most of the talking, but I think that's inevitable — students expect it.
I never know whether to let the discussion keep flowing, or step in and correct students' mistakes.
Some students you just have to force to talk — embarrassing though it is for everyone.
I'd never stick it without the tutorials.
Discussion's generally a waste of time — especially as no one does the reading. Collective stumbling in the dark.

Teaching a group of students might involve your leading a discussion, or working on problems, or a variety of other activities, the distinguishing feature of which is that instead of a one-way flow from you to the students, there is an interaction. But what is supposed to come out of 'interacting' with students? Why invest valuable student and staff time in it? And are all kinds of group teaching similar, or is group work used very differently in different disciplines? Does it matter if you do most of the talking, or should everyone in a class talk? How do you know when you've had a successful group session?

This part focuses on the purposes of group teaching and on the particular challenges it poses. It also looks at the different forms group teaching can take, and considers general principles underlying successful work, exploring the following questions:

1.1 What does the term 'teaching in groups' cover?

Does what you are doing count as group teaching? What is the range of activities that can be included under this heading?

1.2 What claims are made for teaching in groups?

What do teachers and researchers say are the particular benefits of teaching in groups?

1.3 Why don't students join in?

Although groups allow students an opportunity to express their ideas and ask questions, the atmosphere can often be awkward and low key. Why is this and what can teachers do about it?

1.4 How important is structure?

Some teachers advocate letting discussion flow 'naturally' by setting as few constraints on a group as possible, while others argue that structure is the essence. What are the pros and cons?
1.5 What works well according to students?

We look in detail at a study of students’ attitudes to tutorials. What do they think is a good tutorial, and what do they expect of tutors?

1.6 How can I prepare effectively for group teaching?

Preparing and thinking through purposes and aims for group work is a very complex activity. Here we provide some practical guidelines for structuring your plans that draw on the ideas embedded in the rest of the part.

A series of appendices provide practical advice for particular group working contexts. Browse these for help in dealing with a new or familiar but challenging group teaching situation.

Teaching in groups is an intriguing art. Though it can be a source of great satisfaction, it also presents some tough challenges. It provides an excellent opportunity for developing confidence in your role as academic, practitioner and teacher but, at the same time, it can be quite unsettling and frustrating when things are not running your way. Like all forms of teaching, group work rests in part on the soundness of your grasp of the subject, but it also calls on you to develop other capacities:

- imagination in devising ways to get your students engaged with the subject;
- ability to get on to good terms with your students;
- insight in picking up the mood of the group and recognising what is going on;
- skill in handling the flow of ideas, questions, challenges and requests;
- judgement as to when to intervene and when to let things take their own course;
- experience of what approaches tend to work in what circumstances and a repertoire of handy solutions to difficulties that arise.

If this seems a daunting list, do not be alarmed: as part of your induction into the social practices of your professional life – and as a student yourself – you will already have begun to develop some of these capacities. Moreover, as you will see in this part, there are various ways of achieving acceptable results, while you build on your skills and understanding of group processes. What is important is:

- to be clear about what you are trying to achieve through your group teaching;
- to reflect after sessions on what has happened;
- to think strategically about how to develop your approach next time.

1.1 What does the term ‘teaching in groups’ cover?

There are many kinds of group work, ranging from small to large, from highly formal to free-ranging, and involving a variety of patterns of activity. A number of different labels have been attached to these, such as tutorial, seminar, problem class, and discussion group. However, what these terms mean in practice varies between teaching institutions and academic disciplines. Some writers have resolved this difficulty by using ‘tutorial’ as a generic term to include any kind of group work led by a
tutor. Anderson (1997, p. 184) lists the following different forms of 'tutorials':

- discussion of a particular topic with advance preparation by students;
- short presentation by a student which is followed by wider discussion;
- discussion centred on the solution of problems and the wider points of theory that are raised by them;
- particularly in the first year of undergraduate study, tutorials may be used to pass on advice concerning essay writing, examinations and other academic tasks;
- a forum where individual students are able to raise difficulties that they are experiencing in understanding aspects of the course.

Similarly, Lublin uses 'tutorial' as a broad, inclusive term:

In Australia a tutorial is usually a period of class time secondary to and supportive of the primary class time which is most commonly the lecture. Tutorials typically contain 12 to 15 students, although tutorial classes of 30 are not unknown, and in some maths and engineering subjects, lecture-size classes are called tutorials when the students are solving problems or carrying out exercises.

(Lublin, 1987, p. 1)

In the first key reading, Jaqueline Lublin, a senior lecturer at the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Sydney, gives examples of the very different kind of activity that she includes under the term tutorial.
EXTRACT 1.1(A)
TYPES OF TUTORIAL AND LEVEL OF CONTROL
Jaqueline Lublin
Activity 1.1 Questions about tutorials

We can see just how different these three types of ‘tutorial’ are if we pull apart these outlines.

The figure below poses seven questions about different aspects of Lublin's three tutorials. I've put in my own answers for the pathology tutorial (derived mostly from what Lublin herself said).

Fill in your own answers for the other two tutorials.

You will end up with a grid that highlights some of the key differences between these three examples of group teaching.

Figure 1.1 Differences between three group sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pathology</th>
<th>Statistics</th>
<th>Social theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. What is the purpose of the tutorial? | • identifying specimens  
• understanding causes of pathology |                             |                             |
| 2. What does the tutor do? | • introduces topic  
• hands out specimens  
• asks questions |                             |                             |
| 3. What do the students do? | • study specimens  
• answer T's questions  
• listen to Q & A |                             |                             |
| 4. What types of interactions are going on between tutor and students? | • one-to-many  
• one-to-one |                             |                             |
| 5. What types of interactions are going on between students? | • none |                             |                             |
| 6. What role does the tutor play? | • instructor  
• questioner  
• challenger |                             |                             |
| 7. What do you think is making learning happen? | • thinking about Qs while studying specimens  
• Listening to others' answers  
• checking against own |                             |                             |
As you can see from the first row of the grid, group teaching can serve a range of distinctly different purposes.

Rows 2 and 3 show both tutor and students involved in quite different kinds of activities within these groups.

Rows 4 and 5 show different types of interactions within the groups, both between tutor and students and amongst the students themselves.

Row 6 shows how a tutor can use her position, as both subject expert and group leader, to play a range of different roles within a group. There are many useful functions a teacher can perform – and in a group setting ‘telling’ the subject matter to the students is not one of the leading ones.

Row 7 shows that groups can be set up to enable distinctly different kinds of learning process.

Of course, group teaching can take a wider variety of forms than Lublin’s three illustrations can illustrate: law students take part in disputation; architecture students critique a piece of design work; geography and biology students take part in field trips; maths and engineering students solve problems together; management students role-play conflict situations; chemistry students collaborate in lab work; drama students put on performances.

The common strand is that these are all learning situations in which exchanges between students and between tutor and students are expected to make the learning happen. But how? What learning does person-to-person interaction enable that could not more effectively be delivered by straight presentation in a lecture, a text, or an interactive computer program? Why has group work played a major part in higher education? What are the claims made for it?

1.2 What claims are made for teaching in groups?

Let’s begin with you. What claims would you make? You already know a lot about learning in groups from your own experience as a student, and perhaps more recently in your teaching work.

Reflection 1.1

Think back to when you were a student.

(a) What kinds of group learning did you experience? Wherever you keep your reflective notes, jot down at least three situations in which you have experienced learning in a group.

(b) What did you learn in groups that you couldn’t have learned at least as effectively in other ways? Write down the three most important benefits you gained from group learning.

(c) Perhaps you don’t think you learned much in groups. If so, was that because of the way the groups were run, or because of you, or do you think group learning simply doesn’t offer much in your subject area? Again, note down your answers.
To give you something to compare with, here are my answers:

(a) I thought of a first-year maths tutorial with three of us and a senior lecturer; a second-year social psychology tutorial; and a third-year occupational psychology tutorial.

(b) I can't remember learning anything in the maths tutorials – just being scared stiff by the step up from a friendly school maths teacher who wasn't much better than me, to being quizzed by a 'genius' whose every utterance seemed unfathomable. I felt ashamed of wasting his time. Similarly, in the social psychology tutorials, I was mesmerised by the abstractness and complexity of the questions we were posed, and unable to comprehend the contributions blurted out by peers as we lurched from silence to agonising silence. I learned mainly that I was slow-witted and inarticulate, and that anything was better than a tutorial. But finally, the occupational psychology tutor asked questions I could engage with, and at last I felt able to establish some kind of identity as a thinking person with a point of view. This soon came through in my essay writing and I began to get much better grades.

(c) I have to say that in the first two cases I think the tutorials were conducted very poorly. I regret the loss of the learning I could have been achieving, and the confidence I failed to build. The third year tutorials also had weaknesses, but I could live with them because at least I was participating.

I hope yours is a less pathetic case, and that you were able to spend your group learning time more profitably.

**Reflection 1.2**

Now let's come at it from the other end. Think about learning groups you yourself have led recently. What do you think you were trying to achieve? What would have been good outcomes for your students?

Note down the three most important purposes of your group sessions.

(Are they the same as for Reflection 1.1, question (b)? If not, why not?)

As you read the continuing extract from Lublin, you can compare your ideas about the purposes of group teaching with those of Lublin, who outlines the purposes of tutorials in a guide for higher education teachers. As you read, see whether Lublin includes your three key purposes.
EXTRACT 1.1 (B)
WHY ARE TUTORIALS IMPORTANT?
Jaqueline Lublin

This is a densely packed list of purposes. I summarised them for myself like this.

Tutorials enable various aspects of learning, such as:

- engaging with the subject at a level that is personally meaningful;
- practising thinking and problem solving;
- making connections, internalising concepts;
- changing attitudes and values;
- practising speaking the language of the subject;
- practising techniques.

They also help students to:

- become socialised into the academic world;
- take on adult ways of learning, responsibility for self, critical thinking;
- maintain motivation and commitment.

Does this account include the purposes you listed? Does it bring out other points that you might well have listed? Do you agree with the claims Lublin makes?

How do her claims compare with those of other academics? Jean Rudduck, a lecturer at the Centre for Applied Research in Education at the University of East Anglia, carried out studies of group teaching using video recordings, interviews and discussions with students and staff. Here she reports some of the purposes that groups of teaching staff attributed to group learning.
EXTRACT 1.2
HARNESSING THE DISTINCTIVE POTENTIAL OF SMALL GROUP WORK

Jean Rudduck
Rudduck suggests that these lecturers in dentistry and physics have aims for their group teaching that are quite similar to those of teachers in more ‘discursive’ subjects such as literature and philosophy. And these are not aims that prioritise ‘delivery of knowledge’. The dentists want to develop reasoning; the physicists, application of principles. The dentists want to develop judgement; the physicists, critical standards and questioning of evidence. Both groups want to expose students to a wider range of ideas. Both value the social side, the development of group spirit and motivation.

In fact, their lists of aims have a lot in common with the purposes set out by Lublin. But I want to dwell on two aims in particular in the physicists’ list. The first is the one about clarifying thinking through talking. An experienced teacher put it to me like this:

When you are reading, writing, or thinking on your own, it’s easy to get stuck. Discussion is a way of flexibly playing with language and ideas – of negotiating meanings.

In other words talking is a way of thinking – a way of coming at difficult ideas more actively and informally. It gives insight into the way new ideas can be put to use. If you have managed to get your students talking in an engaged way about a relevant subject, then they are almost certainly doing some important learning.

I also want to highlight the aim Rudduck herself elaborates on – about learning to ‘communicate as physicists’. This is more than simply acquiring a vocabulary. It is developing a way of thinking, sharing a conceptual framework, knowing the criteria against which propositions and evidence are judged. It is becoming initiated into the culture and ways of thought of a particular field of academic discourse. And all this is acquired, she says, through successive approximations – constantly refined through practice in engaging with that discourse.

**Reflection 1.3**

Glance back at your notes from Reflections 1.1 and 1.2. Would you change or add to your answers?

Now, begin to think about your own teaching and your students. What might your students want from attending your classes? Would they take a fairly pragmatic view? Which of the following do you think they would hope for?

- help with the next assignment
- help in coping with texts they have to read
- help in understanding lectures they have attended
- help with identifying and correcting misunderstandings of key ideas
- a better understanding of what the course is all about
- new knowledge they would otherwise have to obtain themselves
- a chance to get to know other students and form a supportive group
- more confidence as a student of this subject.

Add any others you can think of.

Perhaps your classes are not really run as ‘group interactions’, but rather as advice surgeries, giving help to individual students who have encountered difficulties – for example, in applying a particular mathematical technique. If your group sessions are of this kind your
Aims will differ to some extent from those you have been reading about. But pause to consider whether the help you offer would be different if you gave it in private one-to-one sessions. Are there benefits to your students from getting help in a group setting? Is it reassuring, for example, to hear other students’ problems being dealt with? Do they pick up general strategies from overhearing advice given to others? Can you build on these elements?

We can see that group teaching is said to serve a wide range of purposes. And also that, while the form that group activities take in different discipline areas may vary, the purposes seem to have much in common. However, in spite of these claims of the manifold virtues of group work, students do not always seem aware of them.

1.3 Why don’t students join in?

Silence usually ranks as the number one problem among any group of tutors met to discuss their teaching – not the fruitful and necessary silence of people who are thinking about a problem, but the non-working, non-fruitful silence of students who cannot, dare not or will not acquiesce to the tutor’s expectation that discussion will occur. Such silences can be very threatening to a tutor, and it can coerce or victimize him into answering the question or engaging in a mini-lecture or otherwise rushing in to dissipate it. Young tutors in particular can find this situation quite intimidating. (Lubin, 1987, p. 22)

We spend much of our lives talking to each other. Surely discussion should be the most natural mode of learning – one that comes easily to us all? But experience tells us different. We all must have experienced embarrassing silences in undergraduate classes, incoherent stilted exchanges, tedium. Why should it be difficult for students to speak in tutorials?

Reflection 1.4

Think back again to your own experience of discussion as a student.

(a) Did you talk easily?

(b) Did other students?

(c) What makes it difficult to speak in a tutorial?

Do students feel inhibited?

The following extract illuminates Rudduck’s conclusions as to why students find it difficult to contribute.
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From Rudduck's observations, I gathered the following points that seem to inhibit students:

- uncertainty as to how and when to contribute;
- extreme wariness about 'making moves';
- not knowing whether it's OK to admit to confusion or misunderstanding;
- not wanting to make a fool of themselves in front of peers;
- uncertainty about the agenda;
- uncertainty about how much they need to know in order to participate;
- feeling inadequate when faced with an aggressive intellectual challenge;
- wondering whether they are being assessed.

But what is the source of all this uncertainty? Rudduck emphasises the youth and inexperience of many students, but are their feelings so very different from those of older, more experienced people when faced with unfamiliar and ambiguous situations, in which they don’t have a clear role?

Do students feel socially 'undefined' in tutorials?

There are plenty of situations in which it feels awkward to speak – even quite unthreatening ones such as in a doctor’s waiting room, or in a railway carriage – why? The sociologist Erving Goffman, who studied people's interactions with each other in a wide variety of situations, offers a helpful line of analysis. He argues that we are always dependent on being able to define ourselves within the many social scenes we find ourselves acting out with others. Whether playing a non-speaking role in a very low key scene standing in a lift, or taking a leading role in the swirl of a family argument, we are only able to participate effectively by virtue of knowing both what our role is in the scene and how it should be played (the 'script' we are expected to follow). One way of understanding the 'inarticulacy that descends like a shroud' on students who are 'confident and resonant speakers in their leisure-time exchanges' is to see it as the effect of moving from a situation in which they have an established role that they know how to play to a situation where there are inadequate opportunities to establish a 'self' – a person whom they can speak as. If they do speak, what claims to knowledge are they making? What relationship do they place themselves in with regard to other students – or to the tutor?

In any case, what kind of a grouping is it? What are its shared aims and values and ways of operating? Until a student has developed a sense of what kind of scene the tutorial is, and their own role within it, it is hard to make any contribution. But if the students are not contributing, then the scene is necessarily very stilted and so does not offer comfortable roles for students to play, nor well fleshed-out 'scripts' to follow. Ideally you would launch quickly into a scenario where students can establish speaking roles for themselves, before it settles into a scene with very few speaking roles. But how?

Human relationships are fluid and we are all very flexible in our ability to play different roles within relationships. The person you present yourself as within any particular scene involves only a small selection from the
repertoire you have developed over a lifetime of participating in different scenes. So how then do people know what bits of their repertoire to draw on within a particular scene? How does a group of people come to agree as to what is going on, and how do individuals establish their own particular roles? Goffman argues that it is a process of negotiation, which evolves as each participant projects a self into the scene (the person they are going to be for the purposes of the scene). Moreover, the opening moves are of great significance, because they define what is possible later as the scene unfolds.
When we allow that the individual projects a definition of the situation when he appears before others, we must also see that the others, however passive their role may seem to be, will themselves effectively project a definition of the situation by virtue of their response to the individual ... Ordinarily the definitions of the situation projected by the several different participants are sufficiently attuned to one another, so that open contradiction will not occur ... Each participant is expected to suppress his immediate heartfelt feelings, conveying a view of the situation which he feels the others will be able to find at least temporarily acceptable. The maintenance of this surface of agreement, this veneer of consensus, is facilitated by each participant concealing his own wants behind statements which assert values to which everyone present feels obliged to give lip service. Further, there is usually a kind of division of definitional labour. Each participant is allowed to establish the tentative official rule regarding matters which are vital to him but not immediately important to others ... In exchange for this courtesy he remains silent or non-committal on matters important to others but not immediately important to him.

We have then a kind of interactional modus vivendi. Together the participants contribute to a single overall definition of the situation which involves ... agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honoured ... [and] the desirability of avoiding an open conflict of definitions of the situation.

... The individual's initial projection commits him to what he is proposing to be and requires him to drop all pretences of being other things. As the interaction among the participants progresses, additions and modifications ... occur, but it is essential that these later developments be related without contradiction to ... the initial positions taken by the several participants. It would seem that an individual can more easily make a choice as to what line of treatment to demand from and extend to the others present at the beginning of an encounter than he can alter the line of treatment that is being pursued once the interaction is under way.

Perhaps the problem of non-participation in learning groups arises because, in contrast with the tutor who starts out with a well defined and active role which provides lots of opportunities to 'project a self', the students have weakly defined and undifferentiated roles and infrequent opportunities for launching a projection of a 'self'. Also, when opportunities do arise they are fraught with such dangers as saying something that is deemed to be irrelevant, or is immediately contradicted, or is simply misunderstood. Because the tutor has so much power to define the scene, the student can take nothing for granted in a new class. Until the scene begins to unfold, the 'style' of session, its conceptual preoccupations, the rules of engagement, are all unknown to the student. So any early contribution carries a high risk of making a faux pas. If initial projections are as sharply defining as Goffman suggests, and so difficult to renegotiate, no wonder students hold back. And if the scene then unfolds (by default) as one in which the tutor does most of the talking – and only those who can carry off roles as 'bold' or 'clever' students participate – then no scripts develop for 'modest' or 'struggling' students to make tentative, speculative contributions. Non-participation by the majority becomes built into the 'interactional modus vivendi'.

This analysis suggests that the first meeting of a learning group (like any group starting up from scratch) presents a difficult and threatening social environment. Thus the first priority is to get students talking to each other, so that they can participate in developing a social scene and simultaneously begin to project themselves into it. If they are going to be speakers within the group later on, they need to establish speaking 'selves'. This suggests designing opening activities that encourage participation but keep the stakes low – for example setting a very straightforward task and using modes of questioning which are not directly confrontational. On the other hand, it may be an advantage to begin with a 'non-academic' topic, so that students are not inhibited by doubts about their intellectual capability. For example, various 'ice-breaker' activities have been developed, often involving a 'silly-game' element, so that students interact in unserious roles that they can discard as they establish themselves properly. However, some people find playing frivolous roles with strangers awkward. Simply inviting students to talk about themselves, their backgrounds, and their general interests is perhaps the most straightforward way of enabling them to 'project' definitions of themselves and to locate themselves within the group as a whole.

Do tutors talk too much?

But perhaps we have been focusing too unquestioningly on students' potential inhibitions about participating. Perhaps non-participation is less to do with their own reluctance than with their teachers talking too much. Do teachers have the confidence, or the technique, to stop lecturing and let their students speak? A study of Open University tutors is revealing. OU students receive all the expert knowledge they need through mailings, broadcasts and the Internet, so the prime function of tutorials is obviously group interaction - a scarce resource in a distance-teaching system. Yet the findings hardly reflect this.

Thirty tutorials, each of two hours, were tape-recorded. The amount of time tutors and students spent talking in various ways was calculated and the different kinds of talk were then reduced to four main categories:
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- clarification by the tutor;
- development talk by the tutor;
- critical comments about the course;
- talk aimed at/involving student participation.
EXTRACT 1.5
WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS IN TUTORIALS?

Steven Murgatroyd

In Table 1, the average time in minutes for tutor and student talk is shown across faculties. (These figures derived from three 120-minute sessions by two tutors in each of the five faculties’ foundation courses.)

This table suggests a number of things. First, tutors talk most of the time – over 60 per cent of the available time is given over to tutors talking (i.e. clarification, developmental or course critical). Second, the emphasis of tutor talk seems to be upon clarifying material produced by the University. As one tutor described this – making explicit the teaching points of the course units ...

The full range of information collected reveals [that] the average amount of time students spoke in a tutorial was eight minutes. There were considerable variations between groups both within and between faculties, but on no occasion did the total amount of student talk about anything exceed fifteen minutes.

Murgatroyd, S. (1980) ‘What actually happens in tutorials?’, Teaching at a Distance, no. 18, p. 47

Table 1 Average tutor–student talk times by categories by faculty foundation course expressed in minutes

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We should be wary about reading a great deal into the differences between faculties, since the study involved only two tutors from each faculty. However, the overall picture is striking. In tutorials, two hours long, where the primary purpose was interaction, students spoke on average for only eight minutes — or four minutes in every hour. Just under a third of the time was actually directed towards participation and even then, three quarters of that ‘participation’ was talk by the tutor. Meanwhile, for nearly two-thirds of the time, tutors simply talked at the students.

This is not to suggest that students were clamouring to have it otherwise — rather to raise questions. If ten tutors operating independently of each other across a wide range of disciplines all dominate their tutorials, does this suggest that there are deeply embedded cultural norms shaping classroom interactions? Are there fundamental structural aspects of the teacher—learner relationship that impel this communicative imbalance? In the last section we saw ‘talking as thinking’ and ‘talking as initiation into a specific academic discourse’ claimed as key aims of group work. But it seems there are powerful forces to be overcome if we want students to engage in this kind of learning experience.

Does the size of group make a difference?

There are further barriers. Rudduck’s academics were talking in the seventies, in an age of more generous funding for HE teaching, when classes were smaller and contact hours more extensive. Now, with a dramatic growth in class sizes and the advance of modularisation and resource-based learning, teachers and students tend to encounter each other over briefier time spans and in larger groups, so habits of participation have to be developed in less promising circumstances. (This does not necessarily mean that there is less participation. After all, as I indicated in my personal account of group learning experiences, close, supportive group work was by no means guaranteed in former times.) When classes are larger the opportunities for any particular student to contribute must inevitably be reduced. But does a large class also restrict the overall amount of participation by students? And does it change the quality of participation?

We turn now to a study conducted in the Faculty of Health Sciences, Ben-Gurion University, Israel. It involved 60 faculty members, representing 24 clinical, behavioural and basic science disciplines. They were teaching medical students in all segments of a six-year curriculum, using a variety of methods, ranging from lecturing to bedside teaching. Six lessons were video-taped for each of the 60 teachers, and three 5-minute samples were analysed from each. The lessons were categorised according to the size of group: small = 1–4 students, medium = 5–16 students, large = 17–50 students. (The authors point out that these category boundaries were chosen to reflect structures within the faculty, rather than on any theoretical basis.) Here is one of the tables of results.
Table 1.1  Duration of lesson activities in three class sizes (percentage of total lesson time)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Small n = 45</th>
<th>Medium n = 175</th>
<th>Large n = 175</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher lectures</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions and answers</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students initiate</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher activities</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students activities</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( n = \) number of lessons assessed.

(Mahler et al., 1986, p.49)

The activities referred to in the table are verbal activities, in other words talk. We see that in the large classes teachers lectured 73 per cent of the time, whereas in the medium and small classes they lectured less than 60 per cent of the time. In the large classes ‘question-and-answer’ exchanges took up less than a quarter of the time, while in the medium and small classes they took more than a third. And student-initiated exchanges, which accounted for 5 per cent of the time in medium and small classes, dropped to 3 per cent in the large classes. In terms of the time the students actually spent talking, this was nearly 30 per cent of the time in small classes, about a quarter of the time in medium-sized classes and only 15 per cent in large classes. In short, this study shows a very clear relationship between the size of the class and the time students spent talking. It also shows that in larger groups lecturers gave more time to lecturing and less to question-and-answer exchanges.

(It is interesting to compare the Ben-Gurion classes with the Open University tutorials, where students spoke only 7 per cent of the time, in class sizes that would generally have been in the ‘medium’ range. This is markedly less than the 24 per cent at Ben-Gurion. Clearly different norms of student participation applied in these two settings.)

It could be objected that the larger classes here were more likely to be designated as occasions for lecturing, and hence that teachers and students would have lower expectations of two-way interaction during them. However, the study also explored the ‘cognitive level’ of verbal activities during the classes, using Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956). Table 1.2 shows the findings.
Table 1.2  Duration of lesson interactions at various cognitive levels in three class sizes (percentage of total lesson time)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive level</th>
<th>Small n = 45</th>
<th>Medium n = 175</th>
<th>Large n = 175</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Low: Knowledge</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Medium: Comprehension Application</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 High: Analysis Synthesis Evaluation</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 100 100 100.0

n = number of lessons assessed.
(Mahler et al., 1986, p. 51)

Here we see that in the large classes 71 per cent of time was directed towards ‘knowledge’, the lowest cognitive level in Bloom’s scheme (e.g. a question clarifying a fact), and only 10 per cent to the high level processes of analysis, synthesis and evaluation whereas the small classes spent 21 per cent of the time on these high-level activities, a third of the time on the medium-level work of comprehension and application, and less than half the time on knowledge. Thus it was not only a matter of the quantity of participation dropping with the larger classes, but also apparently a qualitative decline in the cognitive level of the interactions.

This study suggests, then, that as classes grow larger students are much less likely to engage in the kind of thoughtful discussion that advocates of group teaching see as a key benefit of group work. Indeed, common sense tells us that, as classes grow, student participation will shrink – and the dangers of alienation from the institution and the discipline increase. However, the contrast with the Open University study also shows that large classes do not necessarily involve less student participation. Even the large classes at Ben-Gurion achieved twice as much student participation as the OU tutorials. This suggests that there are ways of running large classes that enable at least some participation, including at the higher cognitive levels. This brings us to the issue of how sessions can best be structured in order to achieve high levels of participation at high cognitive levels.

1.4 How important is structure?

Structure has been a contentious issue in group teaching. A popular ideal in the liberationist seventies was to do away with structures within the classroom as far as possible. They were seen as inhibiting students from genuine, self-directed intellectual exploration. Jane Abercrombie, originally a zoology lecturer at Birmingham University and later at London University in a variety of other fields, was a pioneering advocate of minimal intervention in group leadership.
The group system aims to emancipate the student from the authority-dependency relationship and to help him develop intellectual independence and maturity through interaction with peers...

(Abercrombie, 1974, quoted in Anderson, 1997, p. 185)

Ruddock quotes a professor of literature who describes his practice of handing the role of group leader to a different student each week, regardless of the quality of the resulting discussion:

Some students, by their lack of experience or by their make-up, are ... not good at conducting the discussion ... As you might imagine, the temptation on my part to jump in and rescue the situation is great, but I generally manage to resist this. I’ve come to see that if I jump in and rescue a discussion that is going badly, then for the rest of the term I will be forever jumping in and rescuing the discussion ...

Actually I am prepared ... to endure awkwardness, silences, diversions where I could see that the discussion wasn’t necessarily going in the direction that I would want to take it if I were chairman ...

It has happened that, if we’ve had rather a sticky session and we’ve all been groping for things to say, they will finish with a sense of defeat or frustration. They will feel that they haven’t learned anything or achieved anything. This I tell myself anyway is in the interests of the future of the seminar ... What I look for in the seminar is a good deal of self-propulsion. It must generate its own intellectual driving force, and not look to me to provide it. Instead of providing the driving force of the seminar, I provide the navigational corrections.

(Rudduck, 1978, p. 10)

A slogan of this view of group learning was ‘The more the tutor talks, the less the students learn’. Taken to its logical conclusion this would seem to imply that total silence on the part of the tutor is the ideal. But times have changed.

Students with a limited allocation of contact with staff expect their teachers to teach. The notion that a teacher could afford a few dud classes on the way to the nirvana of student self-sufficiency seems a remote luxury. Students on a highly populated module may be scheduled to meet with total strangers for half a dozen meetings. Even one dud session could be enough to see off the bulk of the class. Yet Anderson suggests that the spirit of the unstructured group lives on in the literature on teaching, if not in real classrooms.

The conception of the role of the tutor established by Abercrombie and others has, by and large, informed all subsequent writing on small group teaching. It also ... led to a ‘deficit model’ view of tutor actions ... Guided by the assumption that small group teaching should be characterised by a ‘hands-off’ style of tutor facilitation and high levels of student participation, researchers have tended to see situations where tutors spend a lot of time talking, or where they play too ‘active’ a role – such as in paraphrasing
or controlling a student's language – as evidence of deficiencies and the need for reform.

(Anderson, 1997, p. 185)

Though this may have been the view of researchers, practice has certainly moved on. Many alternatives to the unstructured discussion have been developed. Indeed structure tends to be seen as enabling and empowering rather than constraining. Extract 1.6 is an example of some notes provided for tutors of an Open University course.
Most of us feel nervous with a group of strangers in an unfamiliar context. Students feel even more so because, in addition, their intellectual prowess seems to be on the line. At first meetings, many visibly quake at the prospect of speaking to the whole group. In fact, there are at least four challenges students face in a newly formed group:

Personal: am I capable of coping in this setting?

Intellectual: can I understand what people are saying?

Social: do I fit in with these people?

Student–tutor role: how do I act out a ‘subordinate’ relationship with a tutor?

Side-stepping the challenges

Fortunately there is an easy and effective way to side-step each of these challenges for at least part of a study session. You simply set the students to work in groups of two, three, or four, on a small well-specified task, which they can accomplish on their own.

Minimizing the personal challenge

As regards the personal challenge, virtually everyone can cope with talking to just one or two people. Then, as people become drawn into the buzz of conversation arising from around the room, self-doubts begin to evaporate. They clearly are coping.

Scaling down the intellectual challenge

Similarly, the intellectual challenge is much less daunting when you are working alongside others, on a clearly specified task. It is much more obvious how to think and how to contribute constructively, than when a wide-ranging, abstract debate is going on. And, in a group of three, it is much easier to say that you don’t understand what the others are saying, and get them to explain, instead of just feeling defeated.

Dispelling the social challenge

In twos, threes and fours, students soon begin to find things out about those they are with.

At the start of a course, people often imagine that the other students around them are more qualified, more competent and more confident than themselves. But, as soon as they begin to converse, they find that shaky confidence and uncertain self-esteem are the norm. Moreover as they hear the ideas and opinions of their partners and learn about their backgrounds, and the kinds of lives they lead, they usually begin to find grounds for respecting and liking them. Instead of the distant relationships and the tenseness of the larger group, people begin to experience friendship and intellectual stimulation, through working collaboratively with others who share their interests. If you repeat this process of dividing into task groups over several sessions, students will eventually have worked with most of the members of the larger group and there will be a high level of interpersonal knowledge.

When you break into task groups you temporarily set aside the unavoidable formality of the large group setting. The meeting is no longer characterized by strained silences, or the faltering incoherence of the over-nervous. Instead, the room is full of chatter, which reveals to all present that, in fact, the members of the group have plenty to say and are only too eager to speak. This helps to set a different tone to the occasion, so that even when the larger group reconvenes and more formal relations have to be re-established, they are no longer as strained as before. The tension has been dissipated through active social engagement.

Stepping out of the hierarchy

The other positive feature of the ‘task-group’ approach is that it takes you, the tutor, temporarily out of the field of play; thus suspending for students the challenge of acting out a subordinate relationship. A tutor is inevitably a rather awe-inspiring figure in the early stages. Students would not go along to be taught, in the first place, unless they held tutors in some respect. There will be the suspicion at the outset that you are awfully clever and that you might be inclined to shred what a student has to say into little pieces; to
humiliate at a stroke. And, of course, as tutor, you also have a good deal of power to define what goes on in the group; to say 'That's not really relevant', or 'What's your view on this?' You have the power, too, to assess a student's work and pronounce it good or bad. Students react to this power and status in different ways. Some want to worship and adore, some want immediately to cut you down to size and establish themselves as equals, others want to hold their distance, but keep you sweet for good grades. Eventually, more mature working relationships become established between tutor and students. To begin with, however, it helps loosen up the social processes of the group to let students talk to each other without you for part of the time. Then they can simply be equals and not have to position themselves in relation to you, the representative of the teaching institution and the subject matter.

The pay-off for the students

The result of cutting down all four of the challenges facing students is that they feel more relaxed and able to talk about what really concerns them. If pitched straight into a large group, they are very inclined to skirt round any issues on which they feel unsure, so as to avoid the prospect of exposing personal weaknesses in front of the group (when of course these are precisely the issues they should be raising). They will ask about a technical point in the text, instead of saying that they don't really know what the whole thing is about; or say they are getting on fine with essay writing, when privately they are suffering agonies of self-doubt. By contrast, in a group of three it is easy to let a small glimpse of a worry peek out and then find that it is shared by peers. Subsequently, the momentum of mutual confiding builds up, so that anxieties are freely shared, and insights which emerge at this level can then be passed on to the group as a whole during a report-back session - so helping to establish a collective ethos of open and frank discussion.

The pay-off for the tutor

With students revealing their real interests and concerns, rather than safe, 'packaged', hypothetical ones, your job as tutor is greatly eased. Instead of going through the motions, the group pitches into the real work for which it exists. Because the students find this satisfying, they become easier to work with. At the same time, the fact that you stand apart from the action for part of the session allows you to 'overhear' what the students are talking about and tune in to their wavelength. If, as tutor, you are acting as chairperson all the time, there is seldom a chance to check how successfully you have guessed the level at which to pitch the discussion. But, when you set the students to work on their own, you soon become much more sharply aware of the angles from which they come at the issues. With this 'breathing space', there is time to think strategically and re-adjust your plans for later parts of the session. When you put yourself in a position to reflect and plan during sessions, you have an excellent opportunity to learn your craft in situ and consequently to make yourself a better tutor.

A simple, robust and flexible technique

The details of task group work can be arranged in many different ways, while still achieving the basic advantages set out above. It is a simple, robust and flexible technique which enables you to cope with a wide range of circumstances. 'Problem' students, for example, can be shared around by changing the task-group membership. People whose persistent contributions in the larger group infuriate fellow students are often a more constructive presence within a small, task-oriented group. There is also the flexibility to absorb students who are unable to attend meetings regularly, or who have to arrive late. And, with the regular movement back and forth between smaller and larger formations of the group, the dynamics of relationships within the group don't so easily get stuck into unproductive ruts. You always have the option of shifting to a different formation if things become sticky.

There are, of course, alternative structures that are also very valuable, such as debates between teams, presentations by students to the group, various forms of workshop, and full-group discussions when the group is sufficiently well established.

The method of splitting a class into sub-groups is described here at some length, in terms relevant to a class for new students. But the same basic idea of setting a task and dividing the class up can be used in many different settings. As this account makes clear, it has the particular merit of breaking up the social formation of the larger group, allowing new norms to be established in an unthreatening context.

With an approach such as breaking into sub-groups, instead of worrying about the subtleties of trying to understand and establish relationships with individual students, you address the issue at a structural level. That is, you design a structure that effectively dissipates the problems. To quote another tutor:

For me structure is the key. Once you have structures that work pretty well, you can develop the finer points of group-work skills in your own time.

Dividing into small groups is just one of many ways of structuring a session. You encountered two others in Lublin’s three examples in Extract 1.1 (a) (her third example being a variant on the small groups theme). For Activity 1.1 in that section, you completed a grid that highlighted differences in the form and substance of the three group sessions. Now we can undertake a similar exercise to highlight the ways these group sessions are structured and controlled.

Activity 1.2 Analysing the structure of group sessions

Re-read the brief descriptions of the three group sessions in Extract 1.1 (a) and the subsequent activity and accompanying discussion. Then try to complete Figure 1.2. As before, the column for the pathology tutorial has been filled in, to give you an idea of how to approach the other two columns.
### Figure 1.2  Structural analysis of three group sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>A: Pathology</strong></th>
<th><strong>B: Statistics</strong></th>
<th><strong>C: Social Theory</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Sequence of events</td>
<td>Intro talk → Q&amp;A → specimen → Q&amp;A → slides + discussion → new specimen → and so on</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2 Types of learning process | • listen/think (introduction)  
• examine/think/ respond (specimens)  
look/listen/respond (slides) | | |
| 3 Structuring of 'content' agenda | through choice of:  
• specimens  
• slides  
• in relation to previous learning | | |
| 4 Control of time for activities | • length of intro  
• number of specimens and slides  
• time given to Q&A | | |
| 5 Types of interactions | • T to S (Q&A)  
• T to group? (intro/slides)  
• S to S? (looking at specimen) | | |
| 6 Structuring of turn-taking (i.e. of active participation) | • by directing questions can ensure all get turn  
• all participate in examining specimens and no-one can drift off in case their turn is next | | |
| 7 Arrangement of seating | • rows facing screen  
• not facing tutor  
• not looking at each other | | |
| 8 Control of the process | T controls all – giving talk/handling out specimens/showing slides/asking Qs | | |
Row 1 Let us see how creating a sequence of events can emerge from this figure.

Group sessions can easily stumble forward in a loose, rambling way. However, in Row 1 of the table, we see that each of Lublin's three group sessions has a clear sequence of events which gives them shape and substance.

You have seen my entry for Tutorial A (pathology). For the other two I put:

B: Give out problem sheet → tackle problem → individual help → watch demo → Q&A → summary → new problem (repeat cycle)

C: Remind of Qs from lecture → sub-group discussion of questions → compare/evaluate → draw out points → make connections.

Row 2 With a series of distinct events sketched out, you can begin to take control of what happens. For example, you can look at what kinds of learning processes each element will engage your students in and decide whether this meets your aims. Here are my additions to Row 2 of Figure 1.2.

B: Analyse/solve problems – ask for help/talk with tutor – watch demonstration and listen – think/respond during Q&A


Row 3 It can be difficult, as we saw in the last section, to keep group work focused on the subject matter – to cover the content. However, our three tutors have overcome this problem.

Tutor A controls what ground is covered through her choice of specimens to examine and slides to show. She also sets up a general framework in her introduction and then controls what issues are covered and what links are made to previous knowledge through the questions she asks.

Tutor B controls the coverage of content mainly through the choice of problems on the problem sheet. He further shapes it through the questions he asks. However, he allows the students some control through the questions they ask him.

Tutor C sets a broad framework in her introduction, but controls the content of the session through the questions she sets for sub-group discussion. Although she does not directly control what is covered within the sub-groups, she is able to exert further control through the way she directs the final discussion.

Notice that these tutors are able to control not only what topics are addressed, but how they are approached. The tasks the students are set ensure that they engage with relevant academic issues. Discussion within the group as a whole can then be securely located within the appropriate academic discourse (rather than consisting of dislocated observations floating past each other in confusing disarray). Broadly, we see the intellectual agendas being set through a sequence that follows these lines:

Introduction → Task → Questions → Explanations → Steered discussion → Summary
Row 4 Time is always a scarce resource, and in an active group, it evaporates quickly. What control do our three tutors have over the use of it?

Tutor A can vary:

1. the length of her introduction;
2. the number of specimens and slides she tries to cover;
3. the time she allows for questions and answers on each specimen and slide.

In other words she has a great deal of control. If she wanted she could proceed very briskly, or she could linger over each specimen with further probing questions and time allowed for thinking.

Tutor B can vary:

1. the time allowed for tackling each problem and for handling individual queries;
2. the number of demonstrations of solutions he asks for from students;
3. the time he takes questioning the demonstrator.

He has quite a lot of control, though to some extent the use of time will depend on what difficulties students encounter with the problems.

Tutor C can vary:

1. the length of her introduction;
2. the time she allows for sub-group discussions;
3. the time set aside for the final plenary discussion.

She could, if she chose, set up a distinctly different session by making the sub-group discussions a lot shorter and having a much fuller final discussion.

Because these are clearly structured sessions, the tutors can exert a lot of control over the amount of time students spend in particular types of learning activity. They can weigh up quite deliberately where to put the emphasis in terms of using the time available. There are obvious 'levers to pull' to change the balance of the session, if they wanted to try something different another time.

Row 5 Groups are supposed to achieve their effects through interaction, so it is important to be able to make interactions of various kinds happen. What interactions do our three tutors set in play?

Tutorial A: the interactions are all between the tutor and individual students to whom she has addressed questions. (There might be scope for interactions between students sitting next to each other as they examine specimens, or between the tutor and the whole group. However, the description suggests these do not happen, beyond the occasional question being asked.)

Tutorial B: the students can interact with each other in pairs while they tackle problems. Individuals and pairs also interact with the tutor as he comes round to help them. Then one student interacts with the group at large while demonstrating a solution, and with the tutor through question and answer.
Tutorial C: the main interactions are between the students in their subgroups. However, students also interact with the larger group in presenting and discussing findings, and at this point the tutor joins in the interactions.

Row 6 Turn-taking is a key aspect of involving people in group work. Often students get left out and develop a habit of passivity because others always jump in before them. In fact, patterns of behaviour easily set in, where certain students become the established speakers and the rest sit back and play being students with nothing worthwhile to say (even though they may be equally able to contribute). However, our three group sessions all have built-in ways of allocating turns.

Tutor A can ensure that everyone has a turn as she asks her questions. (And everyone participates in examining specimens — they have to in case it is their turn to answer next.)

In Tutorial B everyone participates in tackling problems and the tutor gives turns of his attention as he moves round among them dealing with queries. One or two students per session get a turn at demonstrating.

In Tutorial C, students control their own turn-taking within the subgroups. The tutor gives turns to each group during reporting back and oversees turn-taking in the general discussion.

Row 7 How do these three very different ways of structuring a group session compare in terms of the social process that goes on within the group?

Clearly very little goes on between participants in Tutorial A. The students do not establish speaking relationships with each other, nor do they have much opportunity to establish roles for themselves, apart from being ‘clever’ if they get answers right or ‘stupid’ if they get them wrong. They are a little less socially dormant than in a lecture, since they get to speak — but this puts them under pressure, with very little social support to fall back on. There is little chance for students to ‘mature’, gain confidence, or develop supportive friendships — and their relationships with the tutor are not likely to advance beyond the formal. Nor is there opportunity for the group to develop a collective view on the subject through working together over the weeks. They will remain entirely dependent on the tutor for intellectual input. This model is very efficient in addressing content aims, but offers relatively little in terms of process aims.

Tutorial B is more informal and offers scope for students to strike up working partnerships. It also allows students to get on speaking terms with the tutor and to participate a little in the wider group during demonstrations. Students will gradually build up an impression of the others within the group and how they stand in relation to them. If the atmosphere is supportive, they could grow quite a lot in confidence and ‘sense of belonging’ within the department. It may be fairly low level as a social process, but it is certainly very different from a lecture.

Tutorial C encourages students to interact a lot with each other (though relatively little with the tutor). Each has plenty of opportunity to establish a persona within the sub-group and to develop a
speaking voice within it. Over a series of sessions the group will construct a shared understanding of the subject, which the tutor can help to shape. Students will also develop quite strong allegiances and reservations regarding each other. Indeed, one or two may find it difficult to fit in and might require support. However, most could be expected to develop confidence and maturity in their relationship with the subject and the tutor. In other words, this model is strong on process aims. How strong it is on content aims depends on the aptness of the questions set, the willingness of students to engage with them and the way the tutor controls the plenary discussions.

**Row 7 Social space:** getting the seating right. The way people are seated in relation to each other is a key influence on group interactions.

* **Tutorial A:** the students sit in rows facing the screen. When a student speaks, other students are either looking at the back of his or her head, or have to crane round to look. There will be little sense that what is said is addressed to other students. Open discussion is impossible. The seating arrangement sets them up as isolated individuals who happen to be in the same room. On the other hand, the fact that the tutor is not at the front, but is looking at the screen, lessens the social distance between her and the students. She is literally sharing their view. Perhaps her questions are less intimidating when not accompanied by an expectant gaze. It would be intriguing, though, to know how she ‘addresses’ questions to them. Does she have a list of names in front of her?

* **Tutorial B:** the students are presumably working at desks or tables. Pairs working together will develop a sense of their own ‘shared space’ into which they invite the tutors. By moving around the group to deal with queries the tutor creates a sense of flexible spatial relationships. This is reinforced if the demonstrating student goes to the board and the tutor stays at the back. Instead of the traditional division into ‘teacher territory’ at the front and ‘student territory’ elsewhere (especially the back row), relationships are made more fluid and informal.

* **Tutorial C:** we might assume that the students are facing each other in their small groups. This will create their own shared space. The tutor may hover on the edge of it at times, or even sit in – though, if she does, the dynamics will immediately change. With only a short final discussion students may stay seated in groups for it. However, if there is to be any extended discussion it will be important for students to turn their chairs so that they are looking at each other. People whose faces are not visible to the group at large tend to drop out of a discussion.

**Row 8** We can compare the three group sessions in terms of the degree of control exercised by the tutor and the mechanisms of control available.

* **Tutorial A:** the tutor controls everything. Apart from asking occasional questions the students take no initiative. The tutor controls what ground is covered, through her choice of specimens and slides. She controls what aspects are attended to by her questions. She also controls how much time is spent on what. She has very little need to exert control over ‘group process’, since there is hardly
any. It is to be hoped her choices are appropriate, as there is little opportunity for an alternative view to be formed.

**Tutorial B:** the tutor controls the choice of problems, but the students control their work on them. They can also influence when they get help and what they get help with. In this way they also influence the tutor's idea of what help the group as a whole needs. The tutor controls the choice of student demonstrator and the questions he asks. With this low level of group interaction, things are not likely to get out of hand. But there may be difficulties when students have to wait for the tutor's attention, or feel impatient over the amount of help needed by other students during the demonstration.

**Tutorial C:** the tutor controls the initial setting up of the session and then hands over control to the sub-groups. This can be unnerving if some groups seem not to be engaging with the subject, or if they are veering off the subject. (There is always a temptation to step in and reassert direct control, but it is important to allow some time for orientation and engagement. Nevertheless, it is sometimes appropriate to give a prompt to remind sub-groups of the task.) The tutor re-establishes control of the process during the reporting back, though this may not involve much if there is a clear format and sequence for reporting.

In the course of this extended analysis, we have seen that there are many different aspects to the structuring of group processes. We have also identified some important ways of building structures into your group work.

You are probably beginning to see how many different aspects of structure there are to play with in designing a session. You will also see that there are a variety of ways of controlling a group learning process as it progresses, so as to hold to a constructive intellectual agenda whilst keeping all the students involved. If you return to Lublin's examples now, you will see that, although they are fairly simple and straightforward and although her descriptions are brief, there is a lot of structural know-how packed into each case. Her three teachers have not invested everything in the ability and willingness of their students to come forward and provide the impetus to a discussion. But have they left students too little scope for shaping the learning process? What is your view of the impact of these structures on the learning experience of the students?

Through our examples (and in our experience), we have seen that teachers have disagreed about how to get students actively participating in group work. On one side is the argument for emancipating students from teacher-imposed structures, to enable them to take on responsibility for their own group learning; on the other, the argument that structure can itself be enabling by rendering more manageable the challenges students face. But what do students themselves think?
1.5 What works well according to students?

What helps students to join in?

We turn now to a series of extracts from a detailed study by Charles Anderson, a lecturer at the Institute for the Study of Education and Society at the University of Edinburgh. It involved observation and audio recording of fourteen tutorial groups and interviews with 52 of the students and 10 tutors in the Faculty of Social Sciences. The groups were from different social science departments and from each of the four years of undergraduate study.
EXTRACT 1.7 (A)
FEATURES PROMOTING ACTIVE PARTICIPATION AND LISTENING

Charles Anderson

You might want to consider the implications of these points for your own teaching. Do the groups you lead have an informal atmosphere? Do you take particular steps to try to achieve one? Do you think you have skills appropriate for facilitating debate? Do you teach in ways that make your students see you as ‘authentic’ and ‘engaged’? Is the size of your group likely to be a problem for your students? If so, is breaking into sub-groups a way round it?

The second group of features in Anderson’s list is to do with the students themselves, but that does not necessarily mean there is nothing you can contribute. If your students do not seem sufficiently committed, is it because they are not convinced of the value of group work? Perhaps you need to make time to discuss its contribution to their overall progress. And if students seem to lack self-esteem and confidence, can you think up tasks to work on which are likely to give a sense of achievement and of contributing something worthwhile?

Anderson’s third group of features are to do with the subject matter. Again, there may be points you can take up in your own teaching. If your students don’t seem sufficiently engaged, is it because you are focusing on aspects of the subject which are not amenable to group work? Perhaps you should be looking at other aspects. If you can focus on particularly interesting aspects of the subject, you might engender enthusiasm in topics they have never previously been excited by. Or if students seem inhibited by their lack of subject knowledge, you might be able to work out ways of drawing more effectively on what students already know. When your students don’t prepare themselves adequately for group sessions, perhaps you need to give them clearer and more manageable tasks, or discuss with them how to fit the work in amongst other competing demands.

Preparation was seen as easier to achieve when tutors provided a clear focus for preparation through well focused reading and a clearly defined topic for the next tutorial. However, the amount of preparation that could be done was constrained by competing pressure from other coursework, such as essays, that had to be completed. As this other work, unlike tutorial work, was usually formally assessed, it tended to take precedence.

(Anderson, 1997, p. 189)

Anderson reports next on students’ views on ‘structure’. Before reading about the Edinburgh students, what about your own? Would you say that they mainly like tightly structured sessions, or do they prefer plenty of scope to develop agendas of their own?
EXTRACT 1.7 (B)
VIEWS ON STRUCTURE

Anderson's students don't help us to resolve the debate on structure, in that there was support for both sides. Do you think there is a similar spread of views amongst your own students?

What skills are approved of in a tutor?

Anderson's students offer some useful observations on the skills of leading a group. For example, good tutors were said to support the students in thinking their way through difficult issues.
EXTRACT 1.7 (C)
VALUED TEACHING SKILLS

In this extract, Anderson is talking about a teacher's role in helping to shape students' thinking. He goes on to talk about 'scaffolding'. This is a concept drawn from cognitive psychology. The idea is that the process of learning involves reorganizing and extending the conceptual structures in your mind. However, these structures are at the same time what you use to think and learn with. Consequently, everything seems to be in flux, and there is no stable framework within which to focus your thoughts. This makes learning uncomfortable, unsettling and confusing. One of the roles a teacher can play is to help to hold a temporary framework in place — something like the scaffolding that enables work to proceed on a building before its structures are safely in place. This 'scaffolding' by the teacher can take a variety of forms — such as modelling a process of argument; helping to analyse a case study to show how ideas work in practice; or working through a sample problem with students so that they see how to get to the nub, or how to select and apply a particular technique to solving it.

Do you think that you construct 'spaces' within which your students can think? As you read the next extract, try to think of an example where you might apply this approach within your own classes.
EXTRACT 1.7 (D)
ENABLING STUDENTS TO THINK FOR THEMSELVES

Charles Anderson

‘Drawing in students’ understandings towards expert positions in the discipline’ sounds like Rudduck talking about physics students learning to ‘communicate as physicists’. I summarised this as ‘becoming initiated into the culture of a particular field of academic discourse’. Does your own role as a tutor work in this way? Are you trying to get your students to approach things as experts in the field do? How do you achieve this? The next quotation identifies different ways of doing it. On the one hand, you might focus attention on the demands of the particular academic discourse. Alternatively, you could make connections to other discourses the students are more familiar with, so that they see both parallels and differences in the way arguments are developed.

While some students stressed the value of tutors insisting on the very clear and precise formulation of statements, including the exact use of technical terms, others commented favourably on tutors who widened out and enriched discussion, introducing new aspects to debate and encouraging a more differentiated view of topics which had surfaced in discussion.

... On the evidence of the interviews with students (and of the transcripts of talk in tutorials), tutoring involved an interplay between taking out an expert’s view of a subject to students, in terms that novices are likely to understand, and drawing in students’ more common-sense understandings towards expert positions within the discipline.

(Anderson, 1997, p. 192)

How do the needs of a group change over time?

Anderson’s study also emphasises that leading a group is not a fixed set of skills. Students develop as they progress through their studies, so the needs and abilities they bring to group work change.
EXTRACT 1.7 (E)
CHANGES IN STUDENTS AND TUTORS
Are you aware of taking account of the level of experience of your students?

What is the implicit code of conduct?

Group work can put students in an exposed position among their peers, as well as in relation to the tutor. Anderson found that his students had clear views on the code of conduct they expected tutors and students to uphold during a tutorial.
EXTRACT 1.7 (F)
GOOD GROUP BEHAVIOUR

Before we conclude our extensive exploration of Anderson’s study, what is his view on the debate over structure? He takes the line that students clearly like structuring of some kind. Even the shaping, scaffolding, motivating and supporting that tutors offer as they speak are forms of structuring (just as much as dividing into sub-groups). To regard structures simply as inhibiting is to disregard our dependence on structuring in all aspects of life. Structures are enabling and constraining at the same time.

... understanding of a discipline is ... simultaneously enabled and constrained by ... tutors. Tutors in their dual roles as ‘gatekeepers’ for a discipline and guides to the less expert have to lead students towards ways of construing particular topics or problem situations in an appropriate fashion. This might be perceived as a constraining function. Yet, tutors are, at the same time, enabling novices to gain new framing perspectives on topics and so develop their abilities. They are assisting students to gain the knowledge and ways of acting needed for them to participate more fully in academic life, for example, by taking part in the debates which enliven and sustain many disciplines.

(Anderson, 1997, p. 196)

Unless as a tutor you take on some kind of structuring responsibilities, are you really ‘tutoring’ at all? Perhaps we have to see structuring as inevitable. Then the issue becomes what form of structuring to adopt and where and when to apply it. So that, in thinking about how to teach your group, it is a matter of trading physical structuring in the form of seating arrangements, or social structuring in dividing into groups, against intellectual structuring provided by the way you ask and answer questions.

No doubt the debate will go on. What is certain is that the dynamics of group teaching will always provide a challenge to tutors. You may be able to predict what will happen when you stand at the front and lecture, but once you allow ‘interaction’ into the learning process you have to be able to respond to development and think on your feet. The sharper your insights into when and how learning happens in group settings, the better you will be able to ride events – and the more your students and you will get out of group work.

1.6 How can I prepare effectively for group teaching?

When group work goes well, it seems so easy and comfortable that it is hard to see that skill is needed to make it happen. Group leading is one of those invisible skills that you are only aware of when it is lacking. You might imagine that a person who is good at group teaching can just walk into a group session and let it all flow naturally. But, like many things in life, making it seem natural takes skill, know-how and careful preparation. (It is important to bear that in mind, so that you do not feel personally inadequate if some of your early efforts at group teaching do not go particularly well.) The first step towards good group teaching is shrewd preparation, and that requires you to be very clear about what you are
aiming to achieve. The following section suggests some key questions to help you prepare effectively.

**What are the aims of your group sessions?**

**Broad process aims**

There is a range of learning outcomes that you might hope to achieve by group teaching – outcomes that may be difficult to achieve by other means, such as lecturing or reading. Student–tutor contact time is expensive, so why use group teaching rather than other methods? What is it supposed to achieve? The first place to look for answers is your own unit, department or faculty.

- Get hold of the documentation for your course or module and go through it *highlighting* all elements relevant to your group sessions. *Underline* any references to the reasons why groups are used within the course.
- Talk to your course leader and any other colleagues about why group work is used and what they think it achieves.
- Draw up a prioritised list of the process aims for group work in your context – you may find it helpful to refer back to the reflections and activities you undertook earlier in this part. What might your students hope for and what might they reasonably expect to learn in your tutorial?

**Specific content aims**

The content aims are the topics you are expected to cover in the group sessions, the concepts you should explore and the techniques and skills you are expected to teach. These ought to be spelled out in the course documentation. However, you may have to infer some of them from the surrounding elements of the course programme. It is worth making your own list of these content aims – but, better still, write them into an ‘overview of sessions’ plan.

**Constructing an ‘overview of sessions’ plan**

While you are developing your skills it is very helpful to have an overview of what you are trying to achieve within a given term or semester. You can provide yourself with this by drawing up a plan showing an overview of your sessions. If you use a grid or table format for planning, Figure 1.3 below provides illustrative column headings. Filling in the detail will help you to check how your classes are progressing and to adjust your strategy, if some of your aims are not getting enough attention.
An ‘overview of sessions’ plan also enables you to reflect back on how well you judged what could be achieved in each session. This will refine your strategic insights and improve your session planning for future courses. It helps to include a note of other elements of the course on your plan. Then you will have a clear picture of how your group work meshes with other learning your students are doing. Instead of thinking of your series of group sessions simply as a list of topics to cover, you can view them as a total number of contact hours, within which you can arrange a sequence of varied learning activities which build on other work in the course and promote a wide range of skills.

What can go wrong?

Group learning is a dynamic process. Any group of people interacting with each other develops its own energies and interests. It is this momentum that you, as tutor, are trying to harness to drive your students’ learning forward. However, the more creatively involved your students get, the more know-how you need to steer the efforts of the group in a productive direction. Once the group dynamics begin to go wrong, it can be hard to turn the process round.

Becoming skilled at group teaching has a lot to do with being aware of the ways things can go wrong, and planning in advance to ensure that they do not. It also has to do with noticing quickly when things are not quite right and being able to recognise what the problem is. The evidence on which this part is based provides a rational basis to plan and try to ensure that at least you are able to analyse what may have been happening. But complexity – and group work will always be complex – can give rise to unpredictability:

What’s puzzling is that sometimes it seems to go pretty well, then the next time it falls flat and I can’t really tell why. Anyway, the students keep coming back, so they must think they’re getting something. And generally they’re getting more confident.
Group work is always unpredictable. Energy surges, then slumps. Students get irritated with each other, then come to terms. You make rapid progress, then lose your way. What is more you cannot really be sure for much of the time how well your students are progressing with the various kinds of learning process the group is intended to foster. This gives you plenty of scope for uncertainty and self-doubt. You can, however, overcome these misgivings.

1. You can keep variability of sessions within bounds, both through the way you design them and the way you conduct them.

2. As your general competence advances you become more comfortable in your tutor role and feel less affected by the ups-and-downs.

3. With experience and confidence you become able to respond flexibly to unexpected developments and take advantage of them.

Looking at the challenges that group teaching presents, it becomes clear that you cannot simply walk into a classroom and expect to conduct a successful group session. You need to know how to set sessions up properly in advance and how to shape what is happening while they are in progress. To help you continue to learn from your experience, we recommend that you keep referring back to what we explored earlier in the part (Section 1.4) about the ways group learning can be structured.

Planning a session

If you want to set your students preparatory work, your planning will need to begin a week or two in advance. On the other hand, you can set up an excellent session at short notice by building on the course work students are already doing. Because group teaching feeds off the collective intellectual energy generated by the students, a resourceful tutor can quickly design a successful session out of remarkably little.

Establish parameters for the session

The essence of success is to have a very clear idea of what you are trying to achieve. Then as you plan a session you can cut away everything that does not contribute to the core aims. For example, ‘active, purposeful participation’ would usually be near the top of my list of aims. That would make me keep all introductory explanations about the course, regulations etc. to a minimum. I would think of other ways to deal with them – say a hand-out, or a question-and-answer session at the end. You cannot afford to have distracting elements in your session plan. To get people working constructively together within a short span of time you have to be very sharply focused.

What content will the session be focused upon and what kinds of learning processes will you be aiming to foster?

- Begin from the course requirements. This is where an ‘overview of sessions’ plan comes into its own. Check the course documentation again, if you have found it, to remind yourself of what it says about the particular session you are planning.

- Is there any other help available? Can the course leader or any other colleagues give you ideas about what might be useful to do in the session? Are any useful materials available from the department, such as problem sheets, case-study material, or specimens?
Do you need to do some of the course reading as part of your preparation? Would it be a good idea to attend one of the lectures?

- You should check over the reading and other course work for the week. How familiar are you with the material? How well do you need to know it? This is a difficult question. You cannot be expected to be the fount of all knowledge. In a sense you need just enough of a grounding to work out what would make a sensible way of tackling a few issues. On the other hand, you do not want to be floundering. You may find you are on a completely different wavelength from the students if they are using sources which take a different approach from those you have read.

Practicalities

- How many students will be in the group?
- Has a room been booked? If so, what kind of room, with what kind of furniture and equipment?

The answers to these questions will all affect the kind of session you can plan.

Thinking up the main activities

After you have systematically set a framework in place you come to the creative part, where your insight and imagination come into play. You have to juggle with three elements:

- the key issues you want to engage with;
- possible activities through which you could address these issues (such as content analysis of a newspaper, design of an experiment, simulation of a dispute, or criticism of an art object);
- possible stimulus materials around which activities might focus (such as a poem, a past question from an exam, some rock samples, a provocative quotation, a mathematical problem, evidence from a research study, or some photographs).

There is no logical sequence for thinking about these three. You have to go back and forth between them casting about for possibilities. You might think of an excellent stimulus item that then gives you ideas for activities to build around it. Or you might think first of a form of activity you want to use, such as a debate, or a role-playing exercise, and then work out what would make suitable stimulus materials. Either of these trains of thought might give you a different angle on what the key issues actually are. Or you might not use stimulus materials at all, but instead carefully construct questions for discussion.

Deciding how to group the students

When you have thought about the intellectual content of your session, you need to think about the social side. How will students work together? What sort of group dynamic do you want to set in play? Will you be working with the group as a whole throughout the session, or breaking into sub-groups for part of the time? Will some time be spent in individual work? With a class of, say, 15, if you want all your students to participate actively, you may have little choice but to break them into
sub-groups. If your students are new to group learning and to the subject, working in pairs may get them participating more quickly. The nature of the task is also critical. If students are examining specimens, applying a mathematical technique, or closely reading a short text, they will need time to give attention to detail – working on their own and then in twos or threes. You might want them to interview each other in pairs, or act a role-play in threes. With larger groupings, debates or simulations requiring the interplay of competing ideas and interests may work better.

Development: giving the session a shape

Because a group session is a ‘process’ it needs:

- a beginning, where you get the process started: focusing students’ attention – explaining what the session is about – making links to other course work – introducing the first activity – giving detailed instructions;

- a middle, where the main work is done: perhaps involving several activities, or stages;

- an end, where you draw the process to a close: pulling threads together – summarising – evaluating – looking ahead.

You may also need to include other elements such as advice on a forthcoming assignment, discussion of poor timekeeping, planning future work, or answering individual queries. Decide whether to get these out of the way at the start or leave them to the end.

Allocating time

You are now in a position to weigh up how to use the time available. Should you use just one of your ideas for activities, allowing students plenty of time to explore all the angles, and then have a full discussion of the implications? Or would it make a more stimulating session to work briskly through two or three activities? How long do you need to allow for the beginning and the ending of the session? Should you leave time for a break in the middle? Is there ‘other business’ you should allow time for, such as collecting assignments?

Make an initial rough allocation of time to each component and add the figures up. How close are you to the time available?

Drawing up a plan for the session

As you knock your session into shape, it is very helpful to sketch a session plan like the one in Figure 1.4. This focuses attention on the practicalities of what you are trying to achieve. Filling in the time column at the right makes you very aware how scarce time is. It helps you to think strategically about how to make best use of the time. The example in Figure 1.4 is for a 90-minute slot but, because some students are coming from a lecture, they may be a few minutes late. I have also allowed five minutes leeway for things taking longer than I expect. So I have designed an 80-minute session.
Turning to the detail, I have allowed a couple of minutes at the start to get conversations stopped and everyone sitting in their places, and to sketch what lies ahead. (I expect about 15 to 18 students.) I have a couple of announcements to make, assignments to collect, and I expect some questions about tackling the forthcoming essay. It is hard to know how long to allow, but I want enough time to hear from some students who have started thinking about the essay, to get the others moving in the right direction. Then I want to introduce the topic and pull out points from a recent lecture. Five minutes seems rather short for this. However, the plan reveals that it will be a quarter of an hour before the students start interacting, so I have decided to keep the introduction to a few key points. Could I move the general business to the end? But by then the students will be tired and ready to leave – it will be hard to hold their attention. Could I cut out the ‘pairs’ stage in the main activity? No – I know that some students are nervous of numbers and tables and will need time to focus on the questions and the data – otherwise they will sit back and let the others make the running. That ten minutes is when the students really get to grips with the data, before discussing implications. The three groups of five or six students will have plenty of issues to consider in fifteen minutes and then they will need five minutes to pull thoughts together to write on an overhead transparency. The report back time allows each group five minutes to explain its line of thinking and be questioned by the others. And then I want some time at the end to raise questions about the reliability of the data in the table and reconsider the group findings in that light. Because of the time pressure earlier I am tempted to cut the time for the final stage. However, I know that I should not rush the outlining of preparation for the next session, or some students may be confused and use that as an excuse for not doing it – and I need to give some advice on getting hold of sources. I do also want a few minutes for reviewing what has been learned from the session, partly to help students become more reflective learners, and partly to pick up indications as to whether the session has worked as I had hoped. Incidentally, the timings shown are just targets. I would not treat this as a rigid programme, but rather as a framework within which I can adapt to events as they turn out. (While I was at it, I included a column for the resources required for the various stages of the session, so that I would be reminded to prepare them and check on the availability of an OHP.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Grouping</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Mins</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginning</td>
<td></td>
<td>Capture attention, sketch agenda</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General business</td>
<td></td>
<td>Collect in work; questions about next essay</td>
<td>Course details</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduce topic</td>
<td>Plenary</td>
<td>Recap key issues, link back to lecture</td>
<td>OHT</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set up activity</td>
<td></td>
<td>Intro to activity; instructions; questions</td>
<td>OHT</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work on activity</td>
<td>Pairs</td>
<td>Study table for answers to questions</td>
<td>Copies of table of statistics</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Groups of five or six</td>
<td>Discuss meaning of findings</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare report</td>
<td></td>
<td>Summarise conclusions on OHT</td>
<td>OHTs, markers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report back</td>
<td></td>
<td>Use OHTs to present conclusions</td>
<td>OHP*</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Plenary</td>
<td>Draw wider implications, summarise</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ending</td>
<td></td>
<td>Outline future prep, review session</td>
<td>Prep instructions</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                    |           | Total time                                                |              | 80   |

* Remember to order the OHP beforehand.

The process of drawing up the session plan helped me to enact in my head how the session might unfold. With all the elements on paper in front of me I could make careful judgements about where to allow time for what - and why. Although I would not expect to stick precisely to the times shown, they show what I shall be forfeiting elsewhere if I allow one stage to run on. In other words, the plan enables me to make strategic use of contact time, instead of just starting a session with a hunch and hoping for the best. (Note that the plan is a bit more elaborate than necessary in order to bring out details of the process. I would probably collapse the first two
rows together and the third and fourth. But the others are stages worth distinguishing.)

**Room layout**

Always check the room you are going to teach in. Find out what facilities you will have – boards, screens, flipcharts, walls to stick things on. Check too where toilets and refreshment facilities are. Most important of all, check the seating. Is it fixed or movable? Is it raked? Are there tables or other work surfaces?

If seating is fixed in rows, the options for group teaching are limited, though you can get students to twist around and form groupings. Similarly, if students are seated around a large central table, you can form sub-groups at various points round the edge, but the character of plenary discussions will be affected by the distances between the ends of the table and difficulties of visibility and access to boards and screens. The ideal is easily movable furniture, so that students can gather in small groups or turn to face a presentation. Whether or not you need tables or desks depends on the nature of the subject.

You need to consider what kinds of interactions you want to encourage.

The left-hand diagram in Figure 1.5 represents a teacher standing behind a table, in front of a board, with students sitting in rows at desks. This is how the room was laid out when he arrived. He is asking questions but students direct all answers back to him. The ones at the back cannot catch his eye very easily. When they speak, the ones in front look back at them over their shoulders. The ones at the front do not connect at all with the others when they speak. A little group interaction is possible, but free-flowing discussion is difficult. In the second diagram, the group is sitting more or less in a circle, having been in four small groups. Discussion flows in various directions. Occasionally one of the students goes over to the board at the side to note down important points for the group as a whole.

The first tutor is clearly in a dominating position. This will be good for capturing attention and writing on the board, but it will be difficult to

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**Figure 1.5 Two seating arrangements**
Pack 5 Ways of Teaching

hand over discussion to the students. In the second group, the teacher gives herself a status more 'level' with that of the students by being part of the circle. She can see all the students and keep track of how engaged they are with the discussion. Clearly, these two arrangements will produce very different kinds of group interaction.

You need to arrive before the session to move the furniture, or else ask the students to help you at the start of the session. Moving furniture around can feel rather 'school-teacherish', but if you have decided it needs moving, you should carry the plan through. This includes using persuasion if some students opt to remain sitting just outside their group. It is awkward for everybody if someone is half hidden, and it affects the flow of discussion. Do not ask students whether they think it is worth moving the seats. They will almost always opt to stay as they are rather than move. It is your responsibility to decide what will work best.

The appendices to this part take this initial planning view a stage further by offering suggestions for designing and managing group activities in practice. We advise that you browse through this material for ideas and challenges to your assumptions, taking and using what is useful in your current situation.

Appendix 1.1 extends your practice into the design of activities for group teaching

Appendix 1.2 gives practical tips on getting started

Appendix 1.3 considers managing the group process

Appendix 1.4 addresses some of the difficulties that can arise in working with groups

Appendix 1.5 suggests many of the ways in which group processes can be used to support effective learning.

Summary and review

Let us finish Part 1 by returning to our opening questions and reviewing the answers that this chapter has suggested.

1.1 What does the term 'teaching in groups' cover?

Within 'group teaching' we have included all kinds of teaching which involve some form of interaction between a teacher and more than one student.

1.2 What claims are made for teaching in groups?

Group teaching is seen as delivering a wide range of benefits, because it involves students in actively doing rather than just hearing or reading about. In a group they learn to speak and think in ways appropriate to the discipline – becoming users/speakers of the disciplinary discourse.

1.3 Why don't students join in?

Students lack experience of participating in academic discussions, yet opportunities for establishing themselves as worthy speakers tend to be few and risky. The larger the group the greater the problems and the tutor may make things worse by establishing a pattern of doing most of the talking.
1.4 How important is structure?

Students can only become genuinely engaged if they have space in which to participate on their own terms. Some teachers have viewed teacher-imposed structures as constraining and have aimed to maximise student autonomy. Others have viewed structuring as essential in enabling participation and building up confidence. We have analysed some tutorial structures in detail, to see how this might help learning.

1.5 What works well according to students?

Students believe they participate best when the group is of moderate size and has an informal atmosphere. They also value the skills of tutors who are able to enthuse the group, draw everyone into the discussion and stimulate and shape their thinking.

1.6 How can I prepare effectively for group teaching?

In this section, we began to consider many of the practical questions that can get missed in preparing to work with groups. This practical advice is developed further in the activity-rich Appendices that follow. Use these sections to inform and challenge your practice with groups.

Further reading


This chapter briefly reviews relevant ideas from the literature on problem solving and discusses issues faced by tutors leading problem-solving classes. Useful ideas for anyone running such classes.


This handbook presents a range of ideas for large-group teaching and gives clear explanations of principles and practical examples. It is probably the most comprehensive treatment of this topic currently available.


This is a handy ideas book, designed so that you can dip in and find just two or three paragraphs on any aspect of group teaching. It is sensible and thought provoking.


This is a book-length treatment of group teaching that is useful if you want to explore group dynamics and think in greater depth about the processes of learning within groups.


Lublin's handbook is very practical, articulate and theoretically sound, with lots of useful ideas and thought-provoking analysis, though quite dense in style.
References


Rudduck, J. (1978) Learning through Small Group Discussion: a study of seminar work in higher education, Guildford, University of Surrey, Society for Research into Higher Education.

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Text

Conducting Tutorials, © J. Lublin, Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australia;


Tables

Table 1: Mahler, S., Neumann, L. and Tamir, P. (1986) 'The class-size effect upon the activity and cognitive dimensions of lessons in higher education', Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 11(1), University of Bath School of Education.
Appendix 1.1  Designing activities for group teaching

The first group session of your course

A learning group does not spring to life spontaneously. The first session must set in place a framework for what is to follow.

*Introducing yourself*

Over a series of sessions, you are going to be relying on your students to invest a lot of energy and enthusiasm in the topics and activities you have devised for them. They will do so only if they are confident that you know what you are doing. Moreover, you will not feel confidence in yourself until you know that they know you are up to the job. You need to begin with a brief introduction to yourself:

- your academic background;
- any relevant experience;
- the reason you are teaching these sessions (and why you are looking forward to them – otherwise why should they?);
- possibly an anecdote about yourself, so that students can relate to the person behind the tutor role.

Until they have a sense of your humanity, many students will be afraid that you are likely to cut what they say to shreds. You may feel apprehensive, but they will see you as a representative of the rigorous, demanding discipline with which they are struggling. They are likely to assume you are extremely clever and critically inclined. This may be no bad thing, but they need also to sense that you understand the difficulties they are grappling with and are ‘on their side’.

*Getting to know each other*

Most students will not reveal newly developing ideas and opinions to complete strangers. The sooner they feel some sense of ‘belonging’, the sooner group work will ‘take off’. As we saw earlier, worry about losing face is a major reason why students hang back from participating. They sense that the first things they say may have undue significance in defining how others in the group see them – perhaps creating an impression they will reflect on with embarrassment. Read about these anxieties of ‘self presentation’ in the second part of Section 1.3 of Chapter 1.

Safety may lie in saying nothing, but it leaves students with no clear role and consequently tongue-tied. You need to give them early opportunities to establish speaking roles within the group. As they develop a sense of identity and audience, they will begin to be able to formulate things to say.

- **Names:** A first step is to exchange names. However, in the tense opening moments it is hard to absorb a lot of new names, and then later it is embarrassing not to remember. There are various ways of getting over this. One is to ask students to say their names and, as they do, you write them on the board in positions that reflect where they are sitting in the room. Then students (and you) can glance quickly at the board when about to speak to someone.

- **Exchanging personal information:** You can write on the board ‘my name – where I come from – what options I am doing’. Then go round the room asking each person to speak. This can work well if the group is
not too big, though it can be a lot to take in, and it is difficult for students to listen to others if they are ‘rehearsing’ their own information. Alternatively you can divide into sub-groups, or pairs, and let people find out about each other, and then after a few minutes report back to the whole group. In a sense it is not so important that group members find out about everyone else straight away. It is more critical that everyone gets to know and be known by at least one other member of the group, so that they no longer feel completely isolated and unknown and the process of self-establishment has begun. They can get to know others through subsequent group activities.

- **Icebreakers:** Various activities have been developed for enabling students to interact with each other in a playful way, outside the student role – for example, the party game of pinning famous names on people’s backs, which they have to find out through asking ‘yes/no’ type questions of other group members. The usefulness of such activities depends, however, on whether you and your students feel comfortable with this kind of thing.

‘Getting to know you’ activities need to come very early in the session. Some students will not take in much until they have begun to feel comfortable in the group.

**Introducing the series of sessions**

- **The content:** Explain what, broadly, you will be covering in your group sessions, and how they link to other course elements. (An OHT, or handout, will enable students to follow you much more effectively.) If you have students taking different options, explain how their various needs will be met. Indicate what preparation you will be setting, and what to do if they experience difficulties in completing it. Let them know they can bring concerns about assignments or other course work to the group and when and how they should raise such issues.

- **The form:** Indicate the kinds of activities you will be asking students to participate in.

- **The nature of the learning:** Outline the ‘process aims’ of the sessions. Explain how participation in the activities will achieve these aims.

Do not let this introduction become very lengthy. Students will not be able to take in much detail. Put the important points on a handout that students can refer back to when queries arise.

**Ground rules**

All groups develop unspoken rules as to what can and cannot happen and how group members are supposed to behave. However, if you leave these to emerge spontaneously, they may not be suitable for your purposes. Some students may bring inappropriate expectations to your sessions – for example, that you ought to do all the talking. After you have explained the nature of learning and the importance of participation, you could open up a discussion of what ground rules will promote these learning processes and encourage participation. You might set the ball rolling with some suggested rules, inviting students to discuss them and add others. (You may want to repeat this activity after a few sessions to revise the rules.)
Ground rules can take a variety of forms – for example:

- Listening attentively to others
- Asking others for information
- Giving examples
- Giving reactions to the contributions of others
- Encouraging others to take part.

(selected from a list in Forster, 1995, p. 16)

or

a. No smoking except in coffee breaks
b. Don't interrupt other people
c. It's OK to opt out and opt in again
d. Anyone can suggest changing or adding to the ground rules at any time
e. Every group member is entitled to time
f. It is OK to ask other people for help
g. At any point anyone can suggest that the group moves on
h. We start on the hour and finish at ten minutes to.

(Habeshaw et al., 1992, pp. 23–4)

A taste of the real thing

An opening session should not be entirely devoted to introductions. Students are primarily interested in learning about the subject matter and will feel frustrated if they do not get a taste of it. It will, in any case, be the most effective introduction to the approach you are planning to take and will give students a chance to form working relationships with peers. You might design a learning activity that builds on what they already know, while raising issues that lay the groundwork for preparation for the next session.

Preparation for the second session

Prepare particularly clear instructions for any preparatory work for the second session, and allow enough time for students to ask questions about getting hold of sources. It is very important to establish appropriate attitudes and habits from the outset. Students will be confused at the start of term, and struggling to develop a pattern of working. Try to ensure that the work you set is not one of the items they ‘forget’.

Establishing a supportive atmosphere

There is no single key to establishing a good atmosphere in your sessions. A friendly manner and a combination of the suggestions above will make a good start.
Activity 1.3  Adding ‘strategy’ to your session plans

Draw up a plan for the opening session of your course in the form of a table as in Figure 1.4, but add a column headed ‘Strategy’, so that you can record why you have chosen the components and timings that you have. After the session, make notes on the appropriateness of your rationale for the various elements of the session. Write suggestions to yourself for the first session of your next course.
Appendix 1.2 Getting the session started

Arriving early
If you arrive a few minutes early you can make sure that the seating is as you want it, and sort out your materials and equipment. Chatting to students as they arrive will help to tune you and them into the context. They may alert you to issues that need to be taken into account during the session.

Starting on time
It is hard to start sessions if people are still arriving, and you may not want to create the impression of being over-zealous. On the other hand, it is important to respect the time of people who have made the effort to show up, and to establish a businesslike frame of reference. Contact time is a scarce resource, and sessions often end up feeling rushed, so avoid establishing a norm of starting late. Just begin – and when latecomers arrive acknowledge them unobtrusively and direct them to sit down. Carry on with what you are doing and let them catch up once the learning activity is started. If some students are persistently late, ask them to stay afterwards to discuss how to resolve the issue.

Orientation
At the start of a session, students' minds may be continuing business from elsewhere. You might give them time to tune in by handling routine business such as attendance records, or returning assignments. Alternatively, you could begin by asking one or two questions about the last session and intervening course work. Or you might give a five-minute talk to focus minds on relevant concepts and issues. The terms in which the first activity is presented and the challenges it poses will spring to life more quickly for students if you have already set the arguments ticking over in their minds. Or you might spend two minutes talking through an OHT outlining the purposes of the session and instructions for the first task, then pitch straight in. Some activities serve as effective orientation in themselves.

Getting quickly into active mode
Students do not properly experience the benefits of group work until the first learning activity begins. Keep the preamble to a minimum – students will remember little of it. Launch the first activity as soon as you reasonably can.

Summary of tips
- Ask open-ended rather than closed-ended questions.
- Avoid playing 'Guess what is in teacher's mind.'
- Ask questions to which students are likely to have plenty of answers.
- Try to give questions a specific and concrete focus, as opposed to making them broad and abstract.
- Avoid responding in terms of 'right' and 'wrong' answers.
- Avoid showing strong approval of some answers and disapproval of others. Keep 'evaluation' to a minimum.
- Signal acceptance of students' responses and look for ways to make use of everything that is offered.
- Keep asking for specific examples of things, so that students' minds have something to focus on.
- Reflect students' answers back to the group, to keep everyone sharing in the thinking.
- If things are getting sticky, offer students examples of answers to set their minds working on the right lines.
- If things grind to a halt, do not struggle grimly on. change tack - get another trick out of your bag.
- When students ask challenging questions reflect them back to the group. It keeps them involved and gives you thinking time.
Appendix 1.3 Managing the group process

There is more to managing your group than questions and answers. Here we discuss some other skills, already referred to in the underpinning theories of Chapter 1.

Keeping everyone involved

Participation is usually one of the key process aims of group teaching. Consequently, students who do not participate are missing an important learning experience. However, it is possible to participate fully in a large group without speaking a lot. Some quiet students are concentrating on what is being said, while some vocal students do not listen to what other people say. Your task is not to cajole unwilling speakers to contribute, but to design sessions so that there are plenty of opportunities for engagement and for making adjustments if some people do not seem to be getting involved.

- Eavesdrop on students working in groups to check whether they are engaging with tasks or missing the point.
- Look for body language or behaviour that suggests non-involvement (such as looking at other group members, or carrying on reading instead of joining the discussion) and ask the student how it is going.
- Try to ensure tasks like reporting back get shared round.
- In a plenary session, keep looking around the group to see if there are people who are waiting to say something but are being crowded out.
- Make occasional opportunities for quieter students to speak and follow up with questions to get them to elaborate. Perhaps encourage them to use an anecdote to illustrate a point, so that they have a chance to get into their stride.
- If a pattern of just a few dominant speakers has become established, introduce a technique such as ‘rounds’ to break the pattern.
- Encourage students to ask each other questions, and to comment on each other’s replies.

Taking cultural difference into account

Cultures vary in assumptions and expectations regarding patterns of participation within groups. They also vary in assumptions about the roles of teacher and student and expectations as to the contributions of men and women. If your group includes students from differing ethnic or class backgrounds, some may find participation difficult because their expectations clash, or because patterns of contribution cut across each other. These can be very sensitive issues to address, particularly as your own culture and gender will be a factor.
• It is important to be aware of cultural difference as a potential influence on interactions within your group. It may be something to take into account if you are allocating students to sub-groups.

• Try to notice whether individual students are finding participation difficult because of cultural difference. If you think it will be helpful, offer them encouragement to contribute. But be careful not to put more pressure on students who may already be feeling anxious. And remember that most students do not want to be treated noticeably differently from others.

• Be equally aware that students may not be feeling culturally disadvantaged, and may feel patronised by special attention. There are quieter students from every kind of background.

• In many cases, the most effective way of addressing cultural difference is to use the method of dividing into sub-groups, particularly using pair-work for part of early sessions.

• If some students are contributing too much, or are dominating other individuals because of their cultural assumptions, you may need to discuss the issue with them outside the classroom.

Maintaining focus

It is easy to lose track of the ‘intellectual agenda’ in a group – what you are talking about, and where you are aiming. We have stressed the importance of structuring the group process, but structuring content is equally important.

• Set a clear agenda at the outset. Leave key issues on a board or screen throughout.

• Draw the group back to the key issues when you see they have drifted off. Perhaps give them a new case to discuss, to bring the frame of analysis back into focus.

• Do not let interesting diversions run on for too long. It is frustrating to end without having covered more important issues.

• Review progress at suitable points and say what lies ahead. ‘So far we’ve been looking at X and we’ve seen that ... Now we’re going to ...’

• If discussion gets confused, break into it to ask, ‘So what are we talking about here?’

• Summarise at the end. Make patterned notes on the board (using a matrix, say, or a spider diagram) to help students pull their thoughts together and see the purpose of the session.

Leading without dominating

When you are working with a group, your role is not so much to ‘teach’ as to ‘facilitate learning’ – to set up activities and structures through which students can learn, and then support the process of working within them. This is why the term ‘group facilitator’ is sometimes used, instead of
teacher. So what is the ‘facilitative’ thing to do if you hear a student say something that is completely wrong? Should you hold back and allow the discussion to continue to flow, or is it your job to step in and correct the error before further damage is done? Are you supposed to be a strong academic presence, or a figure in the background supporting processes through which students solve their own problems. There are always tensions between:

Correcting misapprehensions  <——>  Getting everyone talking
Getting through the topics  <——>  Getting everyone thinking

Your role is to find some kind of balance.

There is no escaping the fact that you are the social and intellectual pivot of the group. It is your responsibility to set agendas, to judge progress, and to make strategic adjustments to plans if necessary. It is also your responsibility to manage relationships so that the atmosphere is supportive and individuals are not undermined by the behaviour of others – and to set standards if some students are disruptive. However, if students feel that they are dominated by you, they will not produce much for themselves. So, what is your relationship to the students? Are you a friend, a mentor, an advisor, a disciplinarian, a guru, a personal contact from the galaxy of academic stars? Ideally, you move comfortably between roles, as the need arises. Needs will vary from one student to another, and also over time (as Anderson explains in Section 1.5 of Chapter 1).

- Draw up carefully thought out plans and present them clearly. Do not hold back from giving detailed instructions. Students want to believe that you know what you are doing.
- But also plan to hand over control to students at times, so that they do not feel dominated.
- Try to draw students into some of the ‘leader’ roles, such as interrogating other students who are making presentations, or deciding when to move on to a new topic.
- Where appropriate, include students in decision making, but avoid letting it become a long drawn-out deliberation.

The way you project yourself as a person is more significant in a group than in a lecture, because you are interacting directly with the students and relying on them to participate. But equally, your group teaching is a good opportunity to become comfortable in the role of university teacher.

Thinking on your feet

Group teaching requires a combination of purposefulness and flexibility. You need to be able to ‘read’ what is going on and to react quickly when necessary. However thoroughly you have planned, it will sometimes be better to alter your plan, or even to abandon it and work out something on the spot. If you have a clear grasp of what you are trying to achieve and a good sense of where the students have reached, it is possible to devise effective activities in moments. Better still, prepare additional activities in advance to use if you need to. You must be able to judge progress and make adjustments if required. It helps to design the session so that it leaves you free at times to assess what is happening, and think strategically.
Time management

Good group sessions tend to feel a bit rushed, especially towards the end. This is better than having the session run out of steam. If your students participate enthusiastically, they tend to breach whatever time boundaries you have set. However, try to avoid letting pressures from early parts of the programme squeeze important later items, such as summarising the session. It may be better to drop whole segments of your plan, rather than rush everything through, when you have fallen behind. On the other hand, time is inherently flexible in group work and, detailed though your time planning may be, in practice you can usually make parts of your plan simpler and shorter (or more elaborate and longer) if necessary. A written time plan is a big bonus, since you can make quick calculations and work out new time allocations.

Closing the session

As you near the end of the session, you will need to do some of these:

- summarise the final discussion (or ask one or more students to do it);
- review what has been learned – both in content and process terms;
- encourage feedback from the students;
- clarify what preparation is required before the next session.

Activity 1.4  Group process review

Immediately after a session, write a group process review.

- Look down a list of your students. Think about each one, and ask yourself how involved they were during the session. (Do you know?) Could you have done more to bring some of them in?
- Do you think cultural differences might affect participation in your group? Did you make adequate allowances for any such effects? Is there further action you need to take before patterns in the group become too fixed?
- Were there times when the session drifted? What did you do about it? What will you try next time?
- Did you feel in control throughout the session? Were there times when you may have dominated too much? Did you hand over control enough? Did you lead enough? How could you find out?
- Were there times when you had to think on your feet and adjust your plans? Did the adjustments work? Were there times when you should have re-focused but didn’t?
- How was your time management? Are there any lessons for the next session?
- Did you draw the session to an effective close?

Against each of these points think of one new strategy you could try next time.
Appendix 1.4 Coping with difficulties

In the course of your group teaching, you are likely to encounter a number of situations which are difficult to handle within the flow of a session. Here are some of the common ones.

Over-eager or domineering students

- Students with a lot to say can be an asset, if their contributions can be effectively deployed. If you divide the class into sub-groups, this may in itself harness their efforts productively. Sometimes they are good at drawing other students out, once they are with just two or three. But if they continue to dominate at sub-group level, you might try forming a sub-group of dominant students only and sticking to this formation for several sessions.

- If you sit next to a dominant student, it is more difficult for them to dominate. They usually try to sit opposite you.

- In plenary discussions, you may need to allocate turns and time allowances to keep the more voluble students in check.

- If such students continue to dominate proceedings, try talking to them outside class time. Often they simply want recognition. Try to enlist them in the enterprise of drawing other students into the group process. Suggest they impose a rule on themselves to try to allow four other students to contribute between each contribution they make.

- In an extreme case, I would let a student tell me their life-story, over a coffee. Once they have had a good talk with you students tend to be less compulsive about pushing themselves forward in the group. After your chat, make a point of bringing them into the discussion at the next session, so that they don’t feel that you are trying to shut them up.

Irrelevant contributions

- Try not to snub students by ignoring their contributions. Start from the assumption that relevance is obscure rather than absent. Try to tease out what the student means and weave it into the discussion.

- If it is beyond you to find any relevance and the student continues to make similar contributions, then it becomes awkward for the whole group. It disrupts the flow and takes up time. You need to talk to the student outside the class to try to find out the cause of the problem. It may be that the student does not understand the course material, or does not understand the discussion process. You could try talking with the student about ways of addressing the problem. Sometimes there is no easy solution, but you may be able to get advice from a colleague or from the counselling services.

Students you cannot understand

- You may have a student whose speech you can only understand in snatches. It may be because their mother tongue is different from yours, or that they have a speech impairment, or that you are hard of hearing. Whatever the reason, the temptation is to ignore the issue — to pretend you understand and just carry on as best you can. This is not an adequate response, as the student will then be even more disadvantaged through not being able to participate effectively. It may be that simply allowing more time for the student to speak and for you
(and other students) to listen, and asking for clarification where you do not understand, overcomes the difficulty. If not, talk to the student about it and if necessary seek advice.

**Extremely unforthcoming students**

- Dividing into small groups tends to be the most effective way of drawing very reticent students into the group. As the weeks go by try to encourage quieter students to take their turn in reporting back to the larger group. It will be a relatively unthreatening task if the group has already prepared a set of points on a flipchart sheet or a transparency. Usually, as students get used to participating and playing various roles within sub-groups, they pick up confidence and begin to contribute within the wider group.

- Sometimes very withdrawn behaviour is a sign of deeper problems. The students may be going through a study or personal crisis. It may be a good idea to talk with them outside the class. You may end up advising them to seek support through the counselling services, but go cautiously down this track. It is important that students do not feel their every move (or non-move) in class is being pathologised.

- Some students will succeed in the course without appearing to join in with group work. You cannot force them to. You can only provide the encouragement.

**Disruptive students**

- If students are disruptive during sessions, for example, arriving intoxicated, making loud late entrances, or refusing to participate constructively in group tasks, either talk to them outside the class, or take time to discuss the issues with the whole group. If neither of these works, raise the issue of excluding them. The group can only proceed on the basis of a ‘contract’ between you and the students, as agreed in the ground rules (see Appendix 1.1). If students are not prepared to abide by the contract, they should not be allowed to interfere with the education of their peers.

- Seek advice from your department, or the counselling services, if you are considering taking such steps.

**Cliques**

- It is normal for students to form friendships and preferences within a larger group. But sometimes these become exclusive of other students and disruptive to the progress of sessions. You may try to build on these affinities by establishing a regular pattern of groupings for activities. However, this pattern may break down, or become counterproductive as the group evolves. A better option is to keep breaking cliques up for sub-group activities, so that students get to know each other better. It is generally best to aim for a kind of ‘cosmopolitan’ ethos which values diversity within a learning environment.

- If groups of students hold private conversations while the larger group is discussing, take a break for discussion of ‘ground rules’.
Non-preparation

- If progress is being held back by lack of preparation on the part of
  some, or all, students, take time during a session to discuss the issue
  with the whole group and seek a resolution. You cannot simply ignore
  the issue and struggle on. You may need to go back to a discussion of
  ground rules (see Appendix 1.1).

- Try to find out why students have not prepared. It may be that you
  could help by setting more manageable tasks, or by making your
  instructions clearer. Or it may be that your colleagues are imposing
  unreasonable demands and you need to discuss this with them.

- However, it may be lack of organisation or commitment on the part of
  the students (or problems in their lives). You need to talk all these
  possibilities over with the group (bearing in mind that people tend to
  attribute blame to others not present). It may be important for you to
  play the role of standard setter, pushing your students to do what, in
  their own interests, they should do. As tutor you may be the only
  member of faculty they talk to directly, so take this role seriously.

- Try to make sure that students' preparation will be called on. For
  example, say 'In threes, take turns to tell each other two ideas you
  found interesting in the reading.' If students know the session is likely
  to be run in a way which does not allow them to 'hide', they will tend
  to prepare to avoid social embarrassment.

What if you cannot attend?

- Perhaps because you are attending a conference, or fall ill, you cannot
  attend one of your group sessions. Should you cancel it, re-schedule it,
  double the length of the following session, try to arrange for a
  colleague to stand in, or supply the students with your plan for the
  session and suggest that they carry on without you? Which of these is
  preferable will depend on the subject, your students, your colleagues
  and the availability of rooms and slots in the timetable. Ask a colleague
  for advice.

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**Activity 1.5 Recording problems and solutions**

Keep a diary of any difficulties that arise. As you write, a solution
will often become apparent to you.

For each difficulty, note down:

- how it presented itself;
- your ideas as to the underlying causes;
- what action you took;
- what the results seemed to be.

In later weeks, you may be able to add further comments on the
consequences of your actions. At the end of a period of teaching
or a term, you will be able to review your responses to the various
difficulties. By then many changes will have happened within the
group. With hindsight, you will be able to assess the effectiveness
of the strategies you adopted. Keeping the diary will help you to
analyse and reflect upon the nature of difficulties and how to
respond to them.
Appendix 1.5 Using group teaching

1 Student presentations

A very common device is to ask a student or a group of students to prepare and deliver a presentation each week. This can develop student skills in a number of areas:

- researching a topic and extracting key points;
- planning a presentation and preparing presentation aids;
- delivering a presentation.

Preparing a presentation gives the student the experience of engaging with a topic in a very committed way. It draws the student into the experience of being a participant within the academic discourse, presenting a case to be debated by peers. At the same time it contributes to the general ‘democratisation’ of the learning group by handing over responsibility to the students.

The main drawback is students’ lack of experience. This can lead to very weak presentations, from which other students learn relatively little. Unless a reasonable standard of presentation is established early on, the series of sessions will become tedious and unrewarding. Students need to be given some help with developing the necessary skills.

The most obvious failings are:

- Because they are nervous and want to impress, students try to make far too many points.
- They think of the presentation as being addressed to the tutor, so they aspire to high flown ideas (whether or not they understand them themselves).
- They have immersed themselves in an area of literature in which all the specialist terms are taken for granted so feel they should use them, but fail to explain them to their peers.
- They forget that the rest of the group has no idea what issues are at stake and requires an explanation that starts from first principles.

Nervousness leads them to speak too quickly, too quietly, not to look at the audience and not to check whether points have been understood before moving on.

Here are some suggestions:

- Set aside part of the first session for talking about presentations.
- Ask each student to say what is the worst thing they can imagine happening. This will bring anxieties to the surface, where they can be recognised as common and addressed.
- Ask for suggestions for tackling the worries.
- Ask students to describe features of a lecture they have disliked, and then of a lecture they liked. Write these on the board as they emerge. Encourage students to extrapolate from these to produce a list of desirable and undesirable features of presentations.
- Discuss the preparation process. How long should be allowed for research and preparation? What visual aids will be helpful? What forms of notes will help?
• Discuss different modes of presentation.

• The main line of advice to students should be: keep it simple; explain everything, as though to an absolute beginner; take your time. And remember, the other students are not concerned with how clever you are, but with how well they can understand what you say.

Further issues arise as to the way discussion should be handled after the presentation. Do you take over after the presentation, or does another student (or group) lead the questioning? Do the presenters return to their seats and become part of the discussion, or remain in presentation mode at the front? What status do they have during the discussion? For suggestions see Habeshaw et al., 1992, pp. 31–41.

2 Working with large groups

It has become increasingly common to find yourself teaching a group of forty students, or sixty, or even more. How can group teaching work on this scale? After all, it is hard enough for everyone to participate actively in a discussion if there are more than about six people. This is why it is useful to break a class into sub-groups to get everyone involved and then return to a wider discussion within the whole group. However, once the class gets to more than, say, 15 to 20 students it becomes difficult to sustain the wider discussion. Inevitably the nature of the session changes – the times when you are talking to the whole class become more like public speaking than person-to-person discussion. But this does not mean that you have to resort to lecturing. There is still plenty of scope for highly productive interaction among the students and between them and you. Learning in large groups can be very stimulating if it is set up properly. But to enable everyone to participate in a satisfying way requires detailed attention to structure.

Individual engagement with a task

• **Breaking into sub-groups** becomes more or less essential if you want students to participate. The size of sub-groups will depend partly on the seating arrangements and whether there are tables to sit round – but also on how you are going to handle later plenary discussion. The students will not be able to maintain interest in ten substantial presentations from different groups at the end, so you might choose to have five larger groupings instead. Or you might judge that you really need groups no bigger than four for the task in question, but you will only take points from a few selected groups at the end.

• **Clear simple task.** You must be sure that the task is easy to understand and easy to engage with. Student groups must be able to get started quickly on their own, or there may be widespread confusion and much variability in what is done within sub-groups.

• **Stimulus materials.** Well designed stimulus materials can play a key role in providing a compelling structure to the task you set. Investing time in thinking about and preparing materials pays big dividends.

• **Task orientation.** With a large group you need to give extra attention to getting students into the right frame of mind, so that they are very clear as to the purpose of the task and how to set about it. If groups begin by sitting wondering what do, momentum and morale will sag. You cannot rely on going round groups to clarify things once they
have started. Some will have lost their way before you can get to
them, and you will run out of time anyway.

- **Written instructions.** Clear task instructions – including how to get
  started, how to report back and time allowances – need to be clearly
  visible to all participants at all times (on OHT or handout).

- **Timing.** You need to make careful estimates of the time required for
each stage of the session and draw up a detailed plan. You cannot rely
on judging students' progress as you go along, as you will not be able
to keep track of so many people. It is easy to be panicked into not
allowing enough time for things, so that students do not get properly
involved in your task, or do not have enough time to prepare for
reporting back. Also the session can easily begin to unravel in
confusion if timings are skewed by some groups over-running, while
others hang about losing interest and getting diverted onto other
things.

**Plenary reporting back**

When you bring the whole group back together, you need to work out
some way of making constructive use of the work done in sub-groups, in
order to:

- motivate sub-groups to engage seriously with tasks you set them;
- give sub-groups a sense of achievement and of being a valued part of
  the larger enterprise;
- pull ideas together, sort out misconceptions, and broaden and sharpen
  the analysis.

However, with a large group this needs to be carefully thought out and
tightly structured. There are various lines you can take. In fact, it is a good
idea to develop several approaches and shift from one to another from
session to session, because this 'reporting' stage of group work can easily
become routine and repetitive. Here are two basic models from which you
can build variations.

**A Sub-groups prepare reports and present them**

Sub-groups are given specific questions to answer, or some other detailed
format to work to. Then either each group presents very briefly (perhaps
just their two main points), or two or three groups present and then others
add any further points.

It helps enormously if groups prepare legible overhead transparencies, to
make the structure of their presentation visible to all. (Reports on flip-chart
sheets tend to be illegible if the plenary group is large.) But you will need
to allow time for preparation. Also, there are limits as to how brief reports
can be. Sub-group members going up to the OHP to make presentations
are stepping into a 'public speaking' role, so they need a moment to get
into their stride. The audience too needs a chance to tune in to what they
are saying. If groups are presenting too quickly or with inadequate
explanation of their points, intervene to slow them down or ask questions.
A rapid sequence of two-minute presentations tends to be barely
comprehensible – far better to have two substantial and coherent
presentations, and then a few additional points called out.
After presentations by sub-groups it is valuable to have a brief pulling together of threads, led by you. It is a good idea to take down notes as reports are presented, to help you with this summarising process.

B Tutor takes points and weaves them together
As before, sub-groups are given questions to answer, but instead of asking them to make presentations the tutor takes the lead by calling for points and writing them up.

It helps to have some headings or a grid already prepared on the board or on a transparency. Then as points emerge they can be placed within an organising framework. For example, after groups have discussed a case study about a proposed development of an out-of-town shopping centre, the tutor might put up a grid such as the one in Figure 1.6. Then she might take the top left cell and ask sub-groups to call out political arguments in favour of the shopping centre development and write them in – then move to the top right and take political arguments against and so on.
Alternatively, she might take all the points from the first sub-group and write them into the appropriate cells as they are delivered, then move on round the groups. When done well, this format provides an excellent synthesis of student insight and tutor expertise, with primary thinking by students being re-worked into a structured analysis, using the language and analytical tools of the discipline.

Figure 1.6 Example of a tutor’s summary of arguments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>For</th>
<th>Against</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teaching a large group increases the emphasis on structure and detailed planning, on preparation of appropriate materials, instructions and visual aids. Large-group teaching also increases the emphasis on control.

You have to be disciplined about sticking to tasks and to time allowances. And you have to be firm if students seem potentially unco-operative or disruptive. The scale of events is too large for much flexibility, or negotiation. You have to stick to the plan you have decided on for the session and save any adjustments for next time.

3 Problem-solving classes
We have included problem-solving classes in this guide because they meet our criterion of involving interaction between students and tutor. However, it is in many ways a very distinct form of teaching and for detailed advice you should go to a specialised source, probably starting with Arthur’s chapter in Forster et al.’s handbook (1995).

Problem-solving classes tend to be less about group work and more about individual help being offered on a large scale – less about talking than working with pen and paper. They also tend to be characterised by a wide
range of familiarity and confidence. You should, for instance, think strategically about the most productive ways of grouping students. Should they be grouped according to ability, so that groups can focus on shared concerns, or should you mix abilities so that the more able can help the less (and thereby consolidate their own knowledge) and keep the whole group moving along together?

The demands problem-solving classes place on tutors tend to be distinctly different from other kinds of group teaching. There is a particular onus on you to be technically proficient. You need to be sure that you can solve the problems yourself and that you have a clear enough grasp of the principles involved to be able to supply a brief and clear explanation of any aspect of them. It is very easy to spread confusion rather than enlightenment if you take an inappropriate line, or make a basic error. (If you do, it is important to pull out quickly, acknowledge that you have made a mistake, as anyone can, and give yourself time to work out where you went wrong – possibly after the class is over.) Clearly, it is important to prepare thoroughly before a class by working on the problems yourself, and perhaps getting advice from a colleague if you have any concerns as to method or principle.

The emphasis in problem-solving classes tends to be on giving technical help:

- pinpointing mistakes or misconceptions which are blocking individual students’ progress;
- giving practice in applying particular methods to problems and in working through techniques correctly;
- giving practice in setting out solutions appropriately.

However, there is also scope for a non-technical side, which involves the whole group.

- Helping students to think strategically about problem solving. Discussing ways of assessing the nature of a problem, judging what types of method might be applied and making choices as to which method to try first, so as not to waste time unnecessarily.
- Building up confidence, so that students can approach problems with a positive attitude and keep going even when initial lines of attack have failed.
- Sharing experiences of difficulties encountered, as well as ups and downs of morale, so that students realise that they are not alone in their struggles. (Helping to offset discipline cultures which seem to despise stragglers and admire supposedly effortless brilliance.)

4 Work on assignments

Although assignments are central to students’ experience of and indeed to their success in the course, they often struggle ineffectively with them, simply because they have little insight into how to set about the work. It can be extremely helpful to bring some of the assignment work into a group setting, where students can compare strategies with peers. This does not mean doing the work for them. Rather it is an opportunity to share experiences over previous assignments and to consider options for tackling the next.
• Ask students to recall the worst moments they experienced with their last assignment. Ask also how they resolved the difficulties. Draw conclusions as to the key problems assignments pose. Make a list of problems and of suggested ways of tackling them.

• Put the next assignment on the OHP screen. Divide the students into groups of three, and ask them to begin preliminary work on the assignment on their own for five minutes, then compare notes. Ask each sub-group to sketch a strategy for tackling the assignment, and write it on a transparency. Ask each subgroup to talk through their strategy. Then compare the strategies and draw out general points about tackling assignments.

• Bring in photocopies of a high scoring script from the previous assignment (having had prior agreement from the student concerned, who stands to gain both prestige and useful advice). Ask the students to read the script and write comments on its strengths. Talk the group through the script, taking comments from the group and adding your own. Also ask the writer of the script for comments on his or her strategy.

Bringing the private activity of assignment work into a public arena, where it can be analysed and reflected on relatively objectively, can help some students enormously.

5 Encouraging self-help groups

The benefits of group work do not have to be limited by the availability of your time. You can encourage your students to organise their own group work. This brief extract from Habeshaw et al.’s treatment of self-help groups provides a framework.

How they spend their time in the self-help session is, of course, up to the students, though you can be helpful in various ways when they first set up their groups. You can recommend procedures for the group such as:

(a) when the group meets, members agree a rough agenda, a timetable, and a time to finish;

(b) when a meeting finishes, members do not leave without fixing a time and place for the next meeting;

(c) the group chooses a ‘secretary’ who takes responsibility for the above.

You can suggest suitable activities for the group, such as: reading one another’s essays, exchanging views about set books, comparing lecture notes and generally trying out their ideas, and giving one another support and encouragement. You can also help with practical arrangements, such as room booking, and give support generally by showing an interest in the progress of the group.

The likely benefits to students from belonging to a self-help group are an increase in confidence and autonomy and the building of collaborative relationships.

(Habeshaw et al., 1992, pp. 91-2)