Facilitating 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 Accrider. Details of his background, publications and workshop programmes can be found on www.Phil-Race.net.

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Introduction
This article follows on from my previous one on 'Learning in small groups', where (among other things) I started to explore what students actually do in small group learning contexts, linking their actions to five factors underpinning successful learning, and thinking about which student actions are most likely to be accompanied by high learning payoff. In the present article, I shall extend the discussion to what we as facilitators can do to maximise the benefits that students can derive from learning in small groups.

There is no shortage of wise suggestions on the web regarding how best to go about preparing for small group teaching. A range of checklists can be downloaded from http://www.uchsc.edu/CIS/SmGpChkList.html spanning:

- General tasks in preparing for small groups;
- Preparing yourself for leading groups;
- Conducting small group sessions;
- Special tasks for co-leaders;
- Planning and conducting discussions;
- Planning and conducting problem-based learning.

It is worth reminding ourselves that small group teaching (and learning) is part of just about everyone's early experience, and starts in primary schools. A case study from Australia, about how small group teaching in schools helps to switch teachers' attention from their own performances to what their pupils are actually learning, has principles which can usefully be extended to higher education teaching: see 'Small group teaching' by Kaye Stacey and Gary Asp at http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/DSME/staff/Kaye_Stacey/publications/1990to96/StaceyAsp-Small.pdf

From Keele University's pages on 'Support for the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching' there is a 'Guide to Maximising Learning in Small Groups' originally given by Igor Kusyszyn of York University, Toronto (http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/aa/landt/docs/small-gr.html) including 27 suggestions, many illustrated with apposite (sometimes amusing) quotations. The second part of Kusyszyn's article lists 'Some Foundations and other Considerations' (again illuminated by quotations), and alongside 'existence, worth, feedback, self-disclosure', it is
interesting to note a new quality 'effectance' which is simply about people's need in small group situations to feel that they are having an effect.

Nowadays, a lot of small group activity is supported by electronic means, whether it is group-based computer-based learning, or computer conferencing, electronic noticeboards, discussion lists, and so on. The 'Aster' project based at the University of York addresses all of this directly - indeed 'Aster' stands for 'Assisting Small-group Teaching through Electronic Resources', and the project's website at [http://cti-psy.york.ac.uk/aster/](http://cti-psy.york.ac.uk/aster/) is well worth visiting.

Many readers of these pages will know of the published work on small group teaching of David Jaques, latterly of Oxford Brookes University. A substantial article of his can be downloaded from [http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/2_learntch/small-group/sgtindex.html](http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/2_learntch/small-group/sgtindex.html) and is constructed in three main sections, addressing respectively 'characteristics of a group', 'leadership interventions' and 'evaluating groups'.

How should we facilitate?

The word 'facilitator' has had a bad press in educational circles, but that's what we really need to be trying to do when we're getting small groups of students learning from each other, and from learning resources, and indeed from ourselves. What can we do to help students to achieve high learning payoff in small-group contexts?

What can we do to:

- Increase students' motivation to learn in small groups - capture their 'want' to learn?
- Use small group work to help students to find out more about - and take ownership of - what they really need to learn?
- Make small group work as active as we can, so there is abundant learning-by-doing, practice, and trial and error in a safe, non-threatening peer environment?
- Help students to become better able to make the most of the feedback-rich environment of small group learning contexts, and become more skilled both at giving each other feedback, and accepting it and building on it?
- Capitalise on the fact that small groups are ideal contexts for students to make sense of things - 'digesting' information to turn it into knowledge through experience?

What should we do when we 'facilitate'? As in my previous article about what students do in small groups, I'm presenting below a selection spanning some of the things we can set out to do to facilitate student learning in small groups. I've again tried to link each action to one or more of the 'wanting', 'needing', 'doing', 'feedback' and 'making sense' factors underpinning successful learning, as mentioned above.

Which of our actions can promote 'wanting' to learn?

- Inspiring;
- Enthusing;
- Praising success;
- Accepting;
- Coaxing;
- Listening well;
- Legitimising 'not yet knowing';
- Sharing what we learned from our own problems;
- Generating students' ownership of their ideas.

What can we do to help students to identify and address their need to learn?

- Clarifying where the goalposts are;
- Explaining what the intended learning outcomes actually mean in practice;
- Legitimising learning by getting things wrong in a supportive environment;
- Explaining what's important;
- Helping students to put things in perspective so that they see the big picture;
- Suggesting courses of action from which to choose to solve problems;
- Helping students to set priorities;
- Guiding students on task-management tactics.
What can we do to help students to make the most of the feedback-rich environment?

- Get students explaining things to each other;
- Not tell students things that they can tell each other;
- Refrain from lecturing!
- Get students to identify and prioritise their questions, and then help them to work out answers to them;
- Help students to share ‘air-time’ fairly and appropriately;
- Praise students when they reach consensus;
- Praise students when they agree to differ!
- Respect their ideas.

How best can we get students learning-by-doing in small groups?

- Get students practising things, making things, solving problems, answering questions and so on;
- Focus on getting students going, rather than filling the void by talking ourselves;
- Set students tasks which have high learning payoff;
- Accepting and respecting their ideas for action, and helping them feel ownership of their ideas;
- Refraining from jumping in just because we know the answer to a question, and letting our students find out the answer for themselves;
- Letting students struggle for a while, where there will be high payoff from the struggle;
- Rescuing students when a struggle is in danger of spiralling downwards;
- Get students into linking theory to practice.

How best can we help students to make sense of things - to get their heads round things?

- Leave room for students to explain things to each other;
- Create space for students to work out how things happen;
- Don’t use the word ‘understand’ in learning outcomes, but instead explain what the evidence of understanding will look like;
- Celebrate with students when the light dawns;
- Empathise with students when the light has yet to dawn;
- Legitimise the learning payoff associated with trial and error;
- Know when to give the group the comfort of privacy;
- Accept their pace of learning.

I should be delighted if you would email me with your own best suggestions for facilitator actions and behaviours which link into the categories above, and in due course I will add your ideas (if you give me your permission) to the lists above, and acknowledge your contributions. Please contact me at Phil@Phil-Race.net or w.p.race@adm.leeds.ac.uk.

Who knows which of our actions really work?

Our students know, of course. How can we find out from them? Only by continuing to ask them. For example, get each group of students to make a ‘stop, start, continue’ sheet, listing under each heading the things we do which they would like us to stop doing, start doing and continue doing, to maximise the benefit of their work in small groups. It takes some courage to do this, as there will always be at least some things they suggest we stop doing which we don’t want to stop doing. But the students are often right, it’s their learning, and they feel it. And the ‘continue’ suggestions are the good news - it can be worth our while to increase these.

What should we avoid doing?

The list below was produced from a workshop exercise I ran this month in three universities, about how we can best demotivate students in groups!

- Call them stupid;
- Belittle their attempts;
- Talk myself all the time;
• Ignore them;
• Don’t answer their emails;
• Don’t ask them how their studying is going;
• Choose texts which are too simple or too difficult;
• Chose boring topics;
• Be unsympathetic to their problems;
• Rubbish them;
• Give them bad feedback;
• Ridicule them;
• Make them feel inadequate;
• Put them down;
• Have unreasonably high expectations of them;
• Be slow to give them feedback;
• Expect them to work harder;
• Make tasks difficult;
• Make them less responsible for their learning;
• Don’t show them why they need to learn a particular topic;
• Talk to them non-stop without getting them to do anything;
• Interrupt them when they are talking;
• Show impatience;
• Put them on the spot by asking difficult questions in front of other students;
• Cover their assignments with petty criticisms of spelling and grammar;
• Tell them they are doing very badly;
• Be patronising;
• Turn up late myself.

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