Identifying Characteristics of Effective Small Group Learning Valued by Medical Students and Facilitators

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Identifying Characteristics of Effective Small Group Learning Valued by Medical Students and Facilitators

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Keywords
Medical Education, Undergraduate Education, Teaching, Medical Students, Group Processes, Learning

Comments
Medical students Diana Robillard and Laura Spring participated in this study as part of the Senior Scholars research program at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

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**Survey Respondent Characteristics**

A significantly greater percentage of students (60%) reported that the small group leader should be a skilled facilitator rather than a content expert (p = 0.04).

- **Role of facilitator to create supportive environment**
  - N: 176
  - Agreed: 73
  - Neutral: 73
  - Disagreed: 30
  - Rating: 0.16

- **Facilitation skills most important**
  - N: 176
  - Agree: 108
  - Disagree: 68
  - Rating: 0.32

- **Review session objectives**
  - N: 176
  - Agree: 131
  - Disagree: 45
  - Rating: 0.32

- **Facilitators should attend training**
  - N: 176
  - Agree: 141
  - Disagree: 35
  - Rating: 0.01

- **Facilitator of role to summarize main points at end**
  - N: 176
  - Agree: 108
  - Disagree: 68
  - Rating: 0.32

- **Facilitator of role to identify and address misunderstandings**
  - N: 176
  - Agree: 108
  - Disagree: 68
  - Rating: 0.32

- **Facilitator of blackboard 6**
  - N: 176
  - Agree: 141
  - Disagree: 35
  - Rating: 0.01

- **Facilitator of role to summarize main points at end**
  - N: 176
  - Agree: 131
  - Disagree: 45
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**Conclusions**

**FACILITATOR CHARACTERISTICS**

- Students reported variable experiences with facilitators and believe that facilitation in small groups is a skill for which formal training is recommended.
- While the literature appears to support higher value placed on facilitator content expertise over small group facilitation skills, our study found that students, compared to facilitators, felt much more strongly that small group leaders’ skills in facilitation were more important than content expertise.

**GROUP ATMOSPHERE AND STRUCTURE**

- Both students and faculty agreed that the highest value placed on small group learning was in practicing problem-solving skills—more important than getting the right answer.
- Since both students and faculty disagreed that their cohort should be required to attend training on learning and teaching within a small group setting, attention should be paid to developing training for both groups in need of greater pressure on student learning and faculty teaching. Since students felt more facilitation training material in small group was not recommended, both students and faculty agreed that the highest value placed on small group learning was in practicing problem-solving skills—more important than getting the right answer.

**CASES, CONTENT, AND EVALUATION**

- Faculty were twice as likely to recommend students completely work up a case presentation in a small group setting. While nearly all students recommended cases be presented for the first time during a session, this demonstrates the need for an alternative format that best supports learning and teaching.

**LIMITATIONS**

- The nature of a survey is such that questions are subject to varying degrees of interpretation and reporting bias.
- While the scope of this study was limited to case-based small group learning, both students and faculty participated in other types of small group learning that may have influenced their responses.
- Students had more exposure to small group sessions than faculty; thus, consensus between facilitator likely factored into student responses.

**FUTURE RESEARCH AND NEXT STEPS**

- Recommend students and facilitators come together to discuss areas of different perspectives and prioritize areas of action.
- Evaluate cases to determine small group learning and balancing content with problem solving skills to best meet our institutional needs.
- Readminister survey after implementation of newly identified areas of training and/or changes in areas of agreement between facilitators and students.

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**References**