Facilitation of small group learning: what works

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Introduction

• Strategies to overcome challenges of small group learning
  – Facilitator level strategies
  – Program level strategies
• Reasons for exploring this area
  – Two previous studies
  – Literature
• Areas for further research
Reasons for exploring this area

Key Findings of two previous studies (Balasooriya 2005, Balasooriya et al 2009a, 2009b)

• Student response to even the most carefully designed educational was not uniform

• Instead, it was a subgroup response, with four types of student perceptions and responses
The subgroup response

Four subgroups of students who:

1. Moved towards deeper approaches (valued the design of the educational program)

2. Moved towards more surface approaches (dissatisfied with the design)

3. Maintained deep approaches (independent of the design)

4. Continued to use surface approaches (independent of the design)
Polarising effect of features

*Perceptions* of educational features such as:
- Integrated learning
- Collaborative learning
- Self-directed learning
- Holistic approach to medical practice

seemed to have a polarising effect on students

(ie was appreciated by one subgroup and criticised by other)
Implications for learning

• Only a proportion of students may benefit from the educational design
• A significant proportion (1/3) of students may not benefit from the design (the ‘surface responding’ subgroup)
• Potential for some students to undervalue & therefore not achieve some significant learning outcomes
Need for ways to deal with this

• Within a medicine program that includes a large amount of small group learning, we wanted to find out how we could improve the small groups learning process to minimise the negative impact of the subgroup response
The study on Facilitation

• A survey followed by in-depth interviews
• Explored facilitators views of:
  – experience of small group facilitation
  – any particular challenges that they faced in scenario group facilitation
  – areas in which they required further support
  – strategies that they found effective in fostering a collaborative learning environment
Main issue

Key issues highlighted by an overwhelming number of facilitators:

• Management of group dynamics
• Management of specific types of student behaviour
Types of student behaviour

1. The dominant students
   1a. The dominant disruptive students
   1b. The highly enthusiastic dominant students

2. The passive students
   2a. The disinterested students
   2b. The quiet students who work by themselves
Link with previous findings?

• Evidence not sufficient to draw comparisons between the findings of this study and the two previous studies

• However, significant similarities exist within the student subgroup(s) that are of greatest concern

  ie the surface responding subgroup shared characteristics with dominant disruptive students and passive disinterested students
The findings of the two sets of studies highlighted the need to better manage specific types of student behaviour in order to optimise the effects of small group learning environments.

The findings also highlighted the importance of ensuring that educational design is perceived by students in the manner intended by the designers.
Strategies to achieve this

- Facilitator level strategies
- Program level strategies
Effective facilitation strategies

The following strategies were identified by facilitators:

• The allocation of expert roles to students
• Spontaneously allocating leadership roles to students
• Clear introductions that highlight relevance to practice
Effective facilitation strategies contd

- Pairing students with complementary strengths
- Allocating time for reflection
- Modelling of effective learning behaviour
- Speaking to students individually
1. Targeted preparation of students through a ‘Foundations’ program that develops professionalism:
   – Reflective abilities
   – Information searching and Critical evaluation
   – Communication
   – Teamwork
   – Self directed learning
Positive course evaluations
2. Targeted assessment tasks within a portfolio framework:

• A project that guides students to develop self-directed and collaborative learning skills - very encouraging student feedback

• An assignment that develops skills in self-directed learning and peer teaching

• Communications assignment
3. A peer feedback system

4. Multiple avenues for gathering student feedback and for reporting consequential changes

5. Regular meetings and program level mechanisms to support facilitators
Are these strategies effective?
Are these strategies effective?

Evidence available through:

• Teaching evaluations
  – Indication of effectiveness of facilitation strategies

• Course evaluations
  – Indication of effectiveness of program level strategies
Student perceptions of facilitation strategies

Students listed these features as the ‘Best features’ of a facilitator:

“It was good how you get us to run the scenario groups”

(The opportunity to) “share facilitation”

“helped us take responsibility for our learning”
Sample student comment on facilitation

Comment deleted
Student perceptions of Foundations

Sample student comment:

Comment deleted
Principles that relate to these strategies

- Student ownership of learning activities
- Understanding relevance & significance (of both content & process)
- Developing specific interactional skills

Overall: creating a stimulating & enjoyable learning environment that is *perceived* by students as beneficial for their future.
Future Directions

Educational research that:

• clarifies the nature of the ‘subgroup response’

• focuses more on students’ perceptions of educational design

• informs the development of strategies that could help students to perceive educational design in the intended manner
Thank you