**Chapter 4 Making small-group teaching work**



**Intended outcomes of this Chapter**

When you’ve thought through the suggestions included in this Chapter (and tried out the most relevant ones) you should be better-able to:

* Confronted some of the behaviours (student ones and tutor ones) which can reduce the success of small-group work;
* Decide the optimum size of student groups for particular collaborative tasks you set;
* Choose the best way to establish the group membership for your purposes;
* Select from a range of processes such as rounds, buzz-groups, syndicates, snowballing, fishbowls, crossovers, brainstorming and pair-dialogues, to help your students to learn productively and actively in small-group environments.

**Why is small group learning so important?**

My aim in this chapter is to help colleagues increase the interest and diversity of the processes used in small-group work with students. A common theme running throughout this chapter is the need to help students to participate fully in small-group situations, so that the learning payoff they derive from such occasions is maximised.

Small-group learning may be more important than we think. When most people think about teaching in universities and colleges, the image that frequently comes to mind is of a large lecture theatre full of students listening intently (or not) to a lecturer in full spate of erudition. Actually, a large proportion of the most meaningful learning in higher education happens when students are working in small groups, in seminars, tutorials, practicals and laboratories. Moreover, even more learning can be happening in small group situations beyond timetabled sessions, where students interact spontaneously with each other, and learn from each other. With increasing pressure on us all to deliver the curriculum in ever more efficient and effective ways, the means by which we manage small group teaching, and harness the potential learning payoff, come under close scrutiny. This chapter is intended to help you to explore how we can do this to best effect.

Group learning is about getting people to work together well, in carefully set up learning environments. The human species has evolved on the basis of group learning. Learning from other people is the most instinctive and natural of all the learning contexts we experience, and starts from birth. Although learning can only be done by the learner, and can’t be done ‘to’ the learner, the roles of other people in accelerating and modifying that learning are vitally important. Other people can enhance the quality of our learning, and can also damage it. But *which* other people?

We hear much of collaborative learning, as if it’s the most natural activity in the world. But it often seems like the least natural, particularly amongst strangers. Sociological research tells us repeatedly that it is human nature not to be involved with people we don’t know. We might make a mistake, or look stupid, or be attacked. We will, however, get involved with people we do know. We’ll help them with their problems and even defend them. One key to working and learning with other people is, therefore, the ability to lower barriers and become friends with would-be strangers, while acknowledging differences and respecting different viewpoints.

Furthermore, much is now said about transferable skills, or key skills, particularly including oral communication skills, problem-solving skills, self-organisation skills, and reflection. Many of these skills can only be learned from, and with, other people, and can not be developed solely by reading and studying what others have written about them. It is now increasingly accepted that the most important outcomes of education and training are about developing people, and not just what people know or understand. Employers and managers plead for employees who are able to work well with others, and organise themselves. Working in small groups can allow students to embrace a range of interactive and collaborative skills which are often hard to develop in individual study situations, and impossible to develop in large-group environments such as lectures. The small group skills are precisely those required in employment and research, where graduates need to be able to:

1. work in teams,
2. listen to others’ ideas sympathetically and critically,
3. think creatively and originally,
4. build on others’ existing work,
5. collaborate on projects,
6. manage time and processes effectively,
7. see projects through to a conclusion,
8. cope with the normal difficulties of interactions between human beings.

The last of these may be the most important of all. Learning in groups allows students to develop cohesion with their peers, when classes are becoming so large as to preclude feelings of whole group identity, particularly under modular schemes where large cohorts of students come together from disparate directions to study together on a unit.

Group learning has never been as important as it now is. Yet we are still in a world where most teachers, educators and trainers are groomed in instruction rather than facilitation. Despite the increased status of group learning, there is nothing fundamentally new in people learning together.

Some lecturers find working with small groups more anxiety-provoking than lecturing, because of the necessity to work with students as individuals rather than in the anonymity of large groups. Sometimes there are worries about student behaviour, that they might become too challenging, disruptive or unfocussed. Otherwise, there are often anxieties about organisational issues, like how to run a number of parallel seminars, based on a single lecture, with several tutors and research assistants working with different groups. This Chapter addresses some of the reasons for persevering nevertheless, and offers some practical suggestions on overcoming a wide range of difficulties.

**Deciding on group size**

A number of choices exist about the selection of group size and group membership, depending on the context of the group work and the nature of the learning outcomes which are intended to be achieved by students working in groups. If assessed work is to be an outcome of group work, it is worth thinking in advance how appropriate credit for the overall product can best be coupled with credit for individual contributions to the product, particularly where there is the possibility of the contributions being unequal.

There are no rights or wrongs to the following suggestions about ways of establishing student groups: basically it is best to make informed decisions (or inspirational leaps) based on the context and the occasion. It is useful to consider group size first.

The choice of group size will often depend on the size of the whole class, as well as on the size, shapes, and facilities available in the rooms in which small group work is carried out. Sometimes, episodes in small-group format can be conducted even in a large, full lecture theatre, with groups being formed between students sitting close enough to participate together. However, the most important occasions where group size is likely to be crucial involve subdividing the students present at seminars, tutorials and practical classes.

**Pairs**

In some regards a pair is not really a group. It is usually relatively easy to group students in twos – either by choosing the pairs yourself, random methods, or friendship pairs. Advantages include a low probability of passenger behaviour, and the relative ease for a pair to arrange meeting schedules. However, pairs are good for small scale tasks, where both students know each other well. Pairs can also be useful where a stronger student can help a weaker one. Difficulties arise when Problems can occur when pairs fall out, or either student is absent, or lazy or domineering. It is normally unwise to use the same pairs for long term tasks, but useful to ring the changes of constitution of pairs over different tasks.

**Couples**

In any class of students, there are likely to be some established couples. When they work together on collaborative work, the chances are that they will put a lot more into group work than ordinary pairs, not least because they are likely to spend more time and energy on the tasks involved. The risks include the possibility of the couple becoming destabilised, which can make further collaborative work much more difficult for them.

**Threes**

Trios can work well, as communication between three people is still easy and work can often be shared out in manageable ways. Trios represent a very popular group size. The likelihood of passenger behaviours is quite low, and trios will often work well together, sharing out tasks appropriately. It is easier for trios to arrange meetings schedules than for larger groups. The most likely problem is for two of the students to work together better than with the third, who can gradually (or suddenly) become, or feel, marginalised.. Threes can be difficult if two gang up on one, and the group is still fairly vulnerable if one member is often absent or when present doesn’t take an equal responsibility.

**Fours**

This is still quite small as a group size. Passenger behaviour is possible, but less likely than in larger groups. When subdividing group tasks, it can be useful to split into pairs for some activities, and single individuals for others. There are three different ways that a quartet can subdivide into pairs, adding variety to successive task distribution possibilities. Fours can be very effective, and can be a good critical mass for sharing out large projects, with opportunities both for delegation and collaboration. Students with different abilities and qualities can play to their own strengths within a foursome, giving each member a chance to contribute something and feel valued. Fours do have a tendency, however, to split into two pairs, and tensions can arise. With four members (or any other even number) there is no possibility of a ‘casting vote’ if the group is evenly split between two courses of action.

**Fives**

Fives have many of the advantages of fours, and are a favoured group size for many tasks, not least because of the ‘casting vote’ opportunity when making decisions. There are sufficient people to provide a range of perspectives, but the group is not of unmanageable proportions. In a group this size, however, a determined slacker may still be able to hide, unless suitable precautions are taken. The possibility of passenger behaviour begins to increase significantly, and it becomes more important for the group to have a leader for each stage of its work. However, because of the odd number, there is usually the possibility of a casting vote when making decisions, rather than the group being stuck equally divided regarding a choice of action. There are many ways that a group of give can subdivide into twos and threes, allowing variety in the division of tasks among its members.

**Sixes**

The possibility of passenger behaviour is yet more significant, and group leadership is more necessary. The group can, however, subdivide into threes or twos, in many different ways. It is now much more difficult to ensure equivalence of tasks for group members.

**Seven to ten or so**

Such numbers are still workable as groups, but the larger the number, the greater the possibility of idlers loafing and shy violets being overshadowed by the more vociferous and pushy members of the group. It can be argued that groups of this size are only really viable if a really substantial task is to be undertaken and if considerable support and advice is given on project and team management. Such groups can still be useful for discussion and debate, before splitting into smaller groups for action. Passengers may be able to avoid making real contributions to the work of the group, and can find themselves outcasts because of this. When it is necessary to set up working groups which are larger than six, the role of the leader needs to change considerably. A skilled facilitator is needed to get a large group collaborating well. It can be advantageous for the facilitator to become somewhat neutral, and to concentrate on achieving consensus and agreement rather than attempting to set the direction of the group.

**Ways of forming groups**

Strict rules on how to form groups cannot be provided, as such decisions depend so strongly on context and purpose. The following discussion points out some of the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of constituting student group membership. There are many different ways in which you can create groups of students from a larger class. All have their own advantages and disadvantages, and it is probably best to use a mixture of methods so that students experience a healthy level of variety of group composition, and maximise the benefits of learning from and with each other.

**Groups with some historical or social basis**

**Friendship groups**

If you let students select themselves into their own groups, often strategic, high-flyers will quickly locate each other, then the middle ability ones will realise what is happening and form groups among themselves, then the last ones left will tend to be the less able and they will clump together through lack of any alternative. Allowing students to arrange themselves into groups has the advantage that most groups feel a sense of ownership regarding their composition. However, there are often some students ‘left over’ in the process, and they can feel alienated through not having been chosen by their peers. Friendship groups may also differ quite widely in ability level, as high-fliers select to work with like-minded students. This method is effective if you want to be sure that marks will be distributed, but is not such a useful method of group selection if you want peers to support each other.

**Geographical groups**

Simply putting students into groups according to clusters as they are already sitting (or standing) in the larger group is one of the easiest and quickest ways of dividing a class into groups. This is likely to include some friendship groups in any case, but minimises the embarrassment of some students who might not have been selected in a friendship group. The ability distribution may, however, be skewed, as it is not unusual for the students nearest the tutor to be rather higher in motivation compared to those in the most remote corner of the room!

**Alphabetical (family name) groups**

This is one of several random ways of allocating group membership. It is easy to achieve if you already have an alphabetical class list. However, it can happen that students often find themselves in the same group, if several tutors use the same process of group selection. Also, when working with multicultural large classes, several students from the same culture may have the same family name, and some groups may end up as dominated by one culture, which may not be what you intend to occur.

**Other alphabetical groups**

For example, you can form groups on the basis of the last letter of students’ first names. This is likely to make a refreshing change from family-name alphabetical arrangements. Students also get off to a good start in seeing each others’ first names at the outset.

**Random groups**

Many tutors find this to be the easiest and fairest way of selecting groups of students to work together. Using lottery systems or random number generators, students are allocated to the groups in which they are to work. Problems can arise using this method from difficulties with group dynamics, particularly if the students have been given no preparation on how to be a good team member. However, in industrial and commercial contexts, graduates are often required to work in allocated teams, so this may be regarded as good preparation for real life. The following ways of randomising group composition can add variety to student group work.

**Number groups**

When students are given a number (for example on a class list), you can easily arrange for different combinations of groups for successive tasks, by selecting a variety of number permutations (including using a random number generator if you have one on your computer). Groups of four could be ‘1-4, 5-8, …’ for task 1, then ‘1,3,5,7, 2,4,6,8, …’ then 1, 5, 9, 13’ and so on.

**Class list rotating syndicates.**

Where a succession of small-group tasks is to be used, say with group size being four, it can be worth making a printed list (or overhead transparency) of the whole class, and starting off by forming groups by writing AAAA, BBBB, CCCC, DDDD etc down the list. Next time round, write ABCD, ABCD, ABCD etc, so that everyone is in an entirely new group. Such rotation can minimise the problems that can be caused by the occasional difficult or uncooperative student, whose influence is then spread around, rather than lumbering the same group each time. It is worth, however, avoiding the grouping being too much influenced by any alphabetical factors; all too often students find themselves in alphabetically determined situations, and it is useful to break free of this unwitting constraint in deciding group membership.

**Astrological groups**

When selecting group membership from a large class, it makes a change to organise the selection on the basis of calendar month of birthdate. Similarly, ‘star signs’ could be used – but not all students know when (for example) Gemini starts and finishes in the year. This method often leads to groups of somewhat different sizes, however, and you may have to engineer some transfers if equal group size is needed. Participants from some religions may also find the method bizarre or inappropriate.

**Crossovers**

When you wish to systematically share the thinking of one group with another, you can ask one person from each group to move to another group. For example, you can ask the person with the earliest birthday in the year to move to the next group clockwise round the room, carrying forward the product or notes from the previous group and introducing the thinking behind that to the next group. The next exchange could be the person with the latest birthday, and so on. When doing this, you need to make sure that not too many students end up stuck in the same physical position for too long.

**Coded name labels**

Often we want to mix students up in a systematic way so they work in small groups of different compositions, and give and receive feedback from many more people than involved in the group size they are working in at any given time. One way of predetermining a wide variation in group membership is to use sticky labels or post-its (or just small pieces of paper) to become each student’s name-badge on it, also bearing a unique code as follows. A three-digit code of a Greek letter, normal letter, and a number can lead to the possibility of all students finding themselves in three completely different groups for successive tasks. Six of each letters and numbers allows an overall group of 36 students to split into different sixes three times, for example, with each student working cumulatively with 15 other students.

Imagine that you have for example 25 students, and that the table below is your sheet of sticky labels, and that you write on them codes of one Greek letter, one normal letter, and one number, as follows.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **A1** | **A2** | **A3** | **A4** | **A5** |
| **B2** | **B3** | **B4** | **B5** | **B1** |
| **C3** | **C4** | **C5** | **C1** | **C2** |
| **D4** | **D5** | **D1** | **D2** | **D3** |
| **E5** | **E1** | **E2** | **E3** | **E4** |

Give these labels out randomly (and ask students to write their names on them, especially when it will be useful for them to become more familiar with each others’ names). Then you can use three entirely different group configurations, each with five groups of five, as follows:

* + Grouping by Greek letters
	+ Grouping by Latinate letters
	+ Grouping by numbers

So, in this example, by the third group each student would have worked with 12 different students from the whole group of 25, and would have encountered entirely different students in each successive group.

Where the group tasks are successive stages of a larger whole, there is no need for whole group feedback on the first two tasks, because each individual can act as rapporteur on the outcomes of their previous task in the last configuration. This means that everyone is a rapporteur, and each group can benefit from everything which happened in all the groups without the repetition of plenary report-back. As with snowballing or pyramids, you can make the task at each stage slightly more difficult and ask for a product from the final configuration if desired.

Crossovers are useful in making sure everyone in the group is active and also helps to mix students up outside their normal friendship, ethnic or gender groups. It takes a little forethought to get the numbers and letters right for the cohort you are working with. It can be useful to have some templates of the different number-letter combinations, so that you can cut up a sheet of paper or card and give students their individual numbers (this helps avoid the possibility of duplicating numbers when writing them out by hand in the actual session!). You can, however, do crossovers on the spur of the moment using post-its and quick calculations.

**Use a pack of cards.** An alternative to sticky labels as above is to use a pack of playing cards, especially when the total number of students in the room is around 50. You then have a large repertoire of ways of getting them into different

**Further ways of forming groups**

**Performance-related groups**

Sometimes you may wish to set out to balance the ability range in each group, for example by including one high-flier and one low-flier in each group. The groups could then be constituted on the basis of the last marked assignment or test. Alternatively, it can be worth occasionally setting a task where all high-fliers and all low-fliers are put into the same group, with most of the groups randomly middle-fliers, but this (though appreciated by the high-fliers) can be divisive to overall morale.

**Skills-based groups**

For some group tasks (especially fairly extended ones), it can be worthwhile to try to arrange that each group has at least one member with identified skills and competences (for example, doing a Web search, using a word-processing package, leading a presentation, and so on). A short questionnaire can be issued to the whole class, asking students to self-rate themselves on a series of skills, and groups can be constituted on the basis of these.

**Hybrid groups**

This is a compromise solution. You may sometimes wish to organise students by ability or in learning teams, and may at the same time wish to help them avoid feeling that they are isolated from everyone they already know. You can permit students to select one other person they would like to work with, and then juggle pairs to ensure some balance of ability. This can work really well, but can be fraught with difficulty, for example, when pair choice is not coincident! It can also make for difficulties if you try to pair up two self-selecting high flyers with two of the less-able students: resentment and conflict can ensue. In order to avoid this problem, one can sometimes pair middle ability pairs, which make up the bulk, with more able and less able pairs, using one’s best judgement on factors such as friendship and cooperative ability. You need to recognise, however, that when group work is assessed, the likely mark achieved by each group can be affected by your choices and may not be seen as fair, even though it works well in adding value to most students’ learning experience.

**Learning teams**

If your aim is to build upon students prior experience and ability, it is possible to select group members with specific criteria in mind. You might suggest groups form themselves (or are formed by the tutor) into teams which include, for example, one with proven competence in numeracy, one with excellent communication skills, an IT specialist, someone fluent in a language other than English, someone with experience in the world of work, and so on. This provides the opportunity for team members to take account of each other’s divergent abilities and to value them. There may be problems with task allocation, however. Do you allocate the task of doing the drawings to the former draughtsperson or to the group member who is inexperienced in this kind of work? Do you give the IT tasks to the technophile or the technophobe? The team’s marks will be better if the former choice is made, but there many be more learning gain if the novice undertakes the task with guidance from the specialist. Will the team work to its strengths, and achieve the intended outcomes well, or should it be encouraged to work to its weaknesses and maximise the learning payoff resulting from the tasks? If group work is assessed, it is no surprise that teams will do the former. Forming learning teams also relies on the students and tutors having a good knowledge of prior abilities and competence and may take some considerable organisation.

**Small group process techniques**

The most significant single enemy of small-group work with students is their non-participation. There is a wide range of small group processes from which we can select a variety of ways to help students to learn actively. A balanced programme of different kinds of activities can then be devised which will promote learning to the satisfaction not only of external quality assessors but also of the students themselves, who are likely to benefit from being stretched. Effective small group techniques help students derive increased learning payoff from the time students spend working together, by:

* enhancing their motivation to learn, by raising interest levels, and helping them see the relevance of the topics they are working with;
* giving them learning-by-doing opportunities, and allowing them to practise relevant activities, and to learn by trial-and-error in a safe and supportive environment;
* allowing students to gain a considerable amount of feedback from each other, and from the facilitator of the small group session;
* helping students make sense of things that they are learning together, particularly by explaining things to each other, and making decisions together.

This chapter continues with some suggestions regarding how you may use each of eight different ways of helping students to be participative in group situations. Some lend themselves to large-group situations, and can be ways of helping interactive learning to occur in packed lecture theatres as well as in smaller-group settings.

**1 Rounds**

Where groups are not too large, say around twenty or fewer, go around everyone in the group and ask them to respond (for example) to a given sentence-starter, or to give a sentence or two about what they want to find out about the topic to be explored. People often use rounds as icebreakers or equally as part of the winding up of a session, when it can be productive to ask students for (for example) ‘one thing you learned, one thing you liked, and one thing you did not like’. Try not to make the round too daunting for students. It helps to provide some guidance on what is expected of them (for example, “I want everyone to give their name and then identify one aspect of the course programme they know nothing about but are looking forward to learning about” or “let’s go round and find out which single aspect of today’s session has been most useful for each person”). In big rounds, students can be quite nervous, so make it clear that it’s acceptable to say ‘pass’ and if people at the beginning have made your point, that concurrence with ideas expressed already is sufficient. Alternatively, ask everyone to write down the point they intend to give, for example on a post-it, and as the round continues stick all the post-its on a chart or wall, so that they’re all seen to be equally important. Those students who are reticent orally are often less nervous when they’ve already jotted down the point they wish to contribute.

A drawback with rounds is that it can be boring if the group is large, and the answers are repetitive. Contributions late in the round tend not to be valued as they’re adding nothing new, and the contributors can feel their ideas are rejected.

**2 Buzz groups**

Give pairs, threes, fours or larger subdivisions of the whole class, small timed tasks which involve them talking to each other, creating a hubbub of noise as they work. Their outcomes can then be shared with the whole group through feedback, on a flip chart sheet poster, on an overhead projector transparency or otherwise as appropriate. This technique can also work well in large-group lecture situations, though it is not usually appropriate to do more than collect the feedback from selected groups on such occasions, otherwise reporting-back becomes too tedious, repetitive and time consuming. The noise level in a large lecture theatre full of students ‘buzzing’ can be quite alarming for lecturers used only to the sound of one or two voices at a time, but when it is remembered that a lot of learning-by-explaining and learning through feedback is occurring in such a noisy room, the use of the time spent is certain to be accompanied by significant learning payoff.

Buzz groups often work best when they’re buzzing about several different things at once. For example, in a large-group lecture, provide several buzz-group tasks, and get different groups of students addressing selected tasks. Report-back from buzz-groups is then not tedious or repetitive, and the interest level of the large group can be maintained.

**3 Syndicates**

This is a term often used to describe activities undertaken by groups of students working to a brief, usually issued by the tutor, but under their own direction. Syndicate activities can take place within the room where a larger group is working, or can be briefed for things that student groups go off and undertake on their own. For example, students in syndicates can be asked to undertake literature searches, debate an issue, explore a piece of text, prepare an argument, design an artefact, prioritise a list of options, prepare and action plan, or many other tasks. To achieve productively, they will need an explicit brief, appropriate resources and a clear description of the intended outcomes.

Specialist accommodation is not always necessary; syndicates can work in groups spread out in a large room, or, where facilities permit, go away and use social areas of the campus or designated areas of the learning resource centre. On crowded campuses, however, don’t just assume that students will be able to find somewhere suitable to work. If the task is substantial, the tutor may wish to move from group to group, or may be available on a ‘help desk’ at a central location, or available by email on-line at specified times.

It is important to have clear (sometimes quite rigid) deadlines for syndicate report-back, as it can be very tedious when punctual syndicates have to await tardier colleagues before a plenary sharing session can begin. Outcomes from syndicate work may be delivered in the form of assessed work from the group or produced at a plenary meeting of the whole class as report-backs, or poster displays, and so on.

**4 Snowballing**

This is also known as pyramiding. Start by giving students an individual task of a fairly simple nature such as listing features, noting questions, or identifying problems. Then ask them to work in pairs on a slightly more complex task, such as prioritising issues or suggesting strategies. Thirdly, ask then to come together in larger groups, fours or sixes for example, and undertake a task involving, perhaps, synthesis, assimilation or evaluation. Ask them for example to draw up guidelines, or to produce an action plan, or to asses the impact of a particular course of action. They can then feed back to the whole group if required.

It can be useful to issue sheets of overhead transparency, and brief the groups to report-back using these to present summaries of their outcomes. If several groups are involved in feedback on the same final task, it can become somewhat repetitive, and it is often useful to give separate contributory element of the overall task to different groups, so that interest levels are maintained during the final report-back stage.

**5 Fishbowls**

Fishbowling ad hoc: ask for a small group of up to half a dozen or so volunteers to sit in the middle of a larger circle comprising the rest of the group. Give the inner circle a task to undertake that involves discussion, problem solving or decision making, with the group around the outside asking as observers. Usually it is worth having an agreed substitution process, to allow someone from the outer circle to take the place of someone in the inner group, but only when both agree on the exchange. Make the task you give the inner circle sufficiently simple in the first instance to give them the confidence to get started. The levels of the tasks can be enhanced once students have had practice and become more confident.

Fishbowling post-hoc: where several groups have undertaken a task (or some complementary tasks) in parallel, form the inner circle using one member from each group (a volunteer or a conscript) and start the inner circle processing the findings of the groups. Arrange that substitution can occur when necessary or when useful, for example to allow another group member from the outer circle to come in when the representative already in the inner circle is stuck. This method can be a useful method for managing students who are over dominating a group, because it gives them permission to be the centre of attention for a period of time. After a suitable interval, you can ask others from the outer circle to replace them, thus giving the less vocal ones an opportunity for undisturbed air time. Fishbowls can also be useful ways of getting representatives from buzz groups to feed back to the whole group. Some students will find it difficult to be the focus of all eyes and ears, so it as well not to coerce anyone to take centre stage (although gentle prompting can be valuable). A ‘tag wrestling’ version can be used, with those in the outer circle who want to join in gentling tapping the shoulders of people in the middle whom they want to replace, and taking over their chairs and opportunities of talking. Fishbowls can work well with quite large groups too.

**6 Brainstorming**

This can be a valuable way of stimulating creative free-thinking and is particularly useful when looking for a solution to a problem or in generating diverse ideas. Start with a question like “How can we..?’’ or “What do we know about...?” and encourage the group to call out ideas as fast as you can write them up (perhaps use two scribes on separate boards if the brainstorm flows well). Make it clear that this is supposed to be an exploratory process, so set ground-rules along the following lines:

* a large quantity of ideas is desirable, so everyone should be encouraged to input at whatever level they feel comfortable;
* quick snappy responses are more valuable at this stage than long, complex, drawn-out sentences;
* ideas should be noted without comment, either positive or negative; no one should say “That wouldn’t work because..” or “That’s the best idea we’ve heard yet” while the brainstorm is in progress as this might make people feel foolish about their contributions or unduly narrow the focus of further contributions;
* participants should ‘piggy-back’ on each other’s ideas if they set off a train of thought;
* ‘logic circuits’ should be disengaged, allowing for a freewheeling approach.

It can be useful to generate these rules with the group at the start of the brainstorm, and write them up on a flipchart or overhead transparency so that everyone remains aware of them.

Alternatives to these groundrules include gathering contributions from everyone in turn, and allowing people to say ‘pass’ if they have nothing to add at the time. This helps to prevent the products of the brainstorm being unduly influenced by those members of the group who are most vocal or who have most ideas, though it can be argued that this is not brainstorming in the truest sense. The mass of ideas thus generated can then be used as a basis for selection of an action plan, a programme of development, or a further problem solving task. One of the most effective ways of following up a brainstorm is to get everyone involved in some sort of prioritisation of the products. For example, everyone can be invited to vote for their own top three of the things written up on the flipcharts, maybe giving three points to what they consider to be the most important point, two for the next-most-important point, and so on. The numbers can then be added up, and a global view of the prioritisation can be seen. It can be useful to get students to vote ‘privately’ first, so that voting does not become influenced by the initial trends that may be seen as votes begin to point towards favourite items.

**7 Pair dialogues: ‘Five (or three) minutes each way’**

This can be a useful way of getting students to make sense of their own thinking on a topic or an issue, by explaining and articulating their views uninterrupted for a few minutes. Ask students in pairs to take it in turn alternatively to speak and to listen, talking without being interrupted for a few minutes on a given topic. They might find this quite difficult at first, but it is an excellent way of getting students to articulate their ideas, and also means that the quieter students are given opportunities to speak and be heard in a non-threatening situation.

The art of listening without interrupting (other than with brief prompts to get the speaker back on target if they wander off the topic) is a useful one that many students will need to foster too. The products of such pair work can then feed into other activities.

**Leading and following**

Student group work, particularly when there is not the presence of a tutor, can depend a great deal on the skills which the group leader brings to bear on the group. However, no amount of leadership can work on its own, without a substantial investment in ‘followership’ by those who don’t happen to be leading at the time.

The following discussion highlights some of the important attributes needed to make the most of followership. There will always need to be more followers than leaders. We all know the problems that occur when too many people try to lead a group! The suggestions below may help you to ensure that your leaders have skilled followers. They may also help to optimise the learning that can be achieved through well-thought-out following.

* **Brief groups about the importance of followership.** It can be important to legitimise followership as a vital factor to underpin the success of groupwork.
* **Explain that followership should not be regarded as weakness.** When leadership is rotating between group members, they should regard their work when not leading as every bit as important as when they are directing the actions of the group.
* **Accept that followership requires well-developed skills and attributes.** For example, patience may be needed. When it takes a little time for the purpose or wisdom of a leadership decision to become apparent, it is sometimes harder to wait for this to happen than to jump in and try to steer the group, or argue with the decision.
* **More followers than leaders are needed!** It is virtually impossible to have a successful group where all members are adopting leading stances at the same time. Though the credit for successful groupwork is often attributed to the leader, it is often the followers who actually own the success. It is more than good sense to acknowledge this right from the start of any groupwork situation.
* **Followership is a valuable, transferable key skill.** In all walks of life, people need to be followers at least for some of the time. It can be useful to employ groupwork situations to help people to develop skills that will make them good followers in other contexts of their lives and careers.
* **Good followership is not the same as being ‘easily led’.** Being ‘easily led’ usually is taken to imply that people are led into doing things against their better judgement. Good followership is closer to being easily led when the direction of the task in hand coincides quite closely to individuals’ own judgement.
* **Followership should not be blind obedience!** Encourage group members to think about how they are following, why they are following, for how long they are going to be content with following, and what they are learning through following.
* **Suggest that group members experiment with a ‘followership log’.** This could be private notes to themselves of their experiences of being led, but it is more important to make notes on their feelings as followers than to write down criticisms of the actions of the leaders. Whether the logs are treated as private or shared notes can be decided later by everyone involved in a group.
* **Legitimise followership notes as authentic evidence of the operation of a group.** Such notes can tell their own stories regarding the relative contributions of members of the group, and the group processes that worked well, and those which worked badly. When it is known that followership records will count towards the evidence of achievement of a group, leadership itself is often done more sensitively and effectively.
* **Followership is vital training for leadership.** People who have been active, reflective followers can bring their experience of followership to bear on their future leadership activities. Having consciously reflected on the experience of following informs leadership approaches, and makes their own leadership easier for others to follow.
* **Good followership is partly about refraining from nit-picking.** When people have too strong a desire to promote their individuality, it often manifests itself in the form of expending energy in trying to achieve unimportant minor adjustments to the main processes going on in groupwork. Good followership involves adopting restraint about minor quibbles, and saving interventions for those occasions where it is important not to follow without question.

**What goes wrong in small groups?**

Small group teaching can provide excellent opportunities for participants to get to know each other, come to grips with their subject and learn actively and yet small group format classes are often seen by students as of questionable value compared to lectures and one-to-one sessions. Talking to students, they often express confusion about the tasks involved and uncertainty about their role, as well as lack of confidence about participating. They criticise tutors for inconsistency of approach and treatment, for disorganisation and lack of structure and for hogging the sessions with their own views and opinions.

When things go wrong, sometimes it’s the fault of the group members themselves. Sometimes the blame can be directed at the facilitator. In this section, I look in turn at some of the most common ‘damaging behaviours’, and offer for each a few suggestions which can alleviate the problems which can result from them.

**Group member behaviours which damage group work**

The following section looks at a range of student behaviours which can damage or even destroy group work. These are based on the experience of many facilitators. For each of these behaviours, some tactics are offered below as to how facilitators can reduce the effects on group work.

**Group members being late**

Sometimes lateness is unavoidable, but even then it is seen as time-wasting for the group members who have managed to be punctual. Here are some approaches from which facilitators can select, to reduce the problem.

* **Lead the group towards including an appropriate groundrule on punctuality.** If the group members feel a sense of ownership of such a groundrule, they are more likely to honour it.
* **Point out that punctuality is related to courtesy.** Remind group members that when one of them is late, it is an act of discourtesy to all the other people who have been kept waiting, including the group facilitator if present.
* **Lead by example - don’t be late yourself!** If the facilitator is late, it is not surprising that group members can fall into bad habits. Your own actions are seen as a reflection of how you value group learning.
* **Make the beginning of group sessions well worth being there for.** If group members realise that they are likely to miss something quite important in the early minutes of a group session, they are likely to try harder to be punctual.
* **Give out something useful at the start of the session.** For example, issue a handout setting the scene for the session, or return marked assignments straightaway as the session starts.
* **Avoid queuing.** If the place where a group meeting is due to be held is frequently still occupied at the starting time for the group session, it can be worth rescheduling the group for five or ten minutes later, so that a prompt, punctual start can be made then, without those who arrive early having to hang around.

**Group members not turning up at all**

This is one of the most common complaints made by facilitators. Student non-attendance can have a serious effect on group work, and a variety of approaches (and incentives) can be used to address the problem, including those listed below.

* **Ensure that it really is worth turning up.** If group members are not getting a lot out of group sessions, they naturally value them less, and this can lead to them being lower priority than they could have been.
* **Keep records of attendance.** Simply making notes of who’s there and who’s not gives the message that you’re really expecting students to turn up and join in. If keeping records isn’t enough, see below…
* **Assess attendance.** For example, state that 10% of the coursework element of a programme of study will be based solely on attendance. This is one way of making quite dramatic improvements in attendance at small-group sessions. However, the downside of this way of inducing students to attend is that some group members may be there in body but not in spirit, and can undermine the success of the group work.
* **Issue something during each session.** Students don’t like to miss handouts, task briefings, or the return of assessed work. It is important to make missed paperwork available to students who could not have avoided missing a session, but don’t be too ready to do so for those who have no real reason for absence.
* **Cover some syllabus elements only in small-group sessions.** When students know that these elements will be assessed alongside those covered in lectures, and so on, their willingness to attend the small-group sessions increases.
* **Don’t cancel small group sessions.** Students are quick to pick up the message that something which has been cancelled could not have been too important in the first place. This attitude then spreads to other people’s small group sessions.

**Group members not preparing**

Group members can get far more out of small-group sessions if they have done at least some preparation for them. However, many teachers and facilitators complain that students still arrive without having thought in advance about what the session will be covering. It is difficult to cause every group member to come prepared, and over-zealous attempts to do this are likely to cause unprepared students to decide not to come at all. The following suggestions may help you to strike a workable balance between getting well-prepared students, and frightening them off.

* **Help students to structure their preparation.** For example, issuing an interactive handout for them to complete and bring to the forthcoming session is better than just asking them to ‘read Chapter 3 of Smith and Jones’. You could ask them to ‘research your own answers to the following seven questions using Chapter 3’ instead, and leave spaces beneath each question for them to make notes as they read.
* **Don’t fail to build on their preparations**. If group members go to the trouble of preparing for a session, and then nothing is done with the work they have done, they are discouraged from preparing for the next session.
* **Try starting each session with a quick quiz.** Ask everyone one or two short, specific questions, and perhaps ask respondents themselves to nominate the recipient of your next question. This is a way of building on the preparation work that students have done, and making sure that everyone is included, rather than just those who are most forthcoming when you ask questions.
* **Consider asking them to hand in their preparations sometimes.** This does not necessarily mean that you have to assess them, but you could sift through them while group members were busy with an activity, to gather a quick impression of who was taking preparation seriously. The fact that you did this occasionally would lead to students not wishing to be found lacking should it happen again, and lead to better levels of preparation.
* **Get them to peer-assess their preparations sometimes.** This has the advantage that they can find out how their own learning is going, compared to other students. It also helps them learn from feedback from each other, and the act of giving a fellow student feedback is just as useful as receiving feedback.

**Group members not doing their jobs**

A lot of time can be wasted when group members go off on tangents to their intended tasks, or procrastinate about starting the next stage of their work. Work-avoidance is human nature at least for some of the time for some people! The following approaches may help you to keep your group members on task.

* **Have clear task briefings in the first place.** It is usually better to have these in print, and for every student to have a copy. Oral briefings are quickly forgotten, and are much more likely to lead to deviation from the intended tasks.
* **Make the first part of a group task relatively short and straightforward.** This can cause a group to gain momentum more quickly, and this can help to ensure that later, more-complex tasks are started without undue procrastination.
* **Specify the learning outcomes clearly.** When students know what they should be getting out of a particular activity, their engagement is enhanced.
* **Set structured tasks, with staged deadlines.** Most effort is expended as the deadline approaches, especially if students will be seen to have slipped if their task is not completed by a deadline. Act as timekeeper if you are facilitating group work: gentle reminders such as ‘six minutes to go, please’ can cause a lot of work to be done.

**Group members being disruptive**

Group work is often damaged by one or more participant whose behaviour slows down or diverts the work of others. Disruption is more of a problem in small-group contexts than in formal lectures, for example, as it takes less courage to be disruptive in informal settings. Sometimes there is no easy solution for disruptive behaviour, but the following suggestions may help you to solve some such occurrences.

* **Check that it really is disruption.** If you’re a passing spectator to different groups, you may happen to arrive at one particular group just at the moment when one of its members is expressing a strong feeling, or arguing a point relatively forcefully. This may be fine with the other members of the group, and it gives the wrong message if the facilitator assumes the worst.
* **Find out why a person is being disruptive.** Sometimes there are identifiable reasons for such behaviour, for example when a group as a whole has become dysfunctional, or when the task briefing is being interpreted in different ways by group members.
* **Watch for the same group member being disruptive repeatedly.** It is then usually worth talking to the person concerned, to find out why this may be happening. If this does not improve the situation, it may be necessary to reconstitute the membership of groups for successive tasks, so that the disruptive element is fairly distributed across a wider range of students, rather than a particular group becoming disadvantaged by recurring disruption.

**A group member dominating**

These can be among the most serious enemies of effective group learning. They need to be handled with considerable sensitivity, as their ‘taking over’ the work of a group may be well-intentioned.

* **Get the group to reflect on how it is functioning.** For example, once in a while, give them a relatively small task to do as a group, even an exercise which is primarily for light relief. Then when they have completed it, ask them to think through their answers to questions such as the following:
	+ How well do you think you did that as a group?
	+ Did someone take the lead, and if so, how did this come about?
	+ Who said most?
	+ Whose ideas are most strongly present in the solution to the task?
	+ Did you always agree with the ideas being adopted by the group?
	+ Was there anything you thought but didn’t actually say?
	+ This can cause the group to reflect on any elements of domination which may have occurred, and can reduce the tendency for domination in future group activities.
* **Lead a discussion on the benefits and drawbacks of assertiveness.** Then ask group members to put into practice what they have learned about assertiveness. This can lead to students watching out for each other’s assertive behaviours, and reduce the chance of a particular group member dominating for too long.
* **Confront the dominator privately**. For example, have a quiet word in a break, or before the next group session. Explain that while you are pleased that the dominant group member has a lot to contribute, you would like other students to have more opportunity to think for themselves.
* **Intervene in the work of the group.** Sometimes it is helpful to argue politely with a person who seems to be dominating, to alert other group members to the fact that they could be being led off-target by this person. Be careful, however, not to put down the dominator too much – there’s little worse for group dynamics than a sullen ex-dominator!

**Group facilitator behaviours which can damage group work**

There are many ways in which group learning facilitators can damage group work. Sometimes facilitators know about the things they do which undermine the success of group work, but more often they simply are not aware that things could be improved. When facilitators know they have a bad habit, it would be tempting to simply advise “stop doing it!”, but often this could lead to the reply “yes, but how?”. The following list of facilitator ‘faults’ is rather longer than the students’ damaging behaviours already discussed, but it can be argued that facilitators are able to address their own shortcomings even more directly than they can help students to address theirs. As before, each situation is annotated with some suggested tactics for eliminating or reducing the various kinds of damage which can occur.

**Facilitator ignoring non-participants**

It is tempting to ignore non-participants, hoping either that they will find their own way towards active participation, or that other group members will coax them out of inactivity. Alternatively, facilitators sometimes take the understandable view that ‘if they don’t join in, they won’t get as much out of the group work, and that’s really up to them to decide’. However, there are indeed some straightforward steps from which facilitators may select, to make positive interventions to address the problem of non-participation as and when they see it.

* **Remind the whole group of the benefits of equal participation.** This is less embarrassing to the non-participants themselves, and can be sufficient to spur them into a greater degree of involvement.
* **Clarify the group learning briefing.** Place greater emphasis on the processes to be engaged in by the group, and less on the product that the group as a whole is to deliver.
* **Consider making the assessment of contribution to the work of the group more explicit.** When non-participants know that participation counts, they are more likely to join in.
* **Confront a non-participant directly.** This is best done tactfully of course. The simple fact that it was noticed that participation was not enough is often enough to ensure that the situation does not arise again.
* **Try to find out if there is a good reason for non-participation.** There often is. Sometimes, for example, a non-participant may find it difficult to work with one or more particular people in a group situation, because of pre-existing disagreements between them. It may then be necessary to consider reconstituting the groups, or see whether a little ‘group therapy’ will sort out the problem.
* **Explore whether non-participation could be a cry for help.** The act of not joining in to the work of a group can be a manifestation of something that is going badly for non-participants, possibly in an entirely different area of their learning or their lives in general.
* **Check, with care, whether the problem is with the work rather than the group.** Non-participation can sometimes arise because of the nature of the task, rather than being anything to do with the composition or behaviour of the group. For example, if the group learning task involves something to do with researching the consumption of alcoholic beverages, it is not impossible that someone whose religion forbids alcohol resorts to non-participation.
* **Check whether non-participation could be a reaction against the facilitator.** If someone does not like the way that you are organising some group learning, their reaction could be not to join in.

**Facilitator allowing domineers**

Domination has already been discussed under the bad habits that group members can engage in, and several tactics have already been suggested there. However, if you allow domination, it can be seen as your fault too. The following tactics may include remedies for situations where you notice group learning being undermined by domineers.

* **Have a quiet word with the domineer.** This is often enough to solve the problem. Having been seen to be too domineering is usually enough to make a domineer stop and think.
* **Get the whole group to do a process review.** For example, give them a relatively straightforward collaborative task to do, then ask them all to review who contributed most, why this happened, whether this was fair, and whether this is what they want to happen with the next (more important) group-learning task.
* **Watch out for why people dominate.** Sometimes, it’s because they are more confident, and it’s important not to damage this confidence. It can be better to acknowledge group members’ confidence and experience, and gently suggest to them that they need to help others to develop the same, by being able to participate fully in the actions of the group.

**Facilitator not having prepared adequately**

We’ve already explored some of the tactics that can be used to solve the problem of lack of preparation by group members. This time, the issue is lack of preparation by the facilitator. The short answer is, of course, ‘prepare’. However, the results of this preparation need to be visible to group members. The following approaches can help to ensure that group members can see that you are taking group work as seriously as you want them to do.

* **Make it obvious that you have prepared** specially **for the group session.** There are many ways of allowing your preparations to be visible, including:
	+ Coming armed with a handout relating to the particular occasion, rather than just any old handout;
	+ Having researched something that has just happened, ready to present to the group as material for them to work on;
	+ Arriving punctually or early, to avoid the impression you were delayed by getting your own act together ready for the session;
	+ Making sure that you have indeed done anything you promised to do at the last meeting of the group.
* **Keep records of group sessions, and have them with you.** You would not arrive to give a lecture or presentation without having your notes and resources with you, and doing the same for group sessions gives the message that you take such sessions just as seriously as larger-scale parts of your work.

**Facilitator being too didactic or controlling**

This is one of the most significant of the facilitator behaviours which can damage group learning, and experienced facilitators can be the most vulnerable! The quality of group learning is greatly enhanced when students themselves have considerable control of the pace and direction of their own learning. The following suggestions may alert you to any danger you could be in.

* **Don’t try to hurry group learning too much.** It is particularly tempting, when you know very well how to get the group to where it needs to be, to intervene and point out all the short cuts, tips and wrinkles. It is much better, however, for group students to find their own way to their goals, even when it takes somewhat longer to get there.
* **Hide your knowledge and wisdom sometimes.** In other words, allow group members to discover things for themselves, so that they have a strong sense of ownership of the result of their actions. As mentioned previously, this may be slower, but leads to better learning. Don’t, however, make it show that you are withholding help or advice. When you feel that you may be giving this impression, it is worth declaring your rationale, and explaining that it will be much better for your group students to think it out for themselves before you bring your own experience to their aid.
* **Allow group students to learn from mistakes.** Tempting as it is to try to stop students from going along every blind alley, the learning payoff from some blind alleys can be high. Help them back from the brick wall at the end of the blind alley, rather than trying to stop them finding out for themselves that there is a brick wall there.
* **Plan processes rather than outcomes.** It is well worth spending time organising the ways that group students can work towards their goals, rather than mapping out in too much detail the things they are likely to experience on the way. The achievement of the group learning outcomes will be much more enduring when the group has ownership of the learning journey towards them.
* **Ask your students.** Many of the things that can go wrong in teaching or training could have been avoided if feedback had been sought on the way. The best way of getting feedback is to ask for it, not just to wait for it. To get feedback on important things (such as whether or not you are being too didactic or controlling) there’s no faster way than asking for exactly that.
* **Learn from selected colleagues.** Feedback from other group-learning facilitators is always useful. However, it is worth going out of your way to seek feedback from colleagues who have a particular gift for making group learning **productive**, and being duly selective in the tactics you add to your own collection.

**Facilitator showing lack of cultural sensitivity**

This is a serious group-damaging behaviour. In fact, lack of cultural sensitivity can be more dangerous in small-group situations than in large-group ones. It is also one of the hardest areas to find out about. Few people are brave enough to challenge a group learning facilitator with this crime! It is useful for even the most skilled group learning facilitators to undertake a regular self-audit on this issue. The following tactics can help.

* **Read about it.** There is no shortage of published material on equal opportunities, cultural issues and so on. Sometimes when reading this literature, one can be surprised by the thought ‘but sometimes I do this too!’.
* **Watch other group learning facilitators, with this agenda in mind.** See what they do to avoid the pitfalls, and also notice when they fall into them. Work out alternative approaches which could have circumvented such problems.
* **Don’t make assumptions.** It is particularly dangerous to bring to your role of learning facilitator any preconceptions about the different members of your groups, such as those based on gender, age, ethnic group, perceived social status, and any other area where assumptions may be unwise and unfounded. Treating people with equal respect is an important part of acknowledging and responding to individual difference.
* **Talk to group members individually.** When you are working with a mixed group, for example, it is in your informal, individual conversations with members of the group that you are most likely to be alerted to anything which could be offending individuals’ cultural or personal perspectives.
* **Ask directly sometimes.** It is important to pick your times wisely, and to select people who you believe will be willing to be frank with you if necessary. Rather than asking too directly (for example: “What do I do which could be culturally insensitive?”), it can be useful to lead in more gently, for example “What sorts of learning experiences do you find can be damaged by people who are not sensitive enough culturally?”, “How does this happen usually?” and so on.

**Facilitator favouring clones!**

This happens more often than most people imagine. It is noticed straightaway by everyone else in the group! It can go entirely unnoticed by the perpetrator. It is, of course, perfectly human to have ‘warmer’ or ‘more empathetic’ feelings and attitudes towards someone who is more like oneself than other people, or who shares significant attitudes, values, and even ‘looks’. In particular, teachers of any sort can be flattered and encouraged when they recognise ‘a disciple’ among a group of people. If you think you could be in danger of indulging in this particular behaviour, think about which of the following approaches may be most helpful to you.

* **Go clone detecting!** From time to time, think around the types of people who make up learning groups you work with, and test out whether any of them are more like you are (and particularly more like you *were*) than the others. Then watch out for any signs that you could be treating them differently (even if only slightly).
* **Don’t over-compensate.** It is just as dangerous to be too hard on clones as to favour them. The person concerned may have no idea at all why you are being harder on them than on other people. The people you might (consciously or subconsciously) regard as clones may have no inkling that they are in this special position! Subconsciously, you could be putting them under the same sort of pressures as you put yourself under long ago, and exacting of them the standards you applied to yourself.

**Facilitator talking too much**

This is one of the most common of all group learning facilitator bad habits. However, it is just about the easiest to do something about. The following suggestions should contain all you need to rectify this problem, if you own it.

* **Remind yourself that most learning happens by doing, rather than listening.** Concentrate on what your group students themselves do during group sessions, rather than on what you do.
* **Don’t allow yourself to be tempted into filling every silence.** In any group process, short episodes of silence are necessary components, space for thinking. When you happen to be expert enough to step in with your thoughts, before other people have had time to put theirs together, it is all too easy to be the one to break the silence. What seems to you like a long silence, seems much shorter to people who are busily thinking. Let them think, then help them to put their thoughts into words. When they have ownership of putting together ideas and concepts, their learning is much deeper and more enduring.
* **Only say some of the things you think.** Being the expert in the group (you probably are!), you’re likely to know more than anyone else about the topic being addressed. You don’t have to reveal all of your knowledge, just some of it. Don’t fall into the trap of feeling you have to defend your expertise, or that you need to justify your position.
* **Don’t let them let you talk too much!** It’s easier for group members to sit and listen to you than to get on with their own thinking. Sometimes, they can encourage you to fill all of the time, and opt for an easy life.
* **Present some of your thoughts (particularly longer ones) in print.** Use handouts to input information to the group, but not at the expense of getting group members to think for themselves. You can convey far more information in five minutes through a handout than you could in five minutes’ worth of talking. People can read much faster than you can speak, and in any case, they can read a handout again and again – they can’t replay you speaking (unless they’re recording it – and even then, would they *really* replay it all again?).

**Facilitator not providing clear objectives**

In education and training it is increasingly accepted that objectives, or intended learning outcomes, have a vital part to play in ensuring that learning takes place successfully. This is no less true of small-group work than lectures. Moreover, the absence of clear objectives for group work is only too readily taken by students as a signal that the group work can’t really be an important part of their overall learning. The following suggestions may help you to put objectives or statements of intended learning outcomes to good use in facilitating group learning.

* **Work out exactly what you intend each group learning session to achieve.** It is best to express this in terms of what you intend students themselves to gain from the session. Make sure that the learning outcomes are expressed in language that students themselves can readily understand, so that they see very clearly what they are intended to achieve.
* **Publish the learning outcomes or objectives in advance.** This allows students to see where any particular group session fits in to the overall picture of their learning. It also helps them to see that their group learning counts towards their assessment in due course.
* **Maintain some flexibility.** For example, it is useful to have some further objectives for any group session, designed to cover matters arising from previous sessions, or to address students’ questions and needs as identified on an ongoing basis through a programme of study. These additional objectives can be added to the original intentions for the session, and re-prioritised at the start of the session if necessary.
* **Don’t just write the objectives or outcomes –** **use them!** State them (or display them on a slide, or issue them on a handout) at the start of each and every group session, even if it is continuing to address a list of intended outcomes which were discussed at previous sessions.
* **Assist students in creating their own objectives.** From time to time, ask them “what do you need to gain from the coming group session?”, for example giving them each a post-it on which to jot down their replies. Then stick the post-its on a chart (or wall, or door, or markerboard), and ask the group to shuffle them into an order of priority, or to group them into overlapping clusters.

**A closer look at tutorials**

In this Chapter so far, we’ve looked in general terms at the processes of students working together. In the next section, let’s think of the most common small-group scenario: that of the academic tutorial, where a tutor is present alongside a small number of students. How many students make a tutorial? It used to be the case, in many universities, where a tutorial was either a one-to-one encounter between a student and a tutor, or a tutor working with a group of no more than four or five students. With present-day class sizes, elements that appear on the timetable as ‘tutorials’ can in some disciplines and in some universities involve significantly larger numbers of students than five.

**What’s an *academic* tutorial?**

Everyone who is involved in tutorial work with students agrees that there is no clear dividing line between academic and personal tutorials. Academic tutorials are subject-related, while personal tutorials are normally thought of in terms of development of the ‘whole student’, but either kind of tutorial is likely to spill over into the other domain. In this chapter, I would like to flag this overlap now at the outset, but then focus on aspects of academic tutorials and other kinds of small group teaching-learning situations, recognising that quite a lot of the discussion can be translated to personal tutorials too.

There is no agreed definition of a tutorial, and this is probably wise, as tutorials should fulfil any one or more different roles. These may include:

1. to provide students with opportunities to learn-by-doing, practising applying things that have been covered in lectures, handouts, and learning packages.
2. to address students’ motivation, helping to increase their confidence in their abilities to handle the curriculum successfully.
3. to provide students with feedback, from each other as well as from the tutor, helping them to find out more about how their learning is progressing.
4. to give teaching staff opportunities to find out what problems students may be encountering with the subjects they are learning.
5. the help students ‘digest’ or make sense of the concepts they are learning.
6. to allow students to ask questions which they may not be able to ask in large-group sessions.

However, the above description does not amount to a definition of a tutorial, but only serves as a description of some of the processes likely to be involved in the sort of tutorials that help students to get to grips with the curriculum.

**What’s a *personal* tutorial?**

These are usually regarded as one-to-one encounters between a student and a tutor, but where the purpose is not to extend or deepen the academic understanding of the subjects being studied, but to support the student’s learning in a much broader sense. The tutor may be one of the lecturers involved in the student’s course, or may be a teaching assistant or research assistant with some tutorial duties. Students are often assigned a ‘personal tutor’ for the duration of a year of their course, or for their entire time at university. These tutors are normally expected to exercise a counselling or advising role when necessary, on the wide agenda of anything that may be causing concern to their respective students. However, the success of personal tutorial support is at best, patchy. Some tutors take it very seriously, and put themselves out to get to know their students well, and to remain well-briefed on the progress of each student. For many students, however, their personal tutor is just a name.

A result of this situation is that for most students, the majority of personal tutoring happens in the context of the contact they have with academic staff in those teaching-learning situations where the staff-student ratio is low enough for advice and counselling to be available, and that often means in what are intended to be academic tutorials.

**What can students do *before* academic tutorials?**

It’s often argued by teaching staff that a problem with tutorials is that students just don’t do the preparatory work they were intended to undertake before attending tutorials. However well-briefed students are, it seems inevitable that some will turn up without having done any such work, and others will decide to miss the tutorials altogether, feeling guilty that they have not put in sufficient time or energy into preparing for them.

Some ways of maximising the probability that students will engage with preparatory work include:

1. giving work briefings in print rather than orally; this increases the chance that students not present at the briefing will get copies of it;
2. issuing tutorial briefings on sheets of a particular colour rather than just on white paper; this helps students not to lose such briefings amongst other papers;
3. making briefings sheets interactive: for example include some structured questions with boxed spaces for students to write their answers or conclusions in. This makes it much easier to spot who has done some preparation and who has not – and students don’t like to be seen not to have written something into the boxes;
4. arranging that coursework to be handed in for assessment is gathered in at tutorials. This can help to ensure that students attend, if only to hand in their work. It also allows tutorials to be used to discuss problems students may have encountered with the coursework, before they have forgotten exactly what the problems were;
5. including in tutorial time activities such as student self-assessment and peer-assessment, depending on preparation that students are required to have done before participating.

It can be worth exploring possibilities of students doing collaborative work before tutorials, such as meeting together (without a tutor) to help identify common problems and questions, to establish an agenda for forthcoming tutorials – or better still perhaps, for forthcoming large-group sessions.

**What can students do *during* academic tutorials?**

It is probably best to start by looking at things that students *shouldn’t* be doing in academic tutorials. These include activities with low learning payoff, including:

1. making notes just by copying down things said by the tutor, or things written on the board or screen.
2. spending most of the time listening passively, while one or two students dominate the discussion.
3. pretending that they understand what is being discussed, rather than admitting to having problems with the material.

There are many varieties of activity with high learning payoff, that students can engage in during academic tutorials. These include (but are by no means restricted to):

1. solving problems or doing calculations, either individually or collaboratively;
2. discussing different perspectives on an issue;
3. working out different ways of approaching a problem or case-study situation;
4. applying assessment criteria to their own, or each other’s work;
5. marking examples of past-students’ assignments or exam answers;
6. asking the tutor questions, or working out agendas of matters for future tutorial exploration;
7. answering questions posed by each other and by the tutor;
8. doing exercises helping them to apply, and make sense of, material covered in lectures;
9. linking work they have done in practical sessions to underpinning concepts and models;
10. making summaries and checklists to help them distinguish the main points of a subject from the background detail.

Practical pointers for group work

Already in this Chapter are many suggestions on recognising and responding to some of the things that can go wrong with small group teaching. Some additional tips are included below, adapted from many more in ‘500 Tips on Group Learning’ (Phil Race, Routledge, 2000).

**Getting groups started**

Once group work has gathered momentum, it is likely to be successful. The greatest challenge is sometimes to get that momentum going. The first few minutes can be crucial, and you will need all of your facilitation skills to minimise the risk of groups drifting aimlessly in these minutes. Take your pick from the following suggestions about getting group work going right from the start of a task.

* **Foster ownership of the task.** Wherever possible, try to arrange that the members of the whole group have thought of the issues to be addressed by small-group work. When possible, allow members to choose which group task they wish to engage in. When people have chosen to do a task, they are more likely to attempt it wholeheartedly.
* **Start with a short group icebreaker.** Before getting groups under way with the main task, it can be useful to give them a short, ‘fun’ icebreaker so that each group’s members get to know each other, relax, and become confident to work with each other. See the next section for some ideas about icebreakers.
* **Keep the beginning of the task short and simple.** ToEinstein is attributed “everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler”. Make sure that the first stage of each group task is something that does not cause argument, and does not take any time to interpret. Once a group is under way, it is possible to make tasks much more challenging.
* **Don’t rely only on oral briefings.** Oral briefings are useful, as they can add the emphasis of tone of voice, facial expression, and body language. However, when only oral briefings are given for group learning tasks, it is often found that after a few minutes different groups are attempting quite different things.
* **Use printed briefings.** It is useful to put the overall briefing up on an overhead transparency or PowerPoint slide, but if then groups move away into different syndicate rooms, they can lose sight (and mind) of the exact briefing. It is worth having slips of paper containing exactly the same words as in the original briefing, which groups can take away with them.
* **Visit the groups in turn.** It can make a big difference to progress if you spend a couple of minutes just listening to what is happening in a group, then chipping in gently with one or two useful suggestions, then moving on. During such visits, you can also remind groups of the deadline for the next report-back stage.
* **Clarify the task when asked.** Sometimes, groups will ask you whether you mean one thing or another by the words in the briefing. It is often productive if you are able to reply “either of these would be an interesting way of interpreting the task; you choose which interpretation you would prefer to address”. This legitimises the group’s discovery of ambiguity, and can increase the efforts they put into working out their chosen interpretation.
* **Have an early, brief, report-back from groups on the first stage of their task.** This can help to set expectations that everyone will be required to be ready for later report-back stages at the times scheduled in the task briefing. Any group which finds itself unprepared for the initial report-back is likely to try to make sure that this position does not repeat itself.
* **Break down extended tasks into manageable elements.** Often, if the whole task is presented to groups as a single briefing, group members will get bogged down by the most difficult part of the overall task. This element might turn out to be much more straightforward if they had already done the earlier parts of the whole task.
* **Try to control the amount of time that groups spend on successive stages of each task.** It can be useful to introduce a sense of closure of each stage in turn, by getting groups to write down decisions or conclusions before moving on to the next stage in the overall task.

**Icebreakers: some ideas**

There are countless descriptions of icebreaking activities in books and articles on training; see particularly the books by Jaques and Brandes in ‘Further Reading’. An icebreaker is most needed when members of a group don’t already know each other, and when the group is going to be together for some hours or days. Most icebreakers have the main purpose of helping individuals get to know each other a little better. Here are some ideas to set you thinking about what the most appropriate icebreakers could be for your own groups. Some icebreakers can be very quick, acting as a curtain raiser for the next activity. Others can be extended into larger-scale activities at the start of a major group project. Don’t try to rush these.

* **Triumphs, traumas, and trivia.** Ask everyone to think of one recent triumph in any area of their lives (which they are willing to share), and ask them to think of a trauma (problem, disaster, and so on), and something trivial – anything that may be interesting or funny. Then ask everyone in turn to share a sentence or so about each. Be aware that this activity often brings out a lot of deep feelings, so keep this for groups whose members need to know each other well, or already do so.
* **What’s on top?** This can be a quick way of finding out where the members of a group are starting from. Ask everyone to prepare a short statement (one sentence) about what is, for them, the most important thing on their mind at the time. This helps people to clear the ground, perhaps if they are (for example) worrying about a sick child, or a driving test, and enables them then to park such issues on one side, before getting down to the real tasks to follow.
* **What’s your name?** Ask everyone in turn to say their (preferred) name, why they were called this name, and what they feel about it. This not only helps group members to learn each others’ names, but also lets then learn a little about each others’ backgrounds, views, and so on. Bear in mind that some people don’t actually like their names much, so make aliases acceptable.
* **Pack your suitcase.** Ask individuals to list ten items that they would metaphorically pack into a suitcase if they were in a disaster scenario. Emphasise that these items wouldn’t have to literally fit into a suitcase, and could include pets, but shouldn’t include people. Ask them to mill around a large room, finding a couple of others who share at least two items from their list. This enables them to get into groups of three or four, with plenty to talk about, before you get them started on the actual group work.
* **What I like, and what I hate.** Ask everyone to identify something that they really like, and something they really loathe. Ask them then to introduce themselves to the rest of the group, naming each thing. This helps people to remember each others’ names, as well as to break down some of the barriers between them.
* **What do you really want?** Ask everyone to jot down what they particularly want from the session about to start, and to read it out in turn (or stick post-its on a flipchart, and explain them). This can help group members (and facilitators) to find out where a group is starting from.
* **What do you already know about the topic?** Ask everyone to jot down, on a post-it, the single most important thing that they already know about the topic that the group is about to explore. Give them a minute or so each to read out their ideas, or make an exhibition of them on a flipchart. This helps to establish ownership of useful ideas within the group, and can help facilitators to avoid telling people things that they already know.
* **Draw a face.** Ask everyone to draw on a scrap of paper (or a post-it) a cartoon ‘face’ showing how they feel at the time (or about the topic they’re going to explore together). You may be surprised at how many ‘smiley faces’ and alternatives that can be drawn.
* **Provide a picture, with small cartoon figures undertaking a range of activities.** Then ask people to say which activity feels closest to the way they feel at the moment (for example, digging a hole for themselves, sitting at the top of a tree, on the outside looking in, and so on). Use this as a basis for getting to know each other through small group discussion.
* **Discover hidden depths.** Ask people in pairs to tell each other ‘one thing not many people know about me’, that they are prepared to share with the group. Then ask each person to tell the group about their partner’s ‘hidden secret’, such as ballroom dancing, famous friends, ability to build dry stone walls, or whatever. This is a particularly good exercise when introducing new members to a group who already know each other, or when a new leader joins a well established group.
* **Make a junk sculpture.** Give groups of four or five people materials such as newspaper, disposable cups, string, sellotape, plastic straws, and so on. Ask them to design and produce either the highest possible tower, a bridge between two chairs that would carry a toy car, or some other form of visible output. Ask them to think, while on task, about the group processes involved (who led, who actually did the work, who had little to contribute, and so on), then ask them to unpack these thoughts and share in plenary their summarised conclusions about the group processes.
* **Develop verbal skills.** Ask students in pairs to sit back to back. Give one of each pair a simple line drawing comprising squares, triangles, rectangles and circles. Without letting their partner see the original, ask those holding the drawings to describe what is on the page, using verbal instructions only, so that their partners can draw the original on a fresh sheet of paper. After a fixed time, let them compare the originals with the copies, and ask them to discuss what the task showed them about verbal communication. A similar task can also be designed, using plastic construction bricks.
* **Make a tableau.** Ask groups of about seven or eight students to decide on a theme for their tableau (for example the homecoming, the machine age, playtime) and ask them to compose a tableau using themselves as key elements. Ask each group in turn to ‘present their tableau’ to other groups, and then to discuss how they went about the task. Polaroid or digital photos of the tableaux can add to the fun, but do not use this activity if you feel that group members are likely to be sensitive about being touched by others.
* **Organise a treasure hunt.** Give each group a map of the training centre or campus, and a set of tasks to complete across the location. For example, task elements can include collecting information from a display area, checking out a reference item via the Internet, collecting prices for specific items from the catering outlet, drawing a room plan of a difficult-to-locate study area, and so on. Different groups should undertake the tasks in a different order, so that individual locations (and people) are not mobbed by hosts arriving at the same time. Give a time limit for the treasure hunt, and award prizes for all who complete on time. This activity helps people to get to know each other and their learning environment at the same time.
* **Which of these are ‘you’?** Give everyone a handout sheet containing (say) 20 statements about the topic to be explored. Ask each participant to pick out the three that are most applicable to them. Then ask everyone in turn to disclose their top choice, asking the rest to show whether they too were among their own choices.
* **Interview your neighbour.** Ask participants in pairs to interview each other for (say) three minutes, making notes of key points that they may wish to report back in summary of the interview. Then do a round asking everyone to introduce their neighbour to the rest of the group.

**Learning and using names**

People in general tend to take more notice of people they know. Your students will take more notice of you if they feel that they know you – and above all – that you know them. This is particularly important when you work with small groups of students, as they are much more likely to expect you to know who they are! Getting their names right is a useful step towards building up the sort of relationship which fosters learning. The following suggestions provide some general advice on how to improve your ‘hit rate’ of correct name-calling in small group work.

* **Learn all the easy names first.** if you have a group with three Peters in, make sure you know them first and which one is which! You then have a three in twenty (say) chance of getting the first name right!
* **Make a conscious effort to learn three or four names a session.** This way you should build up a reasonable ability to talk to people by name within three first few weeks in small group work.
* **Take particular care with difficult names.** If you have names that you find difficult or unusual to say, write them out clearly and check how to say them, then write it phonetically in a way you will recognise over the top. Use the name as often as you can until you’ve mastered it, regularly checking that you’ve got it right.
* **Consider students’ feelings.** Think how you feel when someone gets your name wrong – especially someone you would have expected to know it. One of the problems with university teaching is that new students can feel quite anonymous and alone, especially when part of a large class.
* **Use preferred names.** At the beginning of the course, ask students ‘what do you want to be called?’ The names they give you will be more accurate than your printed class-lists, and you’ll quickly find out whether Victoria wants to be called Vicky, Jaswinder - Jaz, Cedric – Rick etc.
* **Use labels.** At early stages it’s useful to give students sticky labels to write their names on in bold felt-tip pen. This gives you the chance to call them by the name they prefer – and gives them the chance to start getting to know each other.
* **Help students to learn each others’ names.** In groups with up to about 20 students, try a round as follows: ‘Tell us your name, and tell us something about your name’. This can be a good icebreaker, and can be very memorable too, helping people develop association-links with the names involved.
* **Help students to get to know each other better.** An alternative round is to get the students sitting in a circle. Ask one to say his or her name, then the person to the left to say ‘I am ....... and this is ........’. Carry on round the circle, adding one name at each stage, till someone goes right round the circle correctly. A further alternative is to ask students to introduce themselves, stating first their names, and then two ‘likes’ and two ‘dislikes’, so some memorable details help associate the person with the name.
* **Use your list of names to quiz students.** To help you to get to know their names, once you have a complete list of the names, ask people from your list at random some (easy) questions, not to catch them out, but to help you to put names to faces.
* **Consider using place cards.** In places where small groups of students are sitting in particular places for a while, it is useful to give the students each a ‘place card’ (a folded A5 sheet of card serves well) and to write their names on both sides of the card, and place the cards in front of them. Cards can be seen at a distance much better than labels. This allows you to address individuals by name, and also helps them to get to know each other.

**Conflict in group work**

Much has been written about the stages that are quite normal in groupwork. For example, it is common for groups to progress through stages of ‘forming, storming, norming, and conforming’ – not necessarily in one particular order! The following suggestions may help you to minimise the dangers associated with conflict in groupwork, and to maximise the benefits that can be drawn from people who sometimes disagree.

* **Legitimise conflict.** It is important to acknowledge that people don’t have to agree all of the time, and to open up agreed processes by which areas of disagreement can be explored and resolved (or be agreed to remain areas of disagreement). Ensure, however, that the groups have groundrules for conflict resolution, to that they strive to avoid slanging matches and power games.
* **Establish the causes of conflict.** When conflict has broken out in a group, it is easy for the root causes to become subsumed in an escalation of feeling. It can be productive to backtrack to the exact instance which initiated the conflict, and to analyse it further.
* **Encourage groups to put the conflict into written words.** Writing up the issues, problems, or areas of disagreement on a flipchart or marker-board can help to get them out of people’s systems. Conflict feelings are often much stronger when the conflict is still bottled up, and has not yet been clearly expressed or acknowledged. When something is ‘up on the wall’, it often looks less daunting, and a person who felt strongly about it may be more satisfied. The ‘one the wall’ issues can be returned to later when the group has had more time to think about them.
* **Establish the ownership of the conflict.** Who feels it? Whom is being affected by it? Distinguish between individual issues, and ones that affect the whole group.
* **Distinguish between people, actions, and opinions.** When unpacking the causes of conflict in a group situation, it is useful to focus on actions and principles. Try to resolve any actions which proved to cause conflict. Try to agree principles. If the conflict is caused by different opinions, it can help to accept people’s entitlement to their opinions, and leave it open to people to reconsider their opinions if and when they feel ready to do so.
* **Use conflict creatively.** It can be useful to use brainstorming to obtain a wider range of views, or a broader range of possible actions that can be considered by the group. Sometimes, the one or two strong views which may have caused conflict in a group look much more reasonable when the full range of possibilities is aired, and areas of agreement are found to be closer than they seemed to be.
* **Capture the learning from conflict.** When conflict has occurred, it can be beneficial to ask everyone to decide constructive things they have learned about themselves from the conflict, and to agree on principles which the whole group can apply to future activities to minimise the damage from similar causes of conflict arising again.
* **Refuse to allow conflict to destroy group work.** You may wish sometimes to tell groups that achievement of consensus is an aim, or a norm, or alternatively you may wish to ask groups to establish only the extent of the consensus they achieve.
* **Consider arbitration processes.** When conflict is absolutely irresolvable, the facilitator may need to set up a ‘court of appeal’ for desperate situations. The fact that such a process is available often helps groups to sort out their own problems without having to resort to it.
* **Make it OK to escape.** When people know that they can get out of an impossible situation, they don’t feel trapped, and in fact are more likely to work their own way out of the conflict. It can be useful to allow people to drop out of a group, and move into another one, but only as a last resort. Beware of the possible effects of someone who is seen as a conflict generator entering a group which has so far worked without conflict!

# Gender issues in group work

When problems occur in groups due to gender issues, the they can be felt more deeply than problems arising from almost any other cause. The following suggestions may help you to avoid some problems of this sort from arising in the first place, or to alert group members themselves to the potential problems, so that they can work round them in their own group work.

* **Think about gender when forming groups.** There are advantages and disadvantages for single sex groups, depending on the balance of the sexes, and other issues including culturally sensitive ones. In some cultures, females may be much happier, for religious reasons, working in single sex groups. However, in other cases it may be helpful in terms of future employment to gently encourage them to get used to working with members of the opposite sex.
* **Try to avoid gender domination of groups.** This can happen because of majority gender composition of groups. If this is inevitable because of the overall gender balance of the whole group, try to manage group composition so that minority participants don’t feel isolated. If it is unavoidable, address the issue directly when setting groundrules.
* **Decide when single gender groups might be more appropriate.** For group work on gender-sensitive issues, such as child abuse, it can be best to set out to form single sex groups.
* **Require appropriate behaviour.** For group work to be effective, all participants need to behave in a professional way, with standards that would be expected in an effective working environment. Outlaw sexist or offensive behaviour, and emphasise that one person’s ‘joke’ or ‘tease’ can be another person’s humiliation.
* **Decide when to stick with existing group compositions.** When a set of groups is working well, without any gender-related or other problems, don’t just change the group composition without a good reason.
* **Set groundrules for talking and listening.** It can be useful to agree on groundrules which will ensure that all group participants (irrespective of gender) are heard, and not talked down or over by other participants.
* **Avoid setting up excessive competition between male groups and female groups.** When there are gender-specific groups, don’t egg a group of one gender on, by saying words to the effect “Come on, you can do better than them” referring to groups of the other gender.
* **Be sensitive about role assignment.** For example, try to raise awareness about the dangers of tasks being allocated within groups on the basis of gender stereotypes, such as typing or making arrangements being handles by females, and ‘heavy’ work by males.
* **Alert groups to be sensitive to leadership issues.** It is often the case that, for example, male members of groups may automatically see themselves as stronger contenders to lead the group than their female counterparts, and put themselves forward. When group members are aware that this is an issue, they are more likely to agree on a more democratic process for deciding who will lead an activity, or who will report back the outcomes.
* **Avoid sexual preference oppression.** When it is known that group participants have different sexual preferences from the majority of the group, there is a tendency for them to be oppressed in one way or another by the rest of the group. It can be delicate to raise this issue in general briefings, and it may be best to respond to it as a facilitator when it is seen to be likely to occur.