

Running a Successful Workshop

Teaching workshops, labs, and tutorials allow instructors to enjoy the benefits of small group teaching. Small groups, as opposed to large classes, are more easily student-centered. Small groups can help students learn to collaborate and communicate and, “in addition to the content of the class, the group process itself becomes a learning tool. Participating in classes can help students to learn:

- successful collaboration and effective task sharing techniques,
- inter-personal skills,
- listening skills,
- verbal communication skills,
- about the synergy that can result from group discussions - a group can often produce a higher quality solution to a problem than an individual is capable of alone.”

(<http://www.learning.ox.ac.uk/support/teaching/resources/group/>)

Quoting McInnis, Zhang (<http://personal.gscit.monash.edu.au/~dengs/teaching/GCHE/part2-3.pdf>) summarizes the principles of effective small group teaching:

- Clear learning goals
- Active participation
- An accepting, non-threatening group climate
- Cooperative rather than competitive process
- Equal distribution of leadership functions
- Enjoyable group experience
- Course content is covered
- Evaluation as an integral part of learning process
- Students attend regularly
- Students come prepared

When planning a workshop, Steinert (<http://www.ipssw2011.com/files/Workshop%20Tips.pdf>) lays out the following steps:

Before the workshop:

1. **Define your objectives.** What are you trying to achieve? What is most important? What are the learning goals for the session? The answers to these questions will determine your choice of teaching methods, the sequence for the learning activities, and the appropriate evaluation strategy.
2. **Determine your teaching method.** Once you’ve determined your learning objectives for the workshop, think about the most appropriate teaching method to help meet those goals. The final content and format of the workshop will be influenced by the subject matter, your teaching goals, and learners’ past experiences with the topic.

3. **Be flexible.** Planning ahead is important, but it's also important to build in some backups for when things don't go according to plan

The workshop itself:

1. **Create a relaxed atmosphere for learning.** If this is your first class, introduce yourself and have the class get to know each other. Open yourself up to questions and suggestions.
2. **Outline your objectives for the workshop.** Explain to the class what you hope to accomplish in the available time. Outline what is expected of them and the purpose behind all the tasks. Provide a schedule setting benchmarks that they can aim for. Get feedback on where the class stands and be prepared to make some changes to best meet the needs of the students.
3. **Encourage active participation and allow for problem solving and/or skill acquisition.** Involve the group in all phases of the workshop. Invite questions, group discussion, and debate. Encourage the students to learn from each other – if a problem is presented, allow the class to offer their solutions rather than giving them the answer.
4. **Provide relevant and practical information.** Although active participation and interaction are essential to a successful workshop, students must also feel that they have learned something. Begin class with a mini-lecture setting the tone for the activities, covering the required knowledge, and ensuring a common ground for all students.
5. **Vary your activities and your style.** Keep the workshop flowing at a pace that keeps participants' attention, leaving room for the group to slow down or speed up.
6. **Summarize your workshop and request feedback from the class.** Leave time at the end to restate the learning objectives and what you hoped to achieve, synthesize the main points and tie the activities in to concrete learning goals for the course. Ask students to summarize what they have learned during the workshop and if they found the method helpful.

Strategies for Workshop Success

1. **Ask students to come to class prepared.** Assign students some readings or a short writing assignment, or ask them to post a question or their thoughts to a Blackboard discussion board. This will show you who is prepared or where potential issues may crop up. This will also help you familiarize yourself with individual students and their skill levels, as well as help students get used to the workshop process.
2. **Model the methods you want your students to use.** If you are introducing a new methodology, lead the class through an example. Walk them through the method, discuss why you think it works, and explain what you expect them to gain from its use.
3. **Ensure the process is student-driven.** After finishing an activity, ask students to offer their perspectives before offering your own. If the class seems reticent to participate, ask them to take a moment to jot down their thoughts instead, or have them turn to their classmates and chat in pairs before reconvening the group for discussion. As a last resort, walk them through the methodology again. Resist the temptation to take over the discussion. Instead, facilitate, asking questions and summarizing as necessary.

4. **Offer praise before moving on to critique.** Students are more open to criticism once they've received positive feedback. They also need to know what they're doing right before they tackle what they're doing wrong.
5. **Insist that students be respectful and critically engaged.** Generally, students aren't out to hurt each other during peer critiques. More often they are unwilling to offer comments that are even gently critical. To avoid comments that are too harsh or too soft, model constructive comments for the students and they will learn from you how to engage in a respectful dialogue with each other.
6. **Encourage differences of opinion.** Don't get nervous if the conversation heats up. Use controversy to keep students engaged and to explore the material in depth.

Adapted from: "Conducting Writing Workshops"

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/faculty/methods/workshops.shtml>

7. **Learn students' names.** This is a very powerful technique and makes students feel valued. If you have difficulty remembering names, ask students to wear sticky labels or use paper tents on the tables. Collect the paper tents and redistribute them before each class to help you to remember.
8. **Sit with students as they are working in groups.** Use group work as an opportunity to get to know students. Sitting with them, rather than standing over them or to the side of the classroom will make them feel less intimidated and more likely to participate.

Adapted from: "Encouraging Student Participation in Tutorials"

http://tlu.fbe.unimelb.edu.au/pdfs/tutor_resources/participation.pdf

Group Work

From "Tools for Teaching" by Barbara Gross Davis

<http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/collaborative.html>

1. **Plan for each stage of group work.** When you are writing your syllabus for the course, decide which topics, themes, or projects might lend themselves to formal group work. Think about how you will organize students into groups, help groups negotiate among themselves, provide feedback to the groups, and evaluate the products of group work.
2. **Carefully explain to your class how the groups will operate and how students will be graded.** As you would when making any assignment, explain the objectives of the group task and define any relevant concepts. In addition to a well-defined task, every group needs a way of getting started, a way of knowing when its task is done, and some guidance about the participation of members. Also explain how students will be graded.
3. **Give students the skills they need to succeed in groups.** Many students have never worked in collaborative learning groups and may need practice in such skills as active and tolerant listening, helping one another in mastering content, giving and receiving constructive criticism, and managing disagreements. Discuss these skills with your students and model and reinforce them during class.
4. **Create group tasks that require interdependence.** The students in a group must perceive that they "sink or swim" together, that each member is responsible to and dependent on all the others, and that one cannot succeed unless all in the group succeed.

Strategies for promoting interdependence include specifying common rewards for the group, encouraging students to divide up the labor, and formulating tasks that compel students to reach a consensus.

5. **Make the group work relevant.** Students must perceive the group tasks as integral to the course objectives, not just busywork.
6. **Create assignments that fit the students' skills and abilities.** Early in the term, assign relatively easy tasks. As students become more knowledgeable, increase the difficulty level.
7. **Assign group tasks that allow for a fair division of labor.** Try to structure the tasks so that each group member can make an equal contribution.

For more information, see the LTO Resources page

<http://www.ryerson.ca/lt/resources/>

Collaborative Learning and Group Work:

<http://www.ryerson.ca/lt/resources/learningstrategies/collaborative/>

Teaching Strategies:

<http://www.ryerson.ca/lt/resources/teachingstrategies/index.html>