

Teaching Small Groups

Teaching and learning in small groups provides opportunities for students to be more interactive than in settings such as large-group lectures. Generally the intention of small learning groups at UNSW is for students to

- discuss issues, questions or problems
- examine their personal views about course topics
- clarify their own understanding through comparing and contrasting their own views with those of their teachers and peers.

(The [Small Group Teaching](#) page of this site gives general information about the benefits and challenges of small group teaching, and suggests strategies you might use in this context.)

But small group settings and the interactive nature of tutorials can present cross-cultural challenges for tutors and students. Students and teachers can find it challenging and sometimes difficult to interact successfully when their expectations and intentions differ widely, especially when expectations are tacit or taken for granted. In small group settings, make sure you monitor participation patterns, and be aware of and anticipate cross-cultural barriers to learning. It is equally important to look for opportunities and engage with the diverse cultural knowledge and experiences represented in the class.

Issues with small group discussion

A common concern in small group teaching is that some students are reluctant to speak. There are many reasons why students hesitate to speak in class and unless you have been in similar situations, you may find it difficult to understand and empathise. Some students might not understand the need to initiate interaction, or may feel uncomfortable doing so, because it is so different from their previous educational experience or because they lack confidence using English publicly.

For example, some international students may have difficulty speaking in class because their personal educational culture dictates that students don't speak unless asked to by their teacher. International students have also reported that sometimes they struggle to find appropriate words in English, or feel they can't compose their ideas in clear sentences on the spot, or feel self-conscious about their accent.

Small group classes frequently expect students to engage in debate and critique of ideas. Academic debate can be difficult because it may produce conflicts of ideas or values between students or between the teacher and students. Debate and critique can produce considerable anxiety for students who do not expect to disagree with or query what is said by the teacher or who might feel that it is unsafe to do so. Such students often expect to reserve questions, if

they have any, for private discussion with the teacher. Variable cultural attitudes towards knowledge also shapes students' understanding of and willingness to engage in questioning of ideas.

Teachers and other students can unknowingly contribute to the difficulties that international students, Indigenous students and students from non-English speaking backgrounds face in class. It is easy to forget that Australian English, the Australian accent, speed of speech and examples we use might be hard for international students or students from non-English speaking backgrounds to understand.

Students from some cultural backgrounds have reported feeling invisible or not valued by their local colleagues. This occurs when others do not listen to or understand what is said by students from diverse cultures, do not take up their points in the ongoing discussion, or do not address questions and comments to them.

Furthermore, in seeking the familiar, all students, including local students, tend to form cliques, and initial difficulties experienced in small group settings can have a cumulative impact. Unfortunately, students from diverse cultures are often defined by their initial responses to small class activities and this can lead to or exacerbate the interpersonal gulf between themselves and their teachers and fellow students.

Their initial reticence can also contribute to poor basic conceptual understanding of course material at a critical point in their study, which can have considerable impact on further conceptualisation in later segments of their student program. In addition, the problem might be invisible to the tutor until it is too late to help the student successfully manage the situation.

Strategies and tips for inclusive small group teaching

Inclusive small group teaching requires advance preparation to ensure that the content and materials are inclusive and that expectations are articulated and clarified. Use inclusive teaching and learning strategies and activities, such as those described below to overcome the barriers to effective participation and to provide effective feedback. These strategies are designed to assist all students to

1. feel more comfortable about contributing
2. avoid talking off the top of their head and instead use evidence to support their views
3. prevent the talkers from taking over.

Advance preparation

Find out about your students' cultural and educational origins and experience to provide information to support your planning.

Design a brief needs analysis questionnaire for your students to complete at the start of classes (or online beforehand), for example, ask students to:

- report/rate their level of confidence about communicating in English orally or in writing or about any other core skills for the topic

- talk about their previous educational experiences and, if they're not in their first semester, about what they find different or difficult about learning at UNSW
- estimate their current understanding of cultural interests, values and experiences.

Provide material to help students prepare before classes, such as:

- a list of terms and concepts that are central to the topic of discussion
- guiding questions to focus students' reading of journal articles or texts for the small group discussion (use these in class also to focus discussion)
- a question or statement to consider (or develop a brief response about) that will form the basis of discussion.

Plan alternative or supplementary activities for students who might have difficulty with any core activities

Tutorial environment

Establish a safe, culturally inclusive tutorial environment.

Establish a culture of questioning. It is reasonable in a learning context for students not to know the answers. The goal is not for you as teacher to provide answers, but for all students to add what they know to construct correct answers. Your expert contribution is quality control of questions and elaboration on students' answers.

Set up brainstorming groups. Ask students to go into small groups at the beginning of class and brainstorm all the issues about which they feel unsure from lectures, other course activities and the recommended readings.

Ensure inclusive discussions:

- Ask students to write (or pre-prepare) a question from the last lecture for the whole group to discuss.
- Provide students with a chance to prepare contributions before presenting to the whole group.
- Give students thinking space to ease the pressure of speaking spontaneously.
- Give students a minute or two to think or to make notes or jot down some keywords.
- Ask students to share in pairs.
- Provide pairs/sub-groups with overhead transparencies to make notes on and then share the conclusions of their discussion. This way students become familiar with standing up and making brief presentations.
- Use buzz groups (small sub-groups, formed for a few minutes) so that students can discuss issues and answer questions before reporting back to the whole group.
- Provide time for students to review their presentation with others in the class before the whole group discussion.

Structure activities so that no one becomes invisible. Assign a range of roles and responsibilities for group discussions, where students are encouraged to experience different roles over time. Possible group roles could include:

- leaders, to ensure the task gets done
- recorders, to make notes of the discussion
- observers, to ensure everyone gets a voice and their ideas are recorded
- counter-arguers, to ensure alternative views are canvassed
- summarisers, to present the group's conclusions to the group
- reporters, to present the group's conclusions to the whole class.

Have debates where all students argue only one side of the debate. Students are invited to imagine who would have a stake in arguing that position and what evidence they might use. Next, students generate counter-arguments for the other side of the debate.

Provide clear guidelines for pair work, including the components of the tasks and the roles and responsibilities of group members.

Cross-cultural learning

Use activities to foster genuine collaboration:

- Invite and provide support for Australian students to buddy an international.
- Pair proficient and less proficient English speakers in tutorials to encourage understanding and language development but give roles for the partnership so that there is mutual benefit.
- Establish study groups, especially for first year students, which have a special responsibility for the next class discussion.
- Plan mini-projects to be completed in pairs between tutorials, pairing students from different cultural origins.

Include students' cultural and personal knowledge and experiences. This can provide valuable insight for local students about their own assumptions and foster cross-cultural understanding in the group.

1. Ask all students to prepare for the following week a comment or question from their own cultural viewpoint and experience, especially focusing on what seems to be taken for granted, or what seems "strange". Remember that students are speaking as individuals from a particular culture, not as a representative of their culture.
2. Address cross-cultural perspectives and potentially controversial issues in a positive way. Discussing these issues can help students develop their own perspectives beyond mere dualistic, right/wrong thinking (Perry 1999) and develop their capacity to provide a theoretically defensible rationale for their own views and to consider the viewpoints of others. However, only do this if you feel able to manage it successfully.

3. Use a range of methods to explore different positions on topics. For example, role play, [debates](#), [brainstorming](#).
4. Manage any conflict that arises.

Both teachers and students should be aware of and moderate their own over-attachment to ideas or arguments and moderate their overemotional reaction to criticism or challenges (Boice 1996). These may manifest as students

- expressing biased or prejudiced views
- disagreeing in non-constructive ways
- offending other students.

Encourage the students to listen to other viewpoints and to argue from a view supported by evidence.

References and further resources

Ballard, B. and Clanchy, J., 1991, [Teaching Students from Overseas: A Brief Guide for Lecturers and Supervisors](#), Longman Cheshire, Melbourne.

Boice, R., 1996, [First-Order Principles for College Teachers: Ten Basic Ways to Improve the Teaching Process](#). Anker Publishing Company, Bolton MA.

Perry, W. G. (1999), [Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in College Years: A Scheme](#), Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco.

Teaching for learning

[Active learning spaces](#)

[Blended and online](#)

[Brainstorming](#)

[Case studies](#)

[Debates](#)

[Discussion](#)

[Flipped classroom](#)

[Group work](#)

[Questioning](#)

[Simulations](#)

[Teaching diverse groups](#)

[Inclusive Teaching Practice](#)[Diversity Toolkit](#)[Culturally Inclusive Environment](#)[Teaching for learning](#)[Indigenous Terminology](#)[Designing Inclusive Environments](#)[Managing Issues](#)[Teaching Small Groups](#)

Events & news

[Connections Seminar: Design, development and delivery of an online degree](#)
25 June 2019

[Connections Seminar: Teaching as Performance](#)
13 June 2019

[More](#)[Back to top](#)[Contacts](#)[Towards 2025](#)[Share](#)[Print](#)[Events & news](#)[About](#)

Authorised by Pro Vice-Chancellor Education

UNSW CRICOS Provider Code: 00098G, TEQSA Provider ID: PRV12055, ABN: 57 195 873 179

Teaching at UNSW, Sydney NSW 2052, Australia Telephone 9385 5989

[Privacy Policy](#)[Copyright & Disclaimer](#)

[Accessibility](#)

[Site Map](#)

Page last updated: Thursday 10 September 2015