

Teaching Methods

Small Groups

Purpose

Working in small groups provides an environment in which learners can be actively involved in the learning process. McKeachie (2006) defines discussions as the “prototypical teaching methods for active learning” (35). In small groups, learners can engage in peer learning and peer teaching. Cooperative learning improves learners’ ability to work with others, results in better cognitive outcomes and higher-level learner questioning (214). There can be formal or informal learning groups (Davis, 1993, 147); small groups can be used in class or in assignments outside of the classroom.

Goal

McKeachie (2006) indicates that discussions facilitated in small groups do the following (35–36):

- “Help students learn to think in terms of the subject matter by giving them practice in thinking.”
- “Help students learn to evaluate the logic of and evidence for their own and others’ position.”
- “Give students opportunities to formulate applications of principles.”
- “Develop motivation for further learning.”
- “Help students articulate what they’ve learned.”
- “Get prompt feedback on student understanding or misunderstanding.”

Strengths

Studies in educational and general psychology show that small-group discussions provide a learning environment in which learners can master the subject matter even if the instructor does not participate in the discussion. Their grades on the exams are comparable to or better than those who heard the lecture. Furthermore, learners who participate in small-group discussions demonstrate superior curiosity and interest (McKeachie, 2006, 54; Michaelsen, 2008, 9).

Outcomes related to small-group work:

- Learners can develop skills building on other’s ideas, which increases motivation (McKeachie, 2006, p. 53).
- Learners can improve their communication skills, which is useful when dealing with patients.
- Small-group work can prompt learners to continue the discussion outside of the classroom.
- Learners can support and mutually stimulate each other (McKeachie, 2006, 218).
- Small-group work can be transformed into team-based learning.

In small-group work, peer-assisted learning can be used which offers a “way to continue to offer interactive learning environments.” Benefits of peer-assisted learning (Hudson & Tonkin, 2008, 901-6):

- effects a deeper understanding of the material;
- collaboration between peers fosters learning support and encouragement;
- confidence can be developed as a result of peer interaction.

Weaknesses / Suggestions for Improvement

McKeachie (2006) summarizes the main barriers to participation in small-group work by pointing out that some learners may (44):

- be passive observers instead of active learners;
- fail to see the value of discussion;
- fear criticism or looking stupid;
- feel pushed toward agreement or solution before alternative points of view have been considered;
- feel that the task is to find the answer the instructor wants rather than to explore and evaluate possibilities.”

When learners participate in a small-group discussion without the instructor, they often feel they are not learning. Small-group discussions can provide active learning when they are planned and timed well. They can be introduced to learners when summarizing a bigger topic. (McKeachie, 2006, 45). Learners need to be taught how to learn from small-group discussions. In small-group work, they can practice explaining and clarifying ideas, which leads to retention. The instructor has to create an environment in which learners are willing to talk. (McKeachie, 2006, 53). Learners should not only learn how to participate in and learn through small-group discussions, but they also need to learn to evaluate the effectiveness of small-group discussions (McKeachie, 2006, 54)

Planning Small Group activities (Davis, 1993, 148–49)

- Develop a plan for each stage of the small-group activity—what will learners be expected to do;
- provide detailed instructions about the function and structure of the activity within the small-group;
- make sure learners have a level of knowledge and skill needed to work on a small-group activity;
- encourage a team-centered approach to small-group activities—that is activities that require; “interdependence.”
- make sure the activity is relevant and applicable to the content.

References

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