

Small group teaching: a toolkit for learning

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Introduction

This resource offers a thought-provoking and light-hearted look at the rewards and challenges of small-group teaching. From anthropology to zoology, first-year undergraduates to research postgraduates, small group teaching is ubiquitous in higher education. At its best, it is hugely rewarding for both teacher and taught.

Many take this skill for granted, and those new to teaching tend not to get the support they need. This is a pity, for it is an eminently transferable academic skill. If you can teach small groups effectively, you can liven up your lectures and seminars too.

What will you find here?

This is a resource for those new (and not so new) to teaching in higher education. In it, we've distilled an extensive set of educational literatures and resources into a teacher-friendly resource pack. Whether you have ten minutes to think about tomorrow's class, or are planning a whole course, this resource is for you. But remember that the preparation you and your students do before your session begins is as important as the dynamic within it.

Commonly asked questions

What is 'small group' teaching?

Small group teaching is not defined by numbers. We define it as any teaching situation in which dialogue and collaboration within the group are integral to learning. The teacher is still key to this learning. But now their role is to facilitate rather than to direct, to coordinate as much as to communicate, to inspire rather than to inform. We discuss this further in the literature review below.

How big can a 'small' group be?

There is no one right size for a group. You might not have much control over your class size either. Some insist that the magic number is six, others that it is between 5 to 8. We do not think the precise size matters. A small group could be as small as one. But we use small group techniques as a way of dividing up larger classes, involving students in smaller groups working together.

The larger the group, the more complicated the dynamics and the likelihood that some remain silent. Smaller groups can mean less opportunity for individuals to benefit from each other's knowledge and experience. Nor does the small group have to be face-to-face with the teacher: online and distance learning can lead to highly productive dialogues and collaborations.

What are the origins of small group teaching?

The formal teaching of university students in small groups has any number of origins. It can be traced back to the German research seminars of the 1700s, to the Oxford tutorials of the 1800s, or to the action learning groups of the mid-twentieth century. Some might want to go further and trace it back to Socrates and his (often one-sided) 'dialogues'. Its many pasts are less important

than its use today throughout higher education, partly because of its flexibility and dynamism. In the UK, the legacy of the Oxbridge tutorial remains influential, and in our literature review we draw on recent research that demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of this tutorial model.

How do I learn to be an effective small group teacher?

There is no one right way to teach in small groups. What happens in any teaching situation will depend on your interests and objectives, the subject at hand, and the engagement of students. You might want to promote discussion, focus on a single text, use PBL (Problem Based Learning) techniques, or ask the students to evaluate and develop work they have prepared beforehand. Discussion and dialogue are at the heart of small group teaching. If everyone is actively contributing to the conversation, the challenge of student engagement has been solved.

That said, we think that a commitment to critically evaluating our own teaching practices (an approach that sometimes gets called reflexivity) is the best way to keep improving and developing.

What can I do to prepare for a small group teaching session?

Is small group teaching just about turning up and hosting a conversation? No, no and no. It may sound informal and unstructured, but the title is deceptive. Small group teaching requires just as much preparation as lecturing. You need to keep thinking about your objectives for each class, and for the course as a whole.

Key to the success of small group teaching is careful planning and high expectations, both by teacher and student. If you set your students a task to do before your meeting, make it a requirement. If the students come with a piece of writing or having done the reading, and knowing that they will be asked to talk about these tasks, they are much more likely to actively contribute, and to make the group work. Some p

You also have to develop the skill of 'reading' your group, responding quickly, constantly assessing how individuals and the larger group is engaging with the topic at hand. Some diversions are productive, some are distractions. The teacher's job is to keep the group focused enough.

What if I am asked a question to which I don't know the answer?

This is always a scary moment. Small group teaching involves relinquishing our image of the teacher as the omnipotent authority. It is important for students to realize that we are still learning, and that as teachers that we can learn from them too. Admitting one's lack of knowledge may be just what is needed to get a reticent student to voice their own opinion or talk about their own insights.

Teaching small groups does leave one feeling exposed. Whilst it can work to be honest and truthful, you will also want to develop a confident teaching persona. There are ways of flattering the questioner or deferring the question so that you don't feel as if your authority is being questioned. Our Top 10 resources offer advice on this.

Does it matter if I end up doing all the talking?

Yes, most definitely. If the students are silent, that is your problem, not theirs. Perhaps they have not been able to engage with the learning task outlined, are not sufficiently motivated to prepare, or are intimidated by the setting. Simply talking 'at' students is a sure-fire way of draining the life

out of a group. Remember how daunting it was for you to speak up for the first time. And do not be scared by silences: they don't have to be immediately filled.

Find ways to build their confidence, so that contributing feels less risky. Perhaps start by getting them to talk in pairs, and then in fours. Alternatively, ask them to evaluate each other's work before feeding back to the group. If you have made clear your expectation that they come well prepared, and prepared to engage, that will help.

What do I do if conflicts develop or a few students dominate? Am I still in charge?

Conflicts and disagreements are inevitable in any group situation. Some see the unfolding of these dynamics as integral to the group's learning. But one does not have to be a psychologist to realize that the challenge in small group teaching can be to acknowledge and 'surface' these tensions, and to use them in productive ways.

Can I assess the learning that happens in small groups?

Some of the best small-group teaching happens when the teaching encounter is used to discuss and evaluate work prepared beforehand. The Oxbridge tutorial is often structured around this process, with the focus partly or wholly on a piece of written work submitted and marked beforehand. Whilst it is demanding for the teacher, it offers the opportunities to immediately assess students' learning and understanding about a topic, and to provide dynamic and live feedback. This work tends to be formatively assessed, so that the students feel able to develop their ideas over time.

A manifesto for small group teaching

The learning that happens in small groups can be hugely rewarding, both for students and their teachers. We think it is one of the best pedagogies higher education can offer, and a teaching skill worth nurturing and defending. In this personal manifesto we explain what makes it so special, drawing on our combined experience of teaching and learning in a variety of small group settings.

We see small group teaching as having four key strengths:

- Flexibility,
- Interaction,
- Reflexivity and Engagement.

We expand on these strengths in turn and explain how you can take up these challenges and develop these skills in your own teaching.

Flexibility: Small group teaching opens up pedagogic spaces that are protean, dynamic and responsive. The skill of the teacher is to use these spaces creatively, developing an awareness of the students and responding to the group's learning as it develops.

Teaching small groups underscores the iterative and dynamic nature of all good teaching and learning, and the value of being open to change.

What does this mean for my teaching? It means developing an intellectual nimbleness, and the willingness to rethink and question one's views and positions. Try to find ways of weaving together their different contributions and insights, recognising their interests and agendas.

Over time you will find ways to contextualize your student contributions, to adapt resources for more individualized learning; and to use the prior knowledge and experience of individual students to benefit others in the group. You will learn to adapt your delivery and assessment of the material or debates according to mood and need.

Interaction: Small group teaching is not unique in being interactive. What is special is the intensity of this interaction. A group discussion allows the repeated iteration of ideas and responses, often in quick succession. Students get immediate and detailed formative feedback, both from each other and from their tutor.

Remember that interaction does not just mean talking. It is about negotiating understandings and differences, and cultivating shared meanings. Nor is interaction just about the to-and-fro of debate within one classroom session. The quality of the relationships that develops between students and tutor/teacher over time is equally important.

What does this mean for my teaching? Getting to know your students, and finding ways to nurture their capabilities, is key to high-quality teaching. Without being intrusive, find out about their lives and backgrounds, so you can understand their prior learning, skills and experiences. Appreciate the differences between them, and their diverse motivations and agendas.

Do all you can to acknowledge and value their contributions. Use praise to build confidence and participation, and find ways of making everyone feel part of the team. Encourage them to look out for and support each other, and to think of themselves on a shared an intellectual journey.

Reflexivity: We want our teachers to be many things. Authentic, human, honest, inspiring. We can never live up to such lofty expectations. But we can develop our own teaching persona, and bring a self-critical modesty to everything we do.

What does this mean for my teaching? Celebrate what went well, but equally think hard about what might have been better. Use every opportunity to actively craft a teaching persona that you feel comfortable inhabiting.

Develop the skills of sensitive listening and a watchful attentiveness to those who are perhaps less able to join in or lead the dialogue. Weave together their different agendas and appreciate them as active learners. Over time you will learn to critically assess both your own practice leading these groups, and the progress of your students. Recognise and respond to potential warning signs within the group. Finally, develop the ability to stay at least one step ahead of the class.

Engagement: Small group teaching cultivates creativity, passion and enthusiasm. It should hopefully expose students to current debates and offer them an opportunity to develop their own academic identity. Ideally, it nurtures participation and on an authentic sense of engagement within the group. At best it transcends the teacher-learner hierarchy, and becomes a process of learning together.

What does this mean for my teaching? Student engagement is fundamental to the success of small group teaching. Finding innovative ways to sustain this engagement not only improves learning but also makes teaching more enjoyable, rewarding and challenging.

A glossary of terms you might encounter

Before moving on to the review of the literature, there are a number of key pedagogical terms that it will be useful for you to know. Some of these terms you may be familiar with already.

Most people dislike being assessed, but some approaches are nicer than others. Formative assessment aims to support students' development, rather than provide definitive and 'summative' measures of progress. While summative assessment normally takes the form of a test with a numerical outcome that represents academic achievement at the end of a course, formative assessment is about feedback during the process of learning. In practice it is hard to complete separate formative and summative assessment, but the broad distinction is helpful. Both approaches can be used in small group teaching, but the pedagogy is particularly suited to formative approaches.

Problem based learning

A suite of structured pedagogies that involve the students in actively defining and exploring a 'problems' or issues, often over a period of time. Particularly popular within medical education. Often referred to as PBL. Have a look in the 'Top 10' listings below for more detailed resources related to PBL.

Collaborative learning

An umbrella term that is used to refer to forms of learning that occur through dialogue and collaboration between students and teachers. It is hard to imagine 'uncollaborative' learning, but

here the term collaborative relates to an interactive rather than straightforwardly didactic approach to learning.

Tutorial

A term first used historically to refer to the Oxbridge tradition of (very) small group teaching. Now it is also used more loosely to refer to any small group teaching situation. In Oxbridge the tutorial continues, albeit with a little more diversity of format than before.

Personalised learning (see also differentiation)

A principle that is now largely taken for granted within school settings: that one needs to set different individuals different targets, and to assess their progress accordingly. Personalised learning and differentiation occur when teachers modify resources or the delivery of teaching in order to match the individual competencies and needs of their students.

Student engagement

Until recently UK policymakers focused on the 'student learning experience'. Student engagement is equally important. Educational researchers and policy-makers are particularly interested in finding ways to maintain student engagement, and in the process to raise standards. In the US, the National Survey of Student Engagement is referred to as Nessie (not to be confused with a certain Scottish loch-dwelling monster).

Reflexivity

A complicated term that makes a simple point: a good scholar should always be aware of their effect on a social situation, and find ways to put this effect to work.

Positive reinforcement

The importance of appropriate praise and supportive feedback should never be underestimated. We all need (deserved) cuddles, high fives and pats-on-the-back.

Power

Not the 220 V variety, but rather a reminder that all teaching, like all social encounters, creates inequalities of status and position.

Literature review

Introduction

Now that we have some fundamental terms ironed out, let's turn our attention to a more detailed review of the themes introduced above. This literature review provides an introduction to academic research about small group teaching. Here we look at two key questions:

1. Why do we teach in small groups at university?
2. What does the literature tell us about best practice for small group teaching?

By addressing the above key questions respectively in Part I and Part II of this literature review, we situate our approach to small group teaching within the broader literature. We also make the argument for an anthropological (or socially-focused) perspective on small group teaching that, while theoretically grounded, is also pragmatic and easy to apply in the everyday of your teaching practice. In Part III of the literature review, we then go on to explore the Oxbridge tutorial as a kind of 'case study' of small group teaching, through which we explore the issues raised in Parts I & II.

Our first question (why do we teaching small groups at university?) addresses both the historical development of small group teaching as an approach in Higher Education (HE), as well as the theoretical and philosophical rationales behind small group teaching. Here we focus on the expansive literature from education and psychology, but we also highlight the valuable insights that can be gained from including sociological and anthropological perspectives as well. Our second question (what does the literature tell us about best practice for small group teaching?) focuses more on what the literature says about the 'how-to' of teaching in small groups – which approaches to adopt, and the challenges that are raised by small group teaching. Key here are issues of power, group dynamics and the ways that individuals interact in small group teaching contexts.

We are quite critical of the literature that offers straight-forward answers to the difficult questions about effective small group teaching. Instead we focus on the underlying principles of teaching in small groups, showing how ideas from sociology and anthropology can inform how we understand the social interactions taking place. In this sense we focus not on 'quick fix' techniques for teaching, but on guiding principles for teaching practice that, in the end, are much more flexible, versatile and useful in the everyday of the classroom.

Performance, authenticity, power, and authority

What emerges from this literature review (and from the gaps in the literature) is that performance, authenticity, power and authority are key issues for new teaching staff entering into small group teaching. Performance relates to how people act out roles in small groups, as students and teachers, in relation to one another. Performance in this sense is also about identity. Authenticity refers to how people interpret the appropriateness or legitimacy of how they act in these contexts (for example, an authentic or 'real' performance of the teacher role). Looking at power and authority lets us explore who has power or authority over whom in small group teaching, why this might be, and the shifting dynamics of these relationships. In order to understand these issues we draw on a range of thought-provoking literature from across the social sciences to present a coherent, critically informed approach to small group teaching.

We conclude, via the ‘case study’ of the Oxbridge tutorial, by suggesting practical ways to approach questions of performance and authenticity, power and authority in your teaching. That said it is also important from the outset to state that there is no definitive ‘right’ way to go about teaching effectively in small groups. The enduring benefit, and challenge, of small group teaching is that each group is unique, creative, complex, and inspiring in its own way.

Section I: Why do we teach in small groups at university?

A brief historical overview

Let’s begin by considering where small group teaching comes from historically. As suggested in the introduction, teaching in small groups is not a particularly new phenomenon in universities, but the nature of the small group has varied considerably over the years. The oft-lauded tutorial approach to teaching has been part of institutional practice for centuries at universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, and many other universities in the UK have adopted, modified and made improvements to this model in more recent years. Elsewhere in the world, teaching in small groups also has a long pedigree. German universities have upheld the tradition of the research seminar since at least the 17th century, while other small group contexts, such as ‘dining at the professor’s table’, were also characterized by an intimate, interactive approach to teaching and learning. Despite the enormous increase in the number of people attending university in the UK since the 1960s and 1970s, small group teaching has retained its position as the gold standard of ‘quality’ instruction in Higher Education. Alongside lectures and other larger scale teaching contexts, small group teaching remains the desired approach to pedagogy (or teaching and learning) in most universities today, even when tough economic times call for cuts to contact hours or increases in class sizes. This leads us to ask the question of why it is that small group teaching has been going on for so long in university settings. But first, let’s define the terms.

Defining ‘small group’ teaching

An issue given considerable attention in the literature is the question of how to define what a ‘small group’ actually is. The premise here is that the quantity of participants defining the ‘small group’ has a direct impact on the quality of the ‘small group teaching’ taking place, and there is a point at which an increase in numbers has a negative impact on the effectiveness of the more intimate, individualized approach adopted for small group teaching. As suggested in the introduction, small group teaching can include a wide variety of activities, including seminars, workshops, tutorials, tutor-less or student-led tutorials, labs, problem-based learning (PBL) groups, and various online configurations of small groups of students learning together. Small group teaching might also take place within larger group teaching when students are broken down into smaller numbers for group work. Clearly, there will be significant differences in how small group teaching is approached in each of these contexts, even if the general principles of small group teaching remain the same in each. If you are interested in the debates around taxonomies of small groups, Exley and Dennick (2004) provide a detailed typology.

As well as defining types of small groups, there have been numerous attempts to put an exact figure on how many students should be in a group in order for it to yield the most favourable results pedagogically – the ideal ‘small’ group for teaching. Exley and Dennick (2004:2), for example, draw on Booth (1996) to suggest that in general a ‘small’ group should consist of between five and eight people, with six an optimum number for tutor-style small group teaching. Brown & Atkins (1988),

on the other hand, suggest that no more than 20 students can be effectively organized for small group teaching. Jaques (2004) has pointed out, helpfully, that different group sizes may be preferable for certain activities; and we can infer that while six may be an 'optimal' number in some general sense, there is perhaps not a great deal of merit in searching long and hard for a 'magic number' when it comes to small group teaching. The key here is that in any given teaching context, the teacher considers it possible to interact with students in a way that facilitates the particular benefits of small group teaching (i.e. intimacy, interactivity, flexibility, reflexivity, immediate feedback, and the other strengths outlined in our manifesto). If the group is too large numerically, it will be difficult to achieve these aims. In any case, it is often beyond the control of lecturers and tutors to define the size of their teaching groups, particularly at the beginning of their careers. In this sense a general principle about the effectiveness of 'small' groups is much more useful than an ideal number.

Theoretical and philosophical debates: Why 'small group teaching?'

So much, then, for defining 'small group' teaching in purely quantitative terms. Let us turn our attention instead to the broader philosophical and theoretical principles that define teaching practice in 'small group teaching', rather than just the numbers involved. These theoretical and philosophical underpinnings are often left implicit in the more direct 'how-to' literature that dominates academic writing about small group teaching, but it is worth pausing here to consider the deeper question of why we teach in small groups.

Learning as a social process: perspectives from psychology and education

Small group teaching provides an alternative approach to teaching and learning than that presented by the more traditional didactic master-apprentice / teacher-student model. Much of the academic literature about small group teaching heralds from psychology and associated disciplines, and in this respect the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1962; 1978) has markedly influenced more recent thinking about why small group teaching is 'good' pedagogically. Vygotsky's vision of pedagogy is based on the idea of learning is an interactive, social process, within which the teacher facilitates the transition of the learner into 'zones of proximal development' in order to cultivate new knowledge. That is, the role of the educator is to facilitate rather than to dictate the nature of what is being learned, meaning that students have an active role in this process. The teacher provides the 'scaffolding' around which students are able to construct their own learning, building on prior knowledge. For this reason, this approach to pedagogy is often referred to as collaborative learning, because it is centred around the interactions between teachers and students, rather than seeing learning as a one-way interaction where knowledge is imparted from the teacher to the student. Within what is known variably as the socio-cultural, cultural-historical or 'constructivist' tradition in psychology and educational research, this basic principal remains integral to the idea of 'good' teaching practice in general. In turn, it is this social, interactive approach to learning that is at the heart of all 'good' small group teaching.

Cognition as a social process

The literature on small group teaching from psychology also draws links between social interaction and cognition (that is, how our brains develop, and how we think and learn). A 'cognitive' approach to small group teaching, building on the theories of Piaget, would suggest that learning interactively in small groups is beneficial to students because the process of debating decisions, dealing with conflict, and reconciling divergent perspectives is an essential part of how cognitive development takes place. This idea about cognition also underpins the notion of 'cognitive elaboration' (Dansereau 1988), which posits that cognitive development is based on reformulating or

elaborating existing knowledge into new forms – a sort of unlearning and relearning of knowledge. According to this developmental perspective, small group teaching nurtures cognition through social interaction. Research into ‘social cognition’ (Levine & Resnick 1993) also posits, along these lines, that cognition, while taking place individually, is inherently social in its construction.

Learning in social and cultural context: perspectives from sociology and anthropology

In these different ways, perspectives from psychology generally focus on individuals in social context, exploring how the particular traits or cognitive abilities of these individuals might combine to create a particular atmosphere or dynamic within small group teaching, and in so doing influence the kind of teaching and learning taking place. In general terms, we might say that perspectives from sociology and anthropology, on the other hand, focus first and foremost on social and cultural context, and subsequently on how individuals might in their own idiosyncratic ways reflect social structures and cultural practices in their interactions with one another. Within the sub-disciplines of the sociology and anthropology of education, social relations are from first principles considered to be key in educative processes. This means that sociological and anthropological perspectives are very useful for exploring how larger social issues of power, authority and identity might also come into the process of small group teaching (issues such as class, gender, ethnicity, and so on).

Less research has been conducted within sociology and anthropology than among psychologists that deal with small group teaching as a practice per se. However, there exist many sociological accounts of teaching and learning upon which teachers can draw to develop and enhance their approach to small group teaching. Reading accounts of social life in educational settings can help you shed light on how broader cultural and social influences might impact on your teaching practice. An early example of this focus within anthropological research on education (in its broadest definition), for example, is Margaret Mead’s work among adolescents in Western Samoa (1943). Mead argued that stereotypical Western experiences of coming of age were not universal to all humans, as posited by prominent psychologists at the time, but was instead the result of social and cultural context. Much more recently, the anthropologist Rebekah Nathan (aka Cathy Small) (2005) has written about her experiences pretending to be an undergraduate at a North American university. Nathan masqueraded as a student so that she could see university through undergraduate eyes. While ethically problematic, this serves as one account among many that can be thought-provoking for new teachers (for others, see, for example, Willis 1977; Evans 2007). Over the last century, many other social theorists have added to our understanding of how social and cultural forces shape our experiences, our interactions and our identities, particularly in educational or other institutional settings. Performance, authenticity, power and authority are among the important themes in this literature (elements of which we explore below).

On the whole, then, the focus on social interactions in these different disciplinary understandings of teaching and learning fits together in a complimentary way. We might also add into the mix here the ideas of John Dewey (1916), one of the twentieth century’s most influential philosophers and psychologists of education. Like the psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists above, Dewey also believed that education is a fundamentally social process borne of interaction between students and teachers. Dewey was also particularly interested in the how students learn through experience, both within specific learning encounters and in their ability to build on prior knowledge and experience to develop new knowledge. In addition to this, Dewey saw education not only as a social process, but also as a means to social change. Dewey would argue that the small group serves as an ideal context within which individuals can focus their attentions both on individual success and also on the success of the collective through democratic participation. Of relevance to why small group teaching is a good way to teach, then, is Dewey’s idea that working towards both

individual and group-focused goals is not only an intrinsic and fundamental part of effective pedagogy, but also the key to progressive social change. More recent educational thinkers, such as Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill (2005) have developed these ideas to show the links between interaction, discussion, and promoting a democratic approach to education.

Of course, it is important to recognise that social interaction also involves negotiations of power and authority, and that Dewey's ideal of education, when applied to small group teaching, must be reconciled with the realities of social interactions that are in their very nature asymmetrical and prone to maintaining inequitable hierarchies. We will discuss this in more detail in a moment, particularly in relation to the sociological and anthropological literature on these topics.

So, the essentially 'good' thing about small group teaching is that it encourages learning through social interaction, and allows students to become actively engaged in the educative process. There are lots of ways of phrasing this perspective of small group teaching: Brown & Race (1995) suggest that it is reflective of the best aspects of social learning more generally, while Jaques (1991) and Exley & Dennick (2004) talk about a focus on content and process – both the development of substantive subject knowledge and learning valuable skills through the process of teaching and learning in small groups. However we phrase it, in practice this translates to a number of different key areas of learning and development for students in small groups. These are outlined below.

The benefits of small group teaching: Flexibility, interaction reflexivity, engagement

We have already discussed what we see as the main benefits for small group teaching, as outlined in our manifesto, but it is worth reminding ourselves of some of these points. The flexible and reflexive nature of small group teaching means that teachers can tailor their approach to instruction in order to meet the individual needs of students. Differentiation (that is, varying one's approach to teaching in order to meet the academic and social needs of individual students) allows teachers to hone in on the specific knowledge and skills that students need to develop. When done effectively, this individualised or personalised approach to teaching and learning will allow students to develop not only detailed subject knowledge but also higher intellectual/academic skills such as critical thinking and analysis. Ideally, close personal interaction with an academic in their field will also allow students to develop an emergent sense of academic and/or disciplinary identity, which will in turn foster engagement in the substantive activities taking place. In turn, the small group teacher may also learn directly from students, and improve his or her teaching practice as a result. In terms of assessment, the high level of interactivity in small group teaching means that teachers can provide formative (or ongoing) assessment of progress (also known as assessment for learning), rather than simply focusing on summative or end-of-course/exam-type forms of assessment. Being assessed in this way allows students to actively engage in making cumulative progress during the process of teaching and learning, rather than seeing assessment as a product of the learning experience, even where final/modular examinations dictate formal results (Black & William 1998).

Encouraging the active participation of students in the learning process demands responsibility and organization on the part of students (and teachers), and in this respect small group teaching fosters an independent approach to learning. Emphasising the learning that takes place independently outside of contact hours can encourage students to recognise the active part that they play in the educative processes of small group teaching. At the same time, close interaction with other group members can generate a sense of community within the small group and/or a sense of shared disciplinary identity; and, quite simply, social interaction can make learning more interactive and fun. This may be particularly important for less confident students who may not participate as much in larger groups, or for those who for whatever reason seem reluctant to learn.

Part of what makes small group teaching enjoyable and effective is the flexibility that comes with teaching in a small group. Small group teaching is sometimes more flexible temporally (i.e. in terms of when the teaching takes place) and spatially (i.e. where the teaching takes place, and how this space is organized in terms of seating arrangements, resources, appropriateness for activities, etc.). Students can be encouraged to develop a sense of ownership through helping to define these spatial and temporal boundaries (Jaques 2007).

In short, there are many potential benefits to small group teaching, based on the ideas about social learning outlined above. There are also challenges and potential shortcomings to small group teaching, as we will outline below. But how are these ideal outcomes of small group teaching best achieved in day-to-day practice? What does the literature say about how small group teaching works, and what are the key challenges that emerge? In the next section we explore ideas about the functioning of small groups in teaching contexts, putting forward critique and alternative or complimentary ideas where we think this needs to be added to the debate.

Section II: Best practice, critique and challenges

Conceptual and analytical perspectives

As suggested earlier, academic research into the nature of small group teaching is primarily the domain of psychologists, even though a general focus on social interaction means that there are profitable overlaps with other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology. A large amount of this literature is instructive in its nature – that is, somewhat ironically, it is didactic and author-led in terms of suggesting how best to go about achieving ‘good’ small group teaching. While this ‘how to’ approach may not always be the most productive way to think about small group teaching, it is worth looking at a few different strands in the literature to see what have been the key issues of debate to date.

Group dynamics: Authority and the role of the teacher

Among the most common topics of discussion in the literature to do with small group teaching are issues to do with group dynamics and motivation – and to this list we might also add power and authority as underlying themes. We have already mentioned that the literature from psychology generally focuses first on the individual, and then on social context. As a consequence it is also the case that the literature on group dynamics deals with establishing and maintaining (or engineering) the right kinds of social contexts for learning, taking into consideration the dynamics of students’ and teachers’ personalities. Often this is discussed in terms of ‘atmosphere’ (Douglas 1978) or ‘climate’ (Rogers 1967), with an emphasis on creating ‘safe’ environments for learning (Brown & Atkins 1988).

Clearly, the role of the teacher is crucial in mediating the dynamic of the group and in establishing the appropriate tone within a group. There are a number of ways to approach how teachers achieve this. In discussing ‘climate’, Carl Rogers, for example, argues that teachers must strive for ‘realness’ or ‘congruence’ in the way that they interact with students, meaning that they should neither claim to have knowledge that they do not, nor should they act in a way that is not truthful to their own identities or emotions. Rogers argues that congruence between how one acts ‘normally’ and how one acts in small group teaching environments encourages honesty between teachers and students, and that this in turn engenders trust, respect, and, ultimately, makes for positive learning outcomes.

This kind of approach has merits, but it also raises some very interesting and potentially difficult issues. On one hand, it is possible to argue that there is no single ‘normal’ way in which one acts, but rather that individuals interact with one another and construct different versions of their identities based on social context. The sociologist Erving Goffman (1969) famously argues that the presentation of self in social context is always dynamic and prone to change, relative to one’s interactions with others. It might therefore be impossible to be ‘normal’ with one’s students, by virtue that this ‘normal’ identity simply does not exist: teachers will always act slightly differently with their students than with friends, family, or with other members of staff. Striving for ‘realness’ or authenticity by attempting to act ‘normal’ may be an exhausting and ultimately futile endeavour.

What’s more, the role of the teacher in small group contexts often involves decisions about what kinds of personal emotions or opinions to share. How, we might ask, could students feel confident to share their own ideas if the teacher is not able, to some extent at least, to create a ‘neutral’ environment in which this sharing can take place? Always being ‘honest’ or ‘real’ with one’s

emotions or opinions could potentially alienate or embarrass members of the small group. This does not mean, however, that teachers cannot engage in an honest and open way with students, or that they can't be reflexive about the kind of performance of self that they are undertaking in small group teaching contexts. On the contrary, a self-reflexive approach to teacher identity is crucial to striking the difficult balance between distance and intimacy in the interactions that characterize small group teaching. Accepting and being aware of different presentations of self can be empowering and help individuals to become more confident in performing their particular version of the 'teacher' role.

Group dynamics: Power and authority in the interactions between students

There is considerable literature on group dynamics in small group teaching that focuses on the interactions between students and on the nature of group formation in general. This includes discussions of how small teaching groups form and dissipate, and the roles and interactions between different types of individuals in small groups. Theory about group dynamics derives some of its assumptions from psychodynamics, a sub-field of psychology that explores how individuals interact with one another. In group contexts, some theorists (Bion, 1961) argue for universal patterns in group behaviour. Specifically, they suggest that groups strive to create a leader; that groups attempt to avoid their own destruction; and that within groups, pairing normally takes place between individuals (Jaques 2007). Whether or not these particular patterns are actually as profound or as universal as proponents of psychodynamics would have us believe is open to debate. In our opinion the dynamics and structure of a small group is very much contingent on social and cultural context, and that means that there are no universal 'patterns' of group activity. But we can agree that looking for the patterns or dynamics of interaction in a particular group can be very useful. Essentially, discussions about group dynamics are also discussions of power and authority, given that the dynamics between individuals are shaped by their engagement in power relations between one another. Group dynamics therefore also describes how power and authority is negotiated between group members, and in this sense it is a crucial part of any teacher's toolkit in small group teaching.

Some argue that these power relations follow set patterns that are also related to how teaching groups form and disband. Johnson & Johnson (1997), for example, argue that we must accept turbulence and conflict in groups as a natural part of their formation and dissipation. They go as far as to suggest that this occurs in set cycles, developing from cycle 1 (Forming/Co-Creation), through 2 (Storming/Chaos), 3 (cohesion), and 4 (change/dissipation). They argue that the role of the teacher is to facilitate the progression of the group through these cycles in order for it to better function for teaching and learning. Whether groups always develop in this way is, again, debatable: Jaques and Salmon (2007), for example, focuses on collaboration and cooperation as the continuous characteristics of groups, rather than on storm, stress and conflict. Above all, he argues that a sense of social belonging within the group is essential to its effective functioning. It is equally possible to argue instead that group dynamics are primarily about one person in the group attempting to dominate the rest. In any case, it is certainly important for teachers to think critically about how the social interactions between group members are developing, and how this might impact on how students feel about their learning in a small group context. We might also consider how the power structures of the institution (that is, the university), are reflected in the small group.

Power, authority and social context

More important still, the dynamics between individuals will likely reflect broader social issues of class, gender, ethnicity, age, economic status, and so on. All of these aspects of social identity are

tied into relations of power, and the performance of particular roles in a group may reflect this. Goffman, for example, uses metaphors derived from the theatre – audience, backstage, frontstage, and so on – in order to argue that individuals perform different versions of ‘self’ depending on social context. In turn, one’s position in a given social context (a seminar, for example) will also be determined in part by one’s position in wider society. The feminist cultural theorist Judith Butler (1997) made further contributions to the idea of performance in this respect by showing how gender is also performed as a result of social and cultural influences, rather than being essential or given from birth. When translated into an educational context, the idea of performance becomes a very useful means of reflecting on how and why we ‘act’ in certain ways depending on social context. When it comes to small group teaching, for example, performance describes how one negotiates ‘acting’ as a teacher while also maintaining close social interactions with students. Issues such as gender, age, and ethnicity doubtless become part of this performance, and it is important to keep this in mind when thinking about your teaching practice.

Discussing power, the French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu also presents us with some very interesting ideas about education (1977). Bourdieu argues that education has a crucial part to play in defining our habitus, or the set of norms, values, beliefs and tastes that, consciously or unconsciously, we employ to make sense of the world. Bourdieu also puts forward the idea of social and cultural capital as a way of describing the kinds of access that individuals have to social networks and to the types of knowledge or cultural competencies necessary to be socially and financially mobile. Those with greater social capital (better social networks) and greater cultural capital (those who have knowledge and competencies that are valued in a particular society) are often those with the most power (and the most money). Education can be a means of extending a person’s social or cultural capital; but it can also be a way of reproducing existing hierarchies as well. In the context of small group teaching, it is important to think about how power relations within the group may reflect broader issues to do with habitus or social and cultural capital. How students interact with one another may be as much related to their social, cultural or economic backgrounds as it is with their academic abilities or individual personalities and dispositions.

Other theorists of education have also explored issues to do with power and authority along these lines. Paolo Friere, a Brazilian educational philosopher, helped to develop the concept of critical pedagogy – a radical take on education that argues for teachers to have a direct role in changing the power dynamics of the classroom or the institution (1972). Friere calls for students to be liberated, rather than limited, by their experiences of the education system. Key here are issues of class (that is, socio-economic status) for both teachers and students. Others, such as Giroux (2000), Postman & Weingartner (1969), and Ira Shor (1996), have developed this argument to show how teaching and learning does not have to reproduce the power inequalities existing in wider society.

In the UK context, many sociologists of education have explored the idea that there is a hidden curriculum beneath what students (and teachers) learn more explicitly in the classroom (Jackson 1968). Because of this hidden curriculum – how we are socialized into particular ways of thinking about economics, competition, happiness, politics, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and so on – education may sometimes actually serve to reproduce inequality or prejudice, rather than helping to remove them. This can also be the case in small group teaching, but small group teaching contexts also afford the flexibility and intimacy necessary to challenge the so-called ‘hidden curriculum’ of higher education.

These issues may seem a little distant from the nuts and bolts of small group teaching, and it is also true that issues of power and authority seldom emerge as straightforward categories to be managed as such in a small group teaching context. But by engaging with these issues, it is possible

to think about how broader social and cultural factors will impact on group dynamics and on your teaching practice. You do not have to become a hardline Marxist or feminist to be able to consider how these types of issues may play an important part in how you approach teaching in small groups, whether you're a physicist or a philosopher. Nor do you have to be a psychologist or a proponent of psychodynamics to understand that within groups, individuals will manifest the differences between one another in ways that will impact on the success of your small group teaching. The key is to be reflexive about these issues and to nurture the very specific, idiosyncratic dynamic of your group in positive and productive ways in order to encourage dialogue, engagement, and learning.

The power of discussion

How, we might ask, does one do this? One fundamental means of addressing issues of performance, authenticity, power and authority is through something so straightforward that it seems too obvious to mention: the power of discussion. Discussion is an incredibly valuable tool in small group teaching contexts because it allows students and teachers to address the above issues in a balanced and collaborative way while engaging with the substantive topics to be covered in the curriculum. This is not to say that you should explicitly talk about power, or the significance of gender or ethnicity in a group's interactions, but rather that the process of discussion helps to illuminate issues of power and also to provide an arena where democratic interaction and discussion can take place. In theory, most small group teaching should be centred around discussion, based on informed and detailed preparation on behalf of both teacher and students prior to the seminar or tutorial. However, in practice, discussion can sometimes be curtailed by the pressures of assessment and/or covering the appropriate course content in the time provided. Brookfield and Preskill (2005) are among those who emphasise the importance of discussion in spite of these kinds of institutional pressures. They argue that discussion itself, when structured appropriately, is a means of creating an environment where small group teaching is both engaging and enlightening. Discussion ideally yields results both in terms of subject-specific learning and in terms of students' critical reflections about their interactions with one another. Brookfield and Preskill back up these slightly more abstract aims with clear and pragmatic ways of making discussion work in small groups.

Of course, we must measure the ideal of small group discussion with the realities of small group teaching, and recognize that group dynamics and performances of particular roles may not work out exactly as planned. Again, we see this unpredictability as part of what makes small group teaching at once exciting, challenging, and inspiring. While the principles of 'good' small group teaching always remain the same, your teaching groups will always be different, and present different challenges and opportunities, in their own special ways.

Effective small group teaching: Social and institutional challenges

Clearly, then, there are some challenges in attempting to create a successful context within which small group teaching can flourish. Broadly we might group these challenges as social, or relational, and structural, or institutional, challenges. The former are challenges presented by the individuals in a particular group, while the latter represent challenges that are the result of how the broader institutional teaching context is structured.

Social challenges

Among social challenges, we might count dominant students as the most common issue, alongside passive listening or failure to participate in discussion. Here questions of power are key, and it is

important to ask why particular students are more or less dominant before acting to curtail or encourage participation. Academic ability may be another issue: Lou et al. (2000) argue that lower ability students gain the most from participating in small group work with higher ability students, while medium ability students also benefit from mixed ability groupings. Jaqcues (2004) has argued that in any case, mixed ability or heterogeneous groupings of students are more beneficial because they encourage discussion and challenge students to focus on what they are learning through participation in the group.

Perhaps as common as these issues is the problem of over-talkative teachers or tutors. Jaqcues (2007), building on Brown and Atkins (1999), provides evidence that teachers are prone to talk for up to 60-80% of a small group teaching session, in spite of their commitment to collaborative or interactive practices in small group teaching. On the other hand, for early career academics or those new to teaching, a lack of confidence on could also be a major challenge, given the intimate nature of small group teaching. A third challenge for teachers is at the heart of effective small group teaching: one's ability to negotiate one's performance of the teacher role in such a way as to balance social intimacy with authority and professionalism, providing students with clear boundaries about the nature of interactions within (and outside) the small group teaching context. Again, on-going, active reflection on how one performs the role of 'teacher' is a very good way of monitoring this particular social challenge of small group teaching.

Institutional challenges

Institutions can present a number of challenges to small group teaching. From something as simple as the provision of appropriate spaces for small group teaching (Jaqcues 2004), to the rigours and distractions of institutional or national assessment regimes, Higher Education Institutions do not always make effective small group teaching easy.

If curriculum design and assessment are too rigidly structured at the institutional level, it can become more difficult to encourage a sense of 'ownership' among students over the learning that takes place in a small group. If students have no active part in shaping the learning that they are doing in this way, this detracts from the sense of autonomy and community that small groups can help to foster. It is also important to recognise that the type of small group teaching taking place – most commonly a tutorial or a seminar – is also a somewhat unusual context for social interaction, and is almost entirely peculiar to Higher Education (Gibbs 1992; 1995). Both new teachers and new students alike must think actively and critically about what a seminar actually is, in order to make the most of it. Normally it is taken for granted that teachers and students will know how to learn and interact in a particular small group context, but this is not always the case. Institutions that are inflexible in terms of the type of small group teaching that they offer therefore require you and your students to learn how best to utilize the kinds of teaching contexts available to you.

One important issue to raise is the fact that in many HEAs small group teaching is apportioned to the institution's least experienced teaching staff: PhD candidates and early career academics. This means that some of the most intimate and complex of teaching practice, which is also valued highly by students or 'consumers' of Higher Education, is the responsibility of those who are often least experienced and lowest paid. But these members are also normally very committed to their work because they are in the process of developing skills, building a reputation and establishing an academic career and professional identity. In spite of these laudable efforts, early career academics still face hurdles. It is crucial that those engaging in small group teaching recognise that some of the challenges that they face may not be entirely their fault: structural forces within institutions can also impact significantly on the quality and effectiveness of one's teaching practice. The relative

significance of teaching and research in one's discipline or department, for example, will clearly impact on how one approaches teaching. The level of provision for teacher training or support for professional development will also have obvious impacts on one's perception of teaching as a professional activity. Connected to this, but much less easy to pin down, are informal institutional practices related to teaching. In some universities there may be an open, critical, active dialogue about the challenges of teaching and how to improve one's teaching practice with small groups. In other institutions, teachers, new and old alike, may spend much of their time pretending that everything is alright in the hopes that no-one will ask them to evaluate or articulate their approach to small group teaching. Often this is related to formal regimes of performance management, or a lack thereof, and it is important to understand the local politics of one's institution in order to see where one's teaching fits into the wider political landscape. Again, it may not be entirely the fault of the new teacher that their small group teaching is not as well-organised or effective as they would like. Institutions where it is difficult to seek help about teaching also make it difficult to teach well.

Social and institutional challenges can combine to make small group teaching less effective and rewarding than it should be. But there are also ways of confronting these challenges and ensuring that small group teaching is an inspiring, memorable and productive experience. Unwin (1984), for example, provides an honest and heart-warming account of the difference between the ideal tutorial and the commonplace reality, recognizing that more often than not enthusiastic debate is side-lined in favour of a mini-lecture or monologue delivered by the teacher. The reasons for this may be manifold: students may be quiet because they do not feel confident with one another, or they may be ill-prepared. They may have different expectations of the small group teaching context compared with those of the teacher, or with those outlined by the institution. It may be that nobody told them what to expect. In the end, Unwin ponders whether this is in fact the reason why he feels he does tutorials 'badly' – for years he has failed to tell his students what they should do in his tutorials. This would seem a common enough mistake: it is easy to assume that the nature of small group teaching is something that students know about, but very often this may not be the case. If the complexity of small group teaching is not recognized at the institutional level, then it is less likely still that individual tutors or teachers will recognize the need for students to learn about small group teaching before they can effectively participate in it. The simplicity of the structure of small teaching groups may belie the complexity of how they work. As we have shown in this section of the literature review, maintaining a reflexive, critical view of what is happening in the small group context is a very helpful way to make sure that both you and your students make the most of small group teaching. Above all, encouraging discussion remains the best possible way to achieve this kind of approach.

Section III: The Oxbridge tutorial: myth and method

Let's now turn our attention to an example or 'case study' of small group teaching in order to see how the opportunities and challenges described above may work out in practice. In Part III of the literature review we focus on the Oxbridge tutorial as a well-established and oft-lauded example of small group teaching. Here we highlight the benefits of this approach to pedagogy. We also dispel some common myths about the Oxford tutorial method and point to potential shortcomings.

The Oxbridge tutorial is something of an enigma. It is held up as an example of excellent small group teaching by some, and yet only a relatively small amount of research has been conducted on the pedagogy of the Oxbridge tutorial. On one hand, the private, intimate nature of the tutorial itself does not lend itself to public scrutiny; but we might also assume that for centuries it has been taken for granted that an elite university such as Oxford will by virtue of its reputation also provide an excellent learning experience for its students. More recent research sheds light both on the fundamental successes of the Oxbridge tutorial as an approach to small group teaching, and to some pitfalls, both social and institutional.

In his survey of student perceptions of the Oxford tutorial, Paul Ashwin (2005) makes the crucial point that the Oxbridge tutorial system is much more than simply the short but intimate hour of the tutorial itself: it is a learning system. One of the strengths of the system is the extent to which the success of the tutorial actually depends on extensive work done elsewhere. In a normal week during term time, Oxbridge students will be required to write up to three tutorial essays for three different tutorials, and it is in the researching, writing and critical thinking involved in constructing these essays that much of the learning takes place. It is certainly debatable whether or not this intense level of productivity detracts from the enjoyment of the tutorial system; but an independent, critical approach to learning has long been lauded as the core of the Oxbridge approach (Moore 1968).

The importance of independent, critical, written work completed outside of the initial small group teaching context is noticeable in its relative absence from the wider literature on small group teaching. As we have pointed out, much of the 'how-to' literature focuses, quite rightly, on the need to manage dynamics within groups and to encourage dialogue and discussion. However, the success of discussion in small group teaching contexts is often the result of extensive written preparation beforehand, and for this reason the Oxbridge tutorial system is a good reminder of the significance of this part of the process of small group teaching. Students do not need to write a three thousand word essay in order to prepare for small group teaching sessions, but preparation is key nonetheless. What is more, the Oxbridge tutorial system is focused on written work in preparation for small group teaching: essays are a fundamental part of the system, and the process of writing is crucial to students developing critical, informed perspectives of the topics to be explored. Palfreyman et al. (2000) provide examples of how the process of writing in preparation for Oxford tutorials in this way becomes part of a broader approach to liberal education: it is a means of articulating the process of critical thinking and independent analysis.

What happens in the tutorial is the transformation of this independent writing and thinking into discussion and feedback. Moore (1968) argues that these components independent writing/critical thinking, discussion, personalized learning, and immediate feedback (now also known as formative assessment or assessment for learning) are the hallmarks of the Oxbridge tutorial system. Ashwin (2005) has further pointed out, via Moore, that knowledge is seen as contested in the context of the tutorial; topics are presented for debate between the tutor and the tutee, rather than existing,

pre-packaged, to be validated or refuted. This discursive element of the tutorial fits with what we have already seen from educational theorists such as Brookfield and Preskill (2005). Importantly, it also leaves room for tutors to draw on the extensive knowledge of students during discussion, and, in theory, to admit to gaps in knowledge where these exist. Indeed, the performance of the 'tutor' role in this ideal sense necessitates a relinquishing of control over the learning encounter so that the student can present his or her own knowledge and analysis as an academic equal. After the tutorial, the results of this discussion can then feed into the learning that takes place for the next essay, in preparation for the tutorial to come.

There are, then, a number of features of the Oxbridge tutorial that fit well with the picture of 'good' small group teaching that we have been piecing together here. A focus on independent thinking and written work, the primacy of discussion as a pedagogical tool, the flexibility of personalized learning, immediate formative assessment, and collaborative, interactive learning combine in this approach to small group teaching.

However, the Oxbridge tutorial system is not without a considerable number of faults. Like many other small group teaching contexts, there is the real danger that, like Unwin's students, there is a lack of awareness about what is actually expected of students in tutorials. It is taken for granted that students should, by virtue of their academic ability in entering the university, also know exactly how the tutorial system functions on a pedagogic level. Of course, this is rarely the case, and those who are successful in tutorials may only have an implicit understanding of how the different parts of this particular educational puzzle fit together. To return to Paul Ashwin (2005), his study of student perceptions of the Oxford tutorial show a wide variety of views about what a tutorial is for. Some thought it was a chance to clarify points misunderstood in the reading, while others considered the tutorial itself the main source of new knowledge. Students differed widely in terms of their view of the roles of students and tutors, and in their ideas about what kinds of learning were taking place in the tutorial. For these particular students, there does not seem to be a clear set of expectations about what small group teaching is about, despite their academic successes. Ashwin's study also points to the fact that a lack of regulation in small group teaching can result in varying standards of instruction. Students may feel uncomfortable with raising concerns about the quality of small group teaching in these kinds of contexts, because it is difficult to maintain anonymity.

Elton (2001) adds to this picture by presenting evidence that many Oxford tutorials are in fact teacher-led, teacher-centred experiences in which information is directed one-way, with little discussion at all.

According to Elton, the ideal of open-ended discussion in which students and seasoned academics talk as equals may not be the common experience of Oxbridge undergraduates. It is also important to return to issues of power and authority in this particular example of small group teaching. Ashwin highlights the significance of class and socio-economic status as factors in students' experiences of the tutorial system. Here, students' prior experience of small group teaching, and the dynamic between students of different social backgrounds combine to make the tutorial a less productive and enjoyable educational experience for some than for others. This relates back to knowing what small group discussion entails, and about how to work effectively as an independent learner. In turn, one's competency with these skills will in part be a product of social context and prior experiences of education. If a student does not have the social or cultural capital to equip them with this kind of knowledge, it is then up to the tutor to incorporate the development of these skills into the tutorial experience. It would appear that this does not always take place in the context of the Oxbridge tutorial.

Finally, the Oxford University Students' Union (2010) has also conducted research on student satisfaction with the tutorial system. While overall students identify strongly with the tutorial system and locate it at the centre of their experience of Oxford University, they also highlight a significant discrepancy between the unregulated, discursive nature of tutorials on one hand, and the rigid system of examinations and assessment that ultimately define the result of their degrees on the other. It appears here that considerable institutional challenges stand in the way of effective small group teaching, given that all tutors and students must eventually answer to an examination system that is not based on the tutorial model of measuring academic achievement.

In the example of the Oxbridge tutorial, then, we can see many of the potential benefits and challenges that small group teaching offers both to students and to educators. The Oxbridge approach favours independent learning, a collaborative approach, discussion and formative assessment; but it is hindered by issues to do with group dynamics, the way in which roles are performed in the small group context, by institutional challenges, and by broader social and cultural issues. In the Oxbridge example, as elsewhere, the key to effective small group teaching remains the same: an on-going, reflexive approach that strives for the aforementioned benefits of small group teaching, while being aware of and critical towards the potential pitfalls.

Conclusions

Small group teaching is an intimate, relational experience that challenges us to critically engage with our teaching practice. As we have seen, teaching in small groups raises a number of important questions: how, for example, does one balance the social familiarity necessary to build trust and mutual respect in small group teaching with the authority and control necessary to guide and monitor progress? Ideally, the 'authentic' performance of the teacher role in a small group context will balance the two in a way that is appropriate for the specific group being taught. But authenticity is also about approaches to knowledge. Small group teaching often demands high levels of subject knowledge across a broad range of topics outside of one's specialist area, particularly for early career academics teaching on broad introductory courses. Small group teaching contexts also offer students opportunities to put forward the kinds of wide ranging questions and comments that are not normally accommodated by large group teaching contexts. These issues combined may strike fear into the hearts of new teachers: how, for instance, does one plan for an infinite number of potential questions, across a range of unfamiliar topics that one is supposed to be teaching with 'authority'? And is there a way to marry an 'authentic' performance of the teacher role with recognition that you may not know everything about your subject? Here, we have argued that small group teaching is exactly the kind of learning context where 'good' teaching involves admitting that you are not all-powerful or all-knowing. Power and authority are important issues in small group teaching because teachers must manage their own position of power within the group, while also monitoring interactions between students as well. This precarious but ultimately very rewarding balancing act allows effective teachers to promote ownership of the curriculum, and active participation among students, without relinquishing control over the direction of the learning taking place. Managing to lead, without dominating the discussion oneself, is another fundamental aspect of navigating an authentic but equitable performance of the teacher role in a small group context.

As suggested in the introduction, the great benefit, and challenge, of small group teaching is that each group is unique, creative, complex, and inspiring in its own way. The answers to the above questions will therefore always be contingent on the nature of the group being taught. We recognize in this sense that small group teaching is not an exact science - there are no specific approaches that are likely to yield the same results in any small group context. One of the principle

benefits of teaching small groups is that the learning experience remains dynamic, versatile, and subject to change based on the specific nature of the interactions between teachers and students. It is never quite the same, and if you embrace this aspect of small group teaching, it will always remain inspiring, both for you and your students.

Top-10 lists

Helping you get the best results.

This is our personal selection of some of the best resources for small group teaching along with readings and things that will stimulate the teaching appetite.

10 books and articles

1. Brookfield, S. and S. Preskill (2005) (2nd Edition); Discussion as a way of teaching: tools and techniques for the democratic classroom.
San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
A great combination of a refreshingly critical and theoretically sophisticated approach to teaching, together with lots of practical advice. His other books are all equally good.
2. Brown, S., P. Race, et al. (1997); Making small group teaching work.
Newcastle upon Tyne, MARCET.
Should do what it says on the box.
Practical didactic advice.
3. Chambers, Robert Participatory Workshops: A sourcebook of 21 sets of ideas and activities
London: Earthscan
A left-of-centre book primarily aimed at those working in development, but with loads of ideas for stirring up your teaching and facilitating.
4. Exley, K. and Dennick (2004); Small group teaching: tutorials, seminars and beyond.
Abingdon, Routledge.
A beginner's guide: accessible and practical.
5. Jaques, D. (2004) (3rd Edition); Learning in groups: a handbook for improving group work.
London, Kogan Page.
The book-length version of the Brookes webresource.
6. Nathan, R. (2005); My freshman year: what a professor learnt by becoming a student.
Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
A populist and easy to read account of American student life on a Midwestern campus by a professor going 'undercover'. Ethically slightly dubious, but also thought-provoking.
7. Rowland, S. (2000); The enquiring university teacher.
Buckingham, SRHE - Open University Press.
A thoughtful case for being thoughtful and self-critical.
8. Patience, A. (2008); "The art of loving in the classroom: A defence of affective pedagogy."
Australian Journal of Teacher Education 33(2): 55 -68.
Short but powerful defence of the importance of developing what Oakeshott called 'dramatic friendships' in the classroom, and of not.
9. Postman, N. and C. Weingartner (1971); Teaching as a subversive activity.
Harmondsworth, England, Penguin Education.
A classic counterblast against teaching system.
10. Shor, I. (1996); When students have power: Negotiating authority in a critical pedagogy.
Chicago, Chicago University Press.
A deeply personal case-study of what can happen when a teacher tries to fully share power with his students. The sort of account you will never get in a 'how-to' book.

10 web resources

1. Nottingham University on Small Group Teaching
Excellent resources from Nottingham University. A wide range of video content introducing key aspects of small group teaching, including managing the personal/social aspects of small group teaching, guiding study skills, student roles in small groups, and much more.
Available online at:
<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/pesl/resources/smallgroup/>.
2. David Jaques on Small Group Teaching
A detailed practical overview of Small Group Teaching hosted by Brookes. Topics covered include the characteristics of the group (physical environment, group size, group composition, communication etc.), leadership, and evaluation for SGT.
Available online at:
<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocslid/resources/small-group/index.html>.
3. A Nuts & Bolts Overview from Phil Race – Pedagogy
A more general overview of the pedagogy behind Small Group Teaching from Phil Race.
Available online at:
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/resources/database/id475_learning_in_small_groups.pdf.
4. Briefings from Brookes
Some valuable insights into general issues for teaching in Higher Education from staff at Oxford Brookes University. Topics include theories of learning, assessment, plagiarism, and teaching international students.
Available online at:
http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocslid/resources/briefing_papers/.
5. Ideas about Collaborative learning
An introductory guide to collaborative and cooperative learning from London Metropolitan University
Available online at:
<http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/deliberations/collaborative-learning/panitz-paper.cfm>.
6. Ideas about Problem-based /Enquiry-based learning
A one-stop shop for all the basics you need to know about Problem-based / Enquiry-based learning, from staff at Manchester University CETL.
Available online at:
<http://www.ceebl.manchester.ac.uk/eb/>.
7. Ideas from Youtube
Visit the dedicated HEA Small Group Teaching YouTube Channel for video tips and guidance, including some informal interviews with students about their perspectives.
Available online at:
http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLBAFB72F7845E270B&feature=edit_ok.
8. The Oxford tutorial
Oxford University's Learning Institute provides an overview of the tutorial system for staff, with practical tips and links to relevant literature.
Available online at:
<http://www.learning.ox.ac.uk/support/teaching/resources/group/#d.en.35746>.
9. Small Group Teaching Online
Click here for a valuable article about common problems for small group teaching online, and how to solve them.
Available online at:
http://www.ifets.info/journals/10_4/22.pdf.

10. Best of the Blogosphere

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Top 10 policy controversies facing small-group teachers

1. **How much time and energy should I put into my small group teaching? Does an academic career not also depend on my research 'productivity'?**

This is the hoary question nearly all university teachers have to face. Teaching expectations contend with the pressures of the REF (Research Excellence Framework). How much time you put into teaching will depend on your institution, your subject, your current role, the stage of your career, the size of your student cohort, the amount of feedback and marking involved, the current policy fashion, as well as on what you want to prioritise. Whilst the 'new' universities have long taken teaching seriously, many more institutions are now rewarding and promoting good teachers. You may not have to swim against the policy tide. If you are struggling to navigate the different demands on you, hang on to your moral compass, and your academic vocation. The hackneyed 'Publish or Perish' aphorism needs freshening up: how about 'Teach and Thrive'? Remember that research and teaching are not necessarily opposed, and that small group teaching can be a great way of getting new perspectives on an issue or critical feedback.

2. **How much preparation can I expect my students to do? And how much should I do?**

The answer to this is also string-like: it depends. But having high expectations of your students can be a way of getting the very best out of them. The more they do before the teaching session, the more they are likely to benefit from the feedback they get. At the last count, Oxbridge undergraduates spent an average of 13 hours reading and writing before a tutorial. But this pedagogy is also very demanding for the teacher, especially if they have to read and comment on a number of essays at short notice each week.

3. **Should I worry about student contact hours?**

The respected Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) thinktank regularly surveys students about the number of contact hours they have, and how much preparation they do. Whilst in the past there has been some disquiet about contact hours, most accept that quantity is no indicator of quality. Interestingly the HEPI report shows little evidence of change in institutional teaching provision, despite the new fee structure.

4. **How are student attitudes changing as a result of fees?**

It is hard to predict how the new UK fees regime will shape student attitudes. Yes, students are becoming more demanding, but they do not want to think of themselves solely as consumers. They know that one can't simply buy knowledge, and that one has to work hard at learning. Small group teaching is a great way to remind students of that.

5. **Does small group teaching help my students' employability?**

The skills of teamwork, collaboration, negotiation and dialogue that students can acquire by participating in small groups are just what many employers are looking for. Encourage your students to appreciate and cultivate these different attributes, and to see them as an integral part of their learning.

6. **Can I still use small group teaching approaches on a large lecture course?**
The techniques of small group learning have long been used to complement a lecture-based course. In some universities, graduate research students now routinely lead such settings. If well-mentored and supported, these students can provide cutting-edge insights into their research and relate closely to undergraduates.
7. **What challenges do international students face in small groups?**
Small groups bring to the fore marked differences in attitudes and expectations about university learning. You may be used to students to actively challenge and dispute your position, but this can be hard for students unused to the nuances of academic English, or the unspoken rules of academic conduct. But this diversity, used wisely, is also a great asset.
8. **How can I use technology to complement my small group teaching?**
Virtual learning environments and online fora sustain and enhance engagement, especially amongst those students who may feel less confident about speaking out in class. Remember, however, that it can take a lot of time to fully moderate and support these spaces. Draw on the appropriate resources, human or otherwise, at your institution in order to maximize the effectiveness of the technology available. Don't forget that this includes more 'informal' technological platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube or Pinterest.
9. **How can I promote flexible learning?**
Small groups allow a good deal of flexibility. Within institutional constraints, meeting times and places can be agreed jointly, making allowances for other demands on students. The pace of teaching can also be recalibrated. Not being overly rigid about structure or timetable can open learning up in unexpected ways. Clear, consistent communication is key to being flexible in an organized way.

10 small-group teaching ideas to try

1. **Icebreakers**
Ask students to introduce each other, to share something about their personal interests or aspirations, and to get to know each other as early as possible.
2. **Quizzes and Games**
Make learning fun by designing short 'pub' quizzes, games, or drawing pictures.
3. **Peer assessment**
Ask your students to read each others' work and then give reciprocal feedback.
4. **Google-jockeying**
Think about asking one or more student to search out internet resources to inform classroom discussions.
5. **Appointing a note-taker**
In the same vein, ask a student to summarise the discussion in real-time during the class. If these notes are collectively viewed and shared, this can be a great way of clarifying differences and reminding people of the debates.
6. **Role plays**
Try getting them to act out a critical debate or controversy as the key protagonists, partly in order to try and understand the strength of feeling around the positions at stake.
7. **Problem-Based Learning**
Use your teaching sessions to get students to define a research 'problem' to explore independently and to report back before the next session.
8. **Hot topics and current issues**
Relate the week's academic debates to current affairs, new advances, scientific controversies or other media angles.

9. **Handing control over to students**

Encourage your students to develop the skills of chairing and facilitating discussions by involving them in designing and running a session. Offer to give them mentoring and feedback.

10 things your students should know about small group teaching

1. **Preparation matters**

The more preparation students do beforehand, whether reading, writing or independent research, the more they will benefit from the session.

2. **The rules of engagement**

Set out a clear set of responsibilities so everyone knows what is expected of them throughout the course. If they have been set a task, it is only reasonable that they complete it. Attendance, punctuality, cordiality all matter too.

3. **The importance of listening**

Stress the range of experiences and insights within the class, and the importance of all students listening actively to one another. This is a fundamental aspect of discussion that is often overlooked.

4. **Asking the right questions is as important as getting the right answers**

Help the students to see the importance of asking questions that bring together ideas and take forward debates.

5. **Learning is a social process**

Help your students to see that through dialogue and debate, everyone learns together. Exploring ideas, reflecting on challenges and constructively critiquing each other's points of view are crucial to learning in a small group context. Try to underplay the competitive, individualistic aspects of education that students experience in many other aspects of their academic lives.

6. **Learning can also mean Unlearning**

Learning is never linear. Sometimes one has to 'unlearn' concepts or approaches or models that have been taken for granted. This can be hard work, but it is ultimately very rewarding.

7. **Reading takes time**

Make sure they know how to read effectively, and deeply. Try out a reading template if that helps them focus on the task in hand.

8. **Writing and thinking go hand in hand**

Help the students see that writing is a form of thinking. Give them writing tasks during and between teaching sessions, and then build dialogue and debate around these texts.

9. **Taking feedback seriously**

Encourage your students to see that taking feedback constructively takes courage. It is easy to be defensive, or to dismiss criticism. Model this process by getting them to give you feedback at the end of each session.

10. **Giving feedback responsibly**

In the same vein, teach your students the skill of giving critical formative feedback to each other in a positive and supportive.

10 words of wisdom about small group teaching from experienced teaching academics

1. **Be prepared.**

It is obvious, but make sure you are at least one step ahead. Arrange the room beforehand, learn your students' names before they arrive, have a clear grasp of what you want to achieve in each session, and how that fits into the overall course objectives.

2. **Be enthusiastic**
Nothing matters more than enthusiasm. If the students feel that you are genuinely excited and interested in a topic, they will be too. If the passion has gone, stop teaching.
3. **Be kind**
Show that you care about your students. Try and remember what it felt like to grapple with new and unfamiliar concepts, or to put forward your own interpretation or analysis. For some it is daunting, whilst others may have never been expected to proffer their own views.
4. **Be open**
Locate yourself intellectually within your field. Describe your interests and agendas. This will help the students understand and respect your own position and respect your authority.
5. **Be honest**
Don't be scared to admit that you don't know the answers, or that a concept or debate is hard to understand. Your students would rather you were honest.
6. **Be attentive**
Think about how the dynamics of the group are developing, and potential conflicts or tensions that are emerging. The more your students feel comfortable working together, the more they will engage.
7. **Be inclusive**
There are always a few people who do most of the talking. Encourage them to think about those who are less confident, and find ways to bring everyone into the conversation. A quiet word afterwards can often help, as can using other forms of communication (email, social media, VLEs) between sessions.
8. **Be reflective**
Sessions don't always go to plan, and an approach that works one year might not work the next. It is always worth keeping a teaching diary as a record and an aide-memoire.
9. **Be creative**
Small group settings offer the chance to experiment, to personalize your teaching to the group, and to try out new topics or writing tasks.
10. **Be a learner too**
There is always more to learn, both about your subject and about the art of teaching. Recognise that your students will see the debates and issues in a new light, and that you may well benefit from their perspectives.

Top 10 tips for small group teaching: Perspectives from early career academics

Below are some pieces of choice advice from early career academics in the first few years of teaching with small groups in university contexts.

1. **Be prepared (again)!**
“Organisation and forethought are essential for effective small group teaching. On the surface, it might seem like small group teaching is mainly unstructured discussion or debate; but effective small group teaching really involves careful planning and preparation. This doesn't mean killing yourself with hours of prep work – it means doing enough in anticipation of the session that you are in control of the learning taking place and can achieve everything that you want to in a particular session. Students will respect the fact that you are well-prepared, and in turn you can expect the same from them. This can be something as simple as making sure that you arrive to the session before your students, that you have all your resources ready, and that you've thought seriously (and creatively) about your teaching plan.”

2. Focus on student participation and student interaction

“Limit lecturing and allow students to learn from each other and from group exercises. With a small group you can also fairly easily use various formats (discussion with a partner, mind mapping with one or two others, group debate) which keep everyone involved and awake.”

3. Make your teaching personal and individualised

“This might seem obvious, but it is worth making as big an effort as possible to remember names (even using stickers in the first week helps!). Find out as much as you can about your students – prior knowledge, learning styles, and things that will keep them interested and inspired. This can also help you to recognise the strengths of individual students as participants in the small group.”

4. Think about organising space and the impact that this will have on teaching and learning

“The arrangement of the tables and chairs, and where students chose to sit, has a big impact on the class dynamic. Students tend to prefer sitting at the back of the class, but as they're filing in suggest that they sit towards the front, or ask them to move. You will only need to do this for the first week as people tend to sit in the same spot for the rest of term. I think this subtly establishes authority too. If the tables and chairs aren't arranged in an appropriate way I think getting the students to move them is a great ice-breaker, it's always chaotic! It also helps wake up students if it's a morning session, although you should remember to return everything as you find it, of course!”

5. You can't do everything: remember that your students are also responsible for their learning

“I think it's common to feel that you are solely responsible for the successes or failures in your teaching. Obviously you have a guiding role in the process of teaching and learning, but it is crucial for teachers to remind themselves (and their students!) that the success of small group teaching in large part depends on the ongoing participation of the other people in the room. Students will only get the most out of a course if they're willing to fully engage in the learning process. It's your job to inspire this engagement, but they may need reminding about their roles as independent learners who can add a huge amount to the contribute to the vitality of small group teaching.”

6. Don't be afraid to ask for help

“When I first started teaching at my university I was anxious not to ask for help from more experienced staff, because I thought this would make me look ill-prepared, inadequate or incapable of doing my job properly. This meant that I struggled through early problems on my own, and at times this was a real challenge. In hindsight, I wish I had been honest and asked for help – even with simple things like readings, forms of assessment, or institutional practices that I was unfamiliar with. When I finally did get around to asking for help, it made my life a lot easier! Staff were friendly and open about issues with their own teaching, and it made me feel like I was really engaging with my teaching practice.”

7. Don't worry if you don't know everything

“For me my greatest fear as a new teacher was that some bright spark was going to ask me a question that I couldn't answer. Because I teach across so many topics that aren't my speciality, there are moments when I don't feel very well qualified to answer every question that comes up. At first, when a difficult question did come up I tried to avoid it or skirt around the issue, but I think students could see through this tactic and it made me feel insecure. While it's always good to open difficult questions to the rest of the class, I now feel more confident in letting students know that I don't have all the answers. I'm confident in the knowledge that I do have; and this makes me more confident to admit when I don't know everything. I think students respect this honesty and enjoy being part of the problem-

solving process if we get stumped on a question. It's also worth remembering how much knowledge and experience students bring to small group teaching – you can really draw on this when you venture into unfamiliar intellectual territory.”

8. Positive feedback and formative assessment are key

“For me, there is nothing more important in my small group teaching than encouraging student participation and giving feedback on progress. Students benefit hugely from being congratulated when they do something well, however simple it may be. They also appreciate knowing that you are guiding the progress of a lesson, and can tell them what they're doing well or how to improve on challenging things. This doesn't mean showering everyone in meaningless praise, you know, ‘That was amazing! Well done for picking up your pen!’ – it means thinking critically about the strengths and weaknesses of each individual student and then commenting positively when you think they have made a contribution that shows progress. Verbal feedback is really useful because it happens in real time and can be dynamic, but it's also important to provide positive written feedback that gives students a clear and explicit idea about what they're doing right, and how to improve further.”

9. Think actively and critically about your self-as-teacher

“When teaching small groups I think it is very important to get the atmosphere and the dynamic in the room just right. This means striking the right balance between informality, academic rigour, and mutual respect. In my experience, the students who thrive tend to be those that can function well in such groups, and the best thing students can do is to gain confidence in sharing their ideas – both vocal and written.”

10. Think about power and equity in your teaching.

Work towards equal participation from every student, balancing reticence with dominance, reluctance with showmanship, vague responses with precision. Make sure students develop strong vocal and expressive skills as well as written excellence. Leave space for them to speak fully, develop their ideas and for them to learn to perform to audiences. Make the class environment feel enjoyable and friendly and somewhere students want to be, working in a variety of tasks, media, and ideas. Early career researchers we can give students the very recent benefit of our own student experiences (positive and negative) in a way that should feel very relevant and contemporary. We should also be able to give clear reasons and examples of exactly what teaching and studying is for.

Interested in finding out more?

Have a look at this article from The Guardian:

Available on line [here](#).

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