

Helping People to Work Together in Tutorials

This guide is designed to assist you in your role as tutor, giving tips on how to facilitate small group processes that will help make your tutorials places of active learning. It is designed to be used as an ongoing resource, in which you can add ideas from your own experience and that of others.

Many of your students will be making the transition from school to university where students are expected to become independent adult learners. Research demonstrates clearly that adults learn most effectively when they are actively engaged and drawing on experience. While lectures can be a one-way flow of information, tutorials are settings where active, experiential learning can take place in a context of diverse experiences and views. The more the tutorial environment supports this type of learning, the more self-directed and responsible students can become.

The most important thing to remember about your role as tutor is that you are there to facilitate a process of learning, not lecture on content. In some disciplines, while your knowledge of content is important, you only need to know enough to lead a productive discussion and promote experiential learning. In others, thorough knowledge of content will be needed. When preparing your tutorial, remember to prepare both content and strategies for engaging students. Facilitation skills do not come easily to most people and can really only be developed through experience. This guide offers suggestions for different processes that will help make your tutorials enjoyable places of active learning and increase your confidence as a facilitator.

It is also important to remember that students have a variety of learning styles and come from diverse backgrounds and many will not have had any experience of active or experiential learning. However, diversity adds strength and interest to tutorial participation and discussion.

Introducing each other

Introductions are important in setting a friendly and participative tone for your tutorials. It is also the best way to give the message to students that they are valued and their contribution is important.

Questions you could ask in an introductory round:

- Your name?
- Where do you live?
- What do you like best about the place where you live?
- What do you hope to learn from this course?
- What did you have for breakfast?
- Where was your place of birth?

Other options for introducing people:

- answer questions in pairs, then introduce each other to the larger group
- small groups of three or four—find out what you have in common, and then report to the larger group

- line-up—place yourself on a continuum in relation to where you live, how long at university expectations about the course, etc., then interview people at different places along the line or have them talk to each other
- milling—walk around the room and introduce each other by answering specific questions

Learning names:

- go around the group saying names of people who have spoken before you
- throwing a soft object, naming the person you are throwing it to
- drawing a plan on the board of where students are sitting and their names
- using names as much as possible when you speak to students

Setting agendas/orientation

It is important to include processes in each tutorial that allow students to orient themselves quickly to the course and the tutorial or lecture, particularly for those who may have missed a class. Students often want to know ‘why’ certain content is being covered and frequently reviewing and placing this in the overall context of the unit is very helpful.

Examples of how you can facilitate orientation:

- provide handouts of course objectives and course outline
- provide an agenda for the session with approximate times—open to negotiation (remember to include processes such as rounds, evaluations, brainstorming, etc.)
- arrange furniture in the room to suit the group
- greet students by name as they arrive
- relate work to last week’s class
- review the course so far to create a context for the tutorial
- ask students if there is any unfinished business from earlier tutorials
- indicate how you will be responding to any feedback from the previous tutorial

Setting group guidelines/ground rules

Ground rules are principles of participation that will assist your tutorials to be conducted in productive and participatory ways. It is wise to set up ground rules in your very first tutorial and it’s even better for students to create their own. You can revisit these group guidelines as necessary throughout the semester.

Examples of ground rules for a tutorial or discussion group:

- don’t interrupt people
- it’s okay to pass
- start on time
- participation should be reasonably equal
- support each other to participate
- no put downs
- everyone does their preparation
- remind people if they break ground rules
- anyone can suggest a change to ground rules any time

Breaking up the group

Breaking up a large group (more than 10) into small groups increases participation and facilitates learning. It also takes the focus away from you as the 'expert' and encourages self-directed learning.

Types of groups:

- **Pairs** (reflective/buzz)— 5 minutes—opportunity for quick reflection on what is being discussed or what student is experiencing;
- **Small groups** (3, 4 or 5)— 10-30 minutes— opportunity for more focused discussion and/or problem-solving;
- **Pyramids** (ones, twos, fours...)— 20-40 minutes— opportunity to break down complex tasks; important to have a different task for each stage (e.g. individuals read a short article; pairs come up with one contentious issue arising from the article; fours discuss the issue and identify different perspectives; if time, eights report to each other their discussions and report back to the whole group);
- **Fishbowl** (small group discussion with outer observers, empty chair that permits entering and leaving the discussion)— 10 minutes+—useful for breaking up larger group discussions and encouraging listening.

Strategies for breaking into groups:

- allow students to self-select;
- line-up according to specific criterion (birthday months, familiarity with topic, confidence about speaking in group, etc.) then combine according to commonality or diversity;
- number students off to create more random groups, without the anxiety of self-selecting (e.g. to create 4 groups, number students 1-4 around the group, group the 1s, 2s, 3s etc.);
- allocate students to groups according to your own observations (e.g. putting high contributors together; separating or mixing genders; putting experienced with inexperienced, etc.).

Making contracts

Contracts are agreements about what you expect of students and what they can expect of you. On the next page is an example of a contract handed to students at the beginning of semester (you would need to leave more space in an actual contract sheet).

Encouraging participation

A tutorial where students are all participating is very rewarding—high levels of interaction have been shown to increase learning. The following are some suggested strategies for increasing participation rates in tutorials:

- give structured opportunities to speak, such as:
 - *rounds* (speaking in turn, it's okay to pass and it's okay to repeat what someone else has said);
 - *student questions* (student facilitates the discussion until question is answered to their satisfaction);
 - *brainstorm* (call out ideas in any order, don't justify or explain, don't comment on other ideas—use concept mapping to order and make sense of the ideas, if appropriate);
 - *participatory brainstorm* (students note down ideas, you ask for one from each person and keep going round until all ideas have been exhausted).
- break up the group
- remember to talk less—tutorials are not meant to be mini-lectures
- remind students about ground rules if discussion is being dominated
- you stop talking, leave the room, or sit outside the group
- use a 'buzzer'—any student can stop the flow at any time to ask a question
- put high contributors in a group together
- give dominating students specific roles (note taker, facilitator, timekeeper etc.)
- have a rule that no one speaks twice before everyone has spoken once
- set up debates
- use open rather than closed questioning
- model appropriate self-disclosure; be honest about your own strengths and limitations
- help create a positive and respectful climate by encouraging low contributors and containing high contributors
- use gentle and easy questioning to encourage shy and passive students
- remind students that there is no such thing as a stupid answer
- give students time to answer (silence can often mean reflection)
- allow students to jot down ideas and discuss with a partner before asking for contributions
- ask a variety of questions (e.g. open-ended; one right answer; feelings and emotions; personal experiences)

Encouraging student leadership

Students taking more leadership in tutorials is an important strategy for increasing student self-reliance and confidence. Two major strategies are giving students different roles and conducting student-led presentations.

- 1 Give students responsibility for different roles such as:
 - agenda setter
 - facilitator of large and small groups
 - time keeper
 - note taker
 - summariser

- process monitor

2 Student-led presentations or seminars are common practice, but are not always positive experiences for the tutorial or the student presenters. To ensure a more satisfactory experience:

- *prepare the group*—discuss fears; indicate how process will be different; give wide scope for choice of date and topic;
- *brief leaders* individually before their presentation—help with process suggestions such as having an agenda and objectives; discuss the questions they will ask and methods they will use to involve the group; assist with copying material for them for handouts and overheads;
- *support leaders* during presentation—sit in the group; offer encouragement; don't take over;
- *give feedback*—giving each person a chance to say what worked well and what could have been improved upon; offer one-to-one feedback giving the student a chance to self-evaluate first.

Seeking Feedback and Evaluating

Strategies for evaluating tutorials include:

- *ongoing self-monitoring* of how the tutorial group is going
 - a. use pyramid process—ask what is going wrong and what is going right; individuals write answers to these questions; pairs identify problem areas; fours discuss possible solutions, then report back to large group which selects proposals for change
 - b. use questionnaires with the same questions throughout the semester to track change
- *observation*
 - a. observers from within or outside the group can report back to the group on how they see it going
 - b. video tapes can be made to allow whole group observation
 - c. ask a critical friend to observe a tutorial in order to provide constructive feedback
- *one-minute feedback*—process by which students give anonymous feedback at the end of each tutorial or lecture. You can use unfinished statements such as 'the key thing I learned today was ...'; 'something I found valuable today was...'; 'something I would like to know more about is...'; 'a way to improve things for me in this group would be...'; 'what I will take away from the session is...'; 'what frustrated me today was...' etc. Vary statements each week and demonstrate your responsiveness by addressing the feedback the following week.
- *ongoing consultation*—check with the group about how they want to proceed, e.g. if time is running out and you can't cover everything you planned, ask them what they would like to cover before the end of the session, and so on.

The Institute for Teaching and Learning provides valuable information on how to obtain feedback on your teaching. See <http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/feedback>

Problem	Possible solutions
Students haven't prepared	Explore the issue with the students. Remind them of contracts, or redraw contracts. Suggest incorporating preparation into ground rules. Set specific tasks for different people. Set group work. Allocate facilitation roles to students. Alternate weeks which involve prepared reading and those which involve reading in class.
Students won't participate	Break into groups. Ask what is going on. Do a round on 'what I want from this group' or 'what I find tricky about this group'.
One or two students are dominating the discussion	Thank the contributors and then invite others to speak. Ask students to raise their hands before speaking. Have a round (each person speaks or passes). Appoint dominant students as facilitators of small groups or give them other roles. Break up the group. Remind students about ground rules.
Students are silent when you ask a question	Rephrase the question. Ask easier questions. Give students time to write down notes before speaking. Try a pyramid sequence. Remind students that <i>all</i> responses are fuel for discussion..
Students do not listen to each other	Remind them of the ground rules. Try a listening exercise. Ask for a one minute silence. Change the seating arrangements. Ask students to paraphrase what they have heard. Articulate what you see or feel ('It seems that people are not listening to each other').
Discussion becomes too abstract	Ask the group to relate back to their own experience. Bring them back to the here and now. Use personal statements yourself.
Discussion goes off the point or becomes irrelevant	Set a clear theme at the beginning, check that the group agrees and if the discussion wanders ask 'I'm wondering what the present discussion has to do with what we agreed?'
Students use sarcasm or other put downs	Confront the behaviour. Remind students of ground rules. Invite discussion about consequences of such behaviour. If problem persists, speak to the students involved outside the class.

Troubleshooting common problems

Above are some suggestions for overcoming some of the common problems you are likely to face in your tutorials. As you can see, your skill as a tutorial leader involves understanding something about groups and using your interpersonal skills. It takes time and experience to develop these. Remember to involve students in identifying and solving problems as well.

Talking to experienced tutors and group leaders is also beneficial. We recommend that you identify someone who can act as a critical friend when problems arise—someone who takes their teaching seriously and who may have encountered the same difficulty. The staff at the University's Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL) and staff at the Faculty's own Office for Learning and Teaching are also available to assist. The references that follow will offer a wealth of strategies as well.

Closing the Group

It is important to end the group's time together with a final evaluation of what they have appreciated about being in the group and what they have learnt over the semester. This can be done in rounds, using appreciation cards or paper on the walls. Ending with a social gathering is also a fine way to conclude.

References

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