

Facilitating Small Groups: PBL Learning **Desired Tutor Competencies**

“Problem-Based, Small Group Learning” demands a lot of skill from its tutor. Competencies are required along two main dimensions.

“*Problem-Based Learning*” is a pedagogical approach which uses cases and problems as the starting point for acquiring the desired learning objectives. The role of a tutor in problem based learning is different than the role of a course instructor in a more traditional didactic or lecture-based course. There is some evidence that tutors with knowledge and expertise within the content domains can enhance the learning experience of problem based learning participants.

“*Small group learning*” may or not be case based, however, it does assume that the collective resources of the group will be used to enhance the learning of all its members. For this reason, successful group learning depends on a high level of group functioning. Tutors in this setting play a crucial role in helping the group establish itself, setting norms for group function, ensuring group trust and attending to the unique dynamics and characteristics of the group. Knowledge of group dynamics and a skill set related to group facilitation are equally valuable.

Tutors who take on the challenge of “Problem-Based, Small Group Learning” have to be good at everything! Skill and technique for enhancing case-based learning is essential. Equally important is an understanding of group dynamics and the group facilitating skills necessary to create an effective learning environment.

Groups also exist on these two levels: the “task” (ie – what the group is trying to accomplish) and the “interpersonal process” level – how they communicate and function while going about accomplishing the tasks.

Facilitating Problem-Based Small Group Learning: The First Meeting

The first time a tutorial group meets is the most crucial session. The first group often determines the patterns and habits, which the group will adopt for its entire time together. Starting the new group off on the right foot is the most important preventative strategy for ensuring group problems don’t occur as the year progresses. It is also the session which requires the most active participation on the part of the tutor.

Because the first session is so crucial, it important to look at the tutor tasks which relate to the first group session.

Initial Session: Preparation

Before meeting a new group, the tutor must have a firm grasp on the nature of the group's task. This requires familiarity with course learning objectives and how the work of the group will fit into the overall curriculum. In problem based learning, the "terminal learning objectives" are already defined – the students and group are involved in determining the best "pathway" for individual and collective achievement of those goals. However, the tutor has a responsibility, especially at the beginning, for ensuring the group stays on track.

During the first session, attending to task is often secondary to group formation. Group formation theory is very helpful to the tutor who is trying to help the group achieve as much initial success as possible. The first stage your new group goes through is formation:

Stage 1: Forming

In the *Forming* stage, personal relations are characterized by **dependence**. Group members rely on safe, patterned behavior and look to the group leader for guidance and direction. Group members have a desire for acceptance by the group and a need to know that the group is safe. They set about gathering impressions and data about the similarities and differences among them and forming preferences for future subgrouping. Rules of behavior seem to be to keep things simple and to avoid controversy. Serious topics and feelings are avoided.

The major task functions also concern **orientation**. Members attempt to become oriented to the tasks as well as to one another. Discussion centers around defining the scope of the task, how to approach it, and similar concerns. To grow from this stage to the next, each member must relinquish the comfort of non-threatening topics and risk the possibility of conflict.

In the early stages, tutors need to provide a lot of direction. Members of the group will be looking to the tutor to figure out how things should be done.

Being clear, pointing out when things go right, helping students understand how their behaviours fit into the tasks of the group – are all essential to building the trust necessary for the group to function smoothly down the line.

Questions Members Often ask Themselves

- Will I be accepted or rejected here?
- How will this group be different from my daily interactions?
- What exactly will these sessions be like?
- What risks will I take in here?
- How am I like other people here? Different?
- Will I feel pressured and pushed to perform in some way?

- How important will I be?
- Who will be the real leaders here? What can be achieved here?

Concerns and Fears

- I'm afraid I'll look stupid.
- Will I tell too much about myself?
- Will others like me?
- What if I find out what I'm really like?
- What if everyone rejects me?
- What if the group attacks me?
- I'm afraid I'll be withdrawn and passive.
- What will happen if I really open up my feeling?
- Will I embarrass myself?
- What if I'm asked to do something I don't want to do?
- What if others can tell I'm afraid and nervous?
- What if I find out things about myself that I can't cope with?

Characteristics of Initial Stage

- Silence and awkwardness.
- High anxiety.
- Impatience to "get the ball rolling".
- Confusion about what everybody is supposed to be doing.
- Storytelling, a tendency to talk about others and focus on people and situations outside of the group.
- Central issue is trust vs. mistrust.
- Testing of each other and the leaders.
- Requests for greater leader involvement.
- Cocktail conversations, safe levels of conversation.
- Vying for informal leadership.

If individual conflicts arise, review them in terms of the task. If there is initially a lack of structure and purpose in the deliberations, impose both in terms of the task. If there are disputes between alternative courses of action, negotiate in terms of the task.

Trust is the key consideration for members in a newly forming group. The tutor helps to build trust by:

- Being clear about task expectations
- Modelling warm personal regard and respect for all group members
- Providing positive feedback when things go well
- Encouraging participation from all group members
- Remaining neutral – not displaying any vested interest in one person over another or in one solution over another
- Accurate listening

The importance of building this trust cannot be overemphasized. The success of the group's willingness to risk in the service of learning will be founded in the amount the trust the group is able to collectively establish. Trust will be drawn upon during the next stages of group development.

The Middle Ground

The middle ground is where things begin to get interesting. Once the group is past its initial anxiety and people start to drop their facades of "best behaviour", the group begins to set its sights on the task. Some predictable conflicts emerge which are, in fact, the gateway to a highly functioning group. The tutor's role is in helping the group navigate the conflicts along the pathway to high performance.

Stage 2: Storming

The next stage, which Tuckman calls **Storming**, is characterized by competition and conflict in the personal-relations dimension and organization in the task-functions dimension. As the group members attempt to organize for the task, conflict inevitably results in their personal relations. Individuals have to bend and mold their feelings, ideas, attitudes, and beliefs to suit the group organization. Because of "fear of exposure" or "fear of failure," there will be an increased desire for structural clarification and commitment. Although conflicts may or may not surface as group issues, they do exist. Questions will arise about who is going to be responsible for what, what the rules are, what the reward system is, and what criteria for evaluation are. These reflect conflicts over leadership, structure, power, and authority. There may be wide swings in members' behavior based on emerging issues of competition and hostilities. Because of the discomfort generated during this stage, some members may remain completely silent while others attempt to dominate.

Tutors' role in "Storming"

Tutors play a vital role in recognizing and naming conflicts as they arise. The evaluation time of the tutorial is an ideal one to surface conflicts, normalize them as necessary to the groups ongoing evolution and helping the group find ways to meeting everyone's needs. "Win-Win" solutions are desired and help the group to continue deepening trust and learning. Skills learned in addressing conflict during this stage may be called upon again.

In the Storming stage, the tutor may need to provide clarification or support to individual members if they are unsure or insecure about their own role within the group. Tutors need to ensure at this stage that nobody is being treated too harshly or unfairly. In order to progress to the next stage, group members must move from a "testing and proving" mentality to a problem-solving mentality. The most important trait in helping groups to move on to the next stage seems to be the ability to listen.

If all goes well, the group will enter its next phase:

Stage 3: Norming

In Tuckman's *Norming* stage, interpersonal relations are characterized by cohesion. Group members are engaged in active acknowledgment of all members' contributions, community building and maintenance, and solving of group issues. Members are willing to change their preconceived ideas or opinions on the basis of facts presented by other members, and they actively ask questions of one another. Leadership is shared, and cliques dissolve. When members begin to know-and identify with-one another, the level of trust in their personal relations contributes to the development of group cohesion. It is during this stage of development (assuming the group gets this far) that people begin to experience a sense of group belonging and a feeling of relief as a result of resolving interpersonal conflicts.

The major task function of stage three is the data flow between group members: They share feelings and ideas, solicit and give feedback to one another, and explore actions related to the task. Creativity is high. If this stage of data flow and cohesion is attained by the group members, their interactions are characterized by openness and sharing of information on both a personal and task level. They feel good about being part of an effective group.

The major drawback of the norming stage is that members may begin to fear the inevitable future breakup of the group; they may resist change of any sort.

Tutor's role in "Norming"

The group will be functioning fairly independently at this point. The tutor needs to stay engaged, tracking group function and offering corrective feedback when necessary. With less active facilitation demands, the expert tutor may be tempted to direct the content of the group's learning. Resist this temptation.

Stage 4: Performing

Not all groups reach this stage, characterized by a state of interdependence and flexibility. Everyone knows each other well enough to be able to work together, and trusts each other enough to allow independent activity. Roles and responsibilities change according to need in an almost seamless way. Group identity, loyalty and morale are all high, and everyone is equally task-orientated and people-orientated. This high degree of comfort means that all the energy of the group can be directed towards the task(s) in hand.

Many work groups live in the comfort of Norming, and are fearful of moving back into Storming, or forward into Performing. This will govern their behaviour towards each other, and especially their reaction to change. Achieving the “performing” stage isn’t necessary for successful PBL learning.

*** A note on the “non-directive” or “too directive” tutor**

The degree to which a tutor becomes explicitly involved in either the task of learning or in the functioning of the group needs to vary with the circumstances. In general, tutor involvement is called for when the group’s confidence or competence feel low. During the groups formation, the tutor needs to take on the majority of responsibility for helping the group build trust, make decisions on how to work together, attend to task and participate in reflecting on group function. As groups form and become more coherent, they are able to take on much more of that responsibility. The art of tutoring involves developing awareness of the groups level and functioning and skills in allowing the group to grow without “abandoning it” (too much non-direction) or without “rescuing” the group when it first encounters difficulty (too much control or directivity).

Reference: Tuckman, B. W. "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups." *Psychological Bulletin*. 1965.

Summary of Tutor Competencies

Convene the group

Be aware of course objectives and have clarity about the tutorial group’s task

Help the group name norms for working together

Facilitate group trust

Have familiarity with group process and be able to accurately diagnose and intervene with a group to help move the to “norming/performing”

Recognize conflict as normal and inevitable and help the group increase its cohesion and effectiveness by successful managing and learning from conflict

Protect group members from being scapegoated.

Give descriptive, explicit positive feedback about desired behaviours

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