Learning in small groups

Phil Race

Biography

Phil Race is an independent educational developer and writer, with a particular interest in how people learn best. He works with teaching staff to help them optimise the learning experience of their students, and with students to help them get the most from their teachers. He is a Member of ILTHE, has served on Council, and also serves as an ILTHE Accreditor. Details of his background, publications and workshop programmes can be found on www.Phil-Race.net.

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Why get students learning in small groups?

There is a lot of literature (print-based and electronic) on how to go about small group teaching. One wide-ranging reading list available from Canada can be found at http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infotrac/liblst4.html. Even though some of the sources listed and annotated there are quite elderly, the best principles of how to go about small group teaching haven’t changed much, and it’s worth tracking some of the authors cited there to their more recent publications.

But why is the quality of small group learning so important? There are dozens of reasons. It can be argued that life is a group game, and working in small groups helps students to pick up vital survival skills for well beyond their formal studies. You can’t develop your listening skills much by going to the best lecture on listening. You can’t become better at interpersonal skills just by reading all about it in the library, or downloading the latest scholarly research about it onto your hard disk.

Perhaps the strongest reason for getting students to learn together in small groups is the high levels of learning payoff that they can derive from explaining things to each other. Take the case of four students, at the point where just one of them has ‘seen the light’ regarding something rather complex - be it a concept, a theory, a process or the meaning of life. If this student now explains it to the other three, the explainer remembers for ever, and gets a real grip on the topic. The act of explaining something to other people is one of the surest ways of causing the brain to sort out the ideas involved, as they’ve got to be sorted out satisfactorily for it to be possible to explain it. And the other three students are advantaged too. They’re having the topic explained to them by someone who has just seen the light, and who remembers exactly how the light dawned. This is much better than having it explained to them by someone (a lecturer or tutor) who has understood it for ages, and can’t remember how the light dawned, and possibly can’t understand anyone not being able to understand it!

What goes wrong with small group learning?

Some of what goes wrong is the fault of teachers. In a follow-up article I’ll explore some aspects of the behaviours of small group facilitators that don’t help small group learning. But some of the ‘bad behaviours’ are owned by students.
In an article online from Hong Kong, Jeffrey R Day identifies and discusses three of the most common problems: the silent student, the know-it-all expert, and the aggressive student (http://crucial.ied.edu.hk/smgptchg.html).

Another likely development in the UK is that now that students are paying more substantial proportions of the costs of higher education, some are turning round and saying 'I'm paying to come here and be taught. Why should I use up my energies helping my fellow students to learn in small groups? Get on with your job and teach me!'

Depending on what goes right and what goes wrong in small group learning, students' views and attitudes vary widely. A short but interesting set of quotes of students' views about small group learning in History, Classics and Archaeology can be found at http://hca.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/guides/stdpersp.php. This is followed by some statistics on how much students talk in seminars in the respective disciplines of Industrial Economics, Applied Social Science, French Literature and History. Guess what? Tutors talk in these seminars for more than 50% of the time - more than 60% of the time if we include tutors' questions, and more like 70% of the time if we include tutors responses to students' comments! Students are not entirely to blame for this domination of small group learning by tutors.

So what goes right in small group learning?

Probably this is the area where there hasn't yet been enough real research. If we work out more carefully what the successful small group behaviours are, we can then go on to work out the benefits for students, and will have more chance of persuading them to put their hearts into small group learning. Probably the first step is for us to stop thinking that small group learning is 'different' - it's simply learning. Successful learning in small groups is, I propose, underpinned by the same five factors that govern successful learning in other contexts, namely:

- Wanting to learn (students' motivations and attitudes);
- Needing to learn (knowing where the goalposts are, and what the intended learning outcomes actually mean);
- Learning by doing things: repetition, practice, explaining, getting things wrong and finding out in the relative comfort of the small group why this happened, and how to do it better next time;
- Learning from feedback: there's a lot more opportunity for students to receive - and give - feedback than in lectures, libraries, or sitting at a computer or with a book; and the feedback in small groups is rich feedback, aided by tone of voice, expression, body language, emphasis, and all the higher levels of human communication;
- Making sense of things: 'digesting' information to turn it into knowledge through experience; and checking out whether sense has been made of things by group members explaining it to each other until it really has made sense to them.

These five factors work together rather like 'ripples on a pond' bouncing backwards and forwards and continuing to influence each other (www.Phil-Race.net, go to ‘downloads’ and scroll down to 'Ripples' model for PowerPoint slides).

What can students do in small group learning contexts?

Or, to be more precise, what can they do to maximise their learning payoff? To some extent, it depends on the discipline and the topic, but there are broad principles which can transcend such boundaries. It's probably useful to make one or two ground rules for this attempt to prioritise useful student actions in small groups. Each action needs to be an identifiable behaviour - in other words, there needs to be an ‘…ing’ in the word or phrase. And each action needs to link to one or more (sometimes to all) of 'wanting', 'needing', 'doing', 'feedback' and 'making sense' as mentioned above.

Wanting to learn

- Getting enthused
- Being inspired
- Being creative
- Experiencing success
- Getting things right
- Finding out that problems are shared
- Feeling the light dawn
- Gaining a sense of purpose
- Finding out more about what's in it for me

Needing to learn

- Clarifying where the goalposts are
- Finding out what the intended learning outcomes actually mean in practice
- Getting things wrong, and finding out why
- Working out what’s important
- Putting things in perspective - seeing the big picture
- Helicoptering down to the detail
- Prioritising things

**Learning by doing**

- Practising things
- Making things
- Solving problems
- Answering questions
- Working out what questions to ask
- Sharing ideas
- Explaining things to others
- Summarising
- Linking theory to practice

**Learning through feedback**

- Explaining things to other people
- Being explained to by someone who has just seen the light dawn
- Getting feedback from tutors or facilitators
- Getting one’s questions answered
- Hearing other people’s questions answered
- Answering others’ questions
- Agreeing
- Reaching consensus
- Arguing
- Sharing ideas
- Exchanging views
- Debating

**Making sense - getting one’s head round things**

- Finding out why things happen
- Working out how things happen
- Finding out why things are important
- Finding out what’s not important enough to bother about
- Practising communicating ideas
- Sorting out ideas so that they can be communicated more easily
- Finding out different points of view about things
- Working out one’s own point of view
- Coming to conclusions

I should be delighted if you would email me with your own best suggestions for group actions and behaviours which link into the categories above. Contact me at Phil@Phil-Race.net or w.p.race@adm.leeds.ac.uk.

**Who knows what really works in small group learning?**

Students know, of course. But how can we find out about what they know about what works in small groups? One way is to get them into groups, and ask them to write onto separate post-its the actions that they find give them high learning payoff in group learning situations - and also the actions that don’t. Then get them to prioritise the post-its on a flipchart or a wall or a window, moving upwards the actions with highest learning payoff, and downwards those without such payoff.

It can also be useful to ask students to go further into how each of the most productive actions relate to their own experience of learning. In other words, which help them to increase their ‘want’ to learn, which clarify their learning needs, which give them the most useful feedback on their learning, and (most importantly perhaps) which actions are the
most productive in helping them to get their heads round new ideas and concepts and make sense of what they’re learning?

Armed with some real data on what works for students in small group learning, we can then move on to what best can we do to maximise students’ learning payoff - but that’s another article.

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