

## Small Group work

This document brings together a summary of the discussion outcomes from the session on Small Group Teaching, led by Joy Perkins at the event 'Teaching in the Biosciences: an Introduction for Postgraduates and Postdoctoral Teaching Fellows'.

Delegates considered the benefits and challenges of group work and then discussed four potentially tricky situations that could arise in small group teaching.

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### Challenges

- Time consuming for staff
- Identifying the needs of every student
- Ensure strong students do not overwhelm weak
- Getting everyone to interact with each other and tutor
- Absence / lateness causing disruption
- Getting students to answer questions

### Benefits

- More opportunity to ask questions
- Questions based on coursework
  - Clarify
  - feedback on course
- Meet class mates / staff
- Address problem issues
- Learn more than in lectures
  - Skills
  - Subject
  - Communication
  - Teamwork
  - Presentations
  - Problem solving

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### Dealing with Potentially tricky situations

1. *You have noticed that during your biology tutorials Jennie has been very keen and enthusiastic, but beyond the point of being genuine you feel. She has also started to appear early for your tutorials and remains behind to talk with you afterwards. As well as this, you have been receiving a lot of emails from her and now there are phone calls as well. You feel that you need to deal with this.*

- Discuss with another member of staff – perhaps the course co-ordinator.
- Don't respond to all the emails she sends; only those you think need a response.
- Ask another member of staff to be present in the tutorial sessions.
- If she wants to discuss things after the tutorial perhaps move out into a corridor or common space so you aren't left alone.
- Perhaps ask to be put in charge of another group – swap with another tutor.

2. *During each cell biology tutorial you find that David is answering all of the questions you ask and tending to dominate class discussions. One or two other students in the group are getting annoyed, but most are simply switching off and ceasing to participate once he starts speaking.*
- Limit ALL students to how long they can talk for or how many comments they can make – for example you can talk for two minutes, have tokens (e.g. poker chips) give 3 or 4 to each student, when a student makes a point, answers a question they give up a chip, when all their chips are gone they can't say anything further.
  - Split the group into smaller groups (e.g. pairs) to discuss a point, then choose a member of the pair to feedback to the whole group – this gives everyone a chance to discuss.
  - Something as simple as "thank you for your contribution / answer – now can XX give me anything further to add" could give others the chance to contribute.
  - Establish ground rules when you first start – e.g. will want contributions from ALL members of the group.
  - Get David to run the session.
3. *For the last four group sessions Kevin, a student in your group has never spoken. Even when you have asked him a simple, direct question you have received only a monosyllabic answer, a grunt or silence. Today you try again. You ask a question. Kevin says nothing.*
- Shouldn't leave it for so long until trying to sort out.
  - Perhaps Kevin doesn't know anyone else in the group and would be happier in a group with his friends?
  - Have a chat with, e.g. the course co-ordinator and see if there are any underlying issues you should know about.
  - It may be he has a lack of confidence in speaking in front of a group – perhaps try splitting the group into pairs for discussion – this way he can get involved and contribute without having to say things in front of everyone.
  - Perhaps have a quick chat with him after a tutorial to check he is OK with his course and isn't falling behind or feeling unsure, make sure you know who it would be best to "refer" him onto if he does have problems he would like to discuss.
4. *You have just begun your third session with a group of six students. Suddenly, Mary a student, leans forward and says angrily: "I'm sick of these bloody sessions. I'm pissed off with the whole course. When are we going to do something useful?"*
- Say she is welcome to leave if she wishes to, she is not forced to stay if she is not finding it useful.
  - Have a quick chat with her after the session – is it the small group sessions she isn't finding useful or the entire course?
  - Find out what she would find useful to do in the sessions