UNIVERSITY OF BATH

Inclusive Education Briefing: Small Groups and Tutorials

Overview

Tutorials offer an opportunity to learn more about a student's background, past experiences, learning needs and preferences and, as such, could be part of a broader inclusion strategy. The nature of a small group teaching session means that in certain disciplines the diversity of the student group, and their experiences, can be acknowledged and potentially drawn upon in the teaching of the subject. For some students, articulating their ideas and analysis through spoken discourse is more comfortable than doing these things in writing and for them, such sessions will be an opportunity to demonstrate their learning with confidence.

Nonetheless, some students may feel exposed and anxious in small groups. In this briefing, we consider ways in which to make the small group session as inclusive as possible and suggest methods of anticipating the possible challenges that might arise within this format.

Small Group Sessions and Tutorials: expectations, participation and environment

There are more opportunities for peer interactions in seminars and tutorials and increased opportunities for teacher-student engagement. If expectations and practices are made explicit and students are supported to make incisive spoken contributions, then small group sessions can become more productive for all participants.

Making expectations and practices explicit

Some students may be experiencing small group teaching, particularly tutorials, for the first time. At the start of the semester, it may be helpful to explain how the sessions will operate and what student roles and responsibilities are. Making these practices and expectations explicit will particularly benefit students who are arriving from different educational systems and, potentially, those new to the discipline (for example, a seminar in politics may have slightly different, but unstated 'rules' of operation than a session in literature).

At the start of the semester, students can also help co-construct ground rules for the sessions and this would be an opportunity to address inclusivity explicitly and then to model it during the sessions.

Including student experiences in the curriculum

Building on the previous point, in some disciplines it is appropriate to take a negotiated curriculum approach to seminar teaching. While some topics will no doubt be core and non-negotiable, it may be possible to offer students some degree of choice over what will be discussed in the sessions. This would be another opportunity to be inclusive and engage students in the curriculum design process.

Student Participation in Small Group Sessions

Full student participation can be one of the biggest challenges when teaching small groups. The following suggestions foreground inclusion, but are generally about effective teaching:

- Ensure that all students have an opportunity to contribute. Are there equal opportunities for all students in a seminar or workshop to participate and articulate their views?
- Some students, (for example, those with Asperger's, those working in an additional language or those who have speech impairments) might find speaking in front of a group difficult. Ways of supporting them might include
  - Offering an indication of what types of issues and/or questions might be raised in the session, so that students can undertake some advance preparation. If the ultimate goal is to have students offering confident, spontaneous responses, then this approach could be seen as a sort of scaffold.
  - Using paired discussions in advance of whole group discussions to allow students to speak first with one other student. Sometimes the label 'think, pair, share' is used to describe this type of activity: students are asked to think on their own about an issue for a short while, then discuss in pairs, then share across the group.
  - Rounds – the seminar leader asks for a one sentence response to a question – Such as 'could you identify one thing you learned in the session' or 'what question has this article raised for you?' and go around the group hearing these. Students could be given an opportunity to jot down their response first, perhaps in the early weeks of the semester. This could give those who require it a bit more security (Race, 2007).
  - Buzz groups – get students to break out into small groups with short, timed, manageable tasks. They can record responses on flip chart paper, digital tablet, a white board or similar to share with the rest of the seminar group (Race, 2007). The 'buzziness' of the room can create positive sense of activity, but special provision may need to be made if there are hearing impaired students who might struggle with the acoustics. (See case study 2, below.)

Making spaces within a group discussion for students who contribute less frequently.

With any of the smaller group tasks above, the seminar leader can walk around and ascertain ideas, perspectives, answers that individual students have put forth and then invite them, specifically, to describe those to the larger group. Additionally, sometimes asking a particular student by name what s/he thinks about a topic will enable them to contribute. (This technique may require offering an option of 'passing' if the student does not wish to contribute. Some students appreciate having the 'door' into the discussion 'held open', while others may feel put on the spot.)

Creating an inclusive environment

Small groups and tutorials can be rich and unpredictable learning experiences. They are powerful and compelling spaces in which to discuss, try out ideas and techniques and have educational conversations, and they can also be spaces in which values, worldviews and disciplinary perspectives are interrogated and defended. Preserving the richness of the space while also maintaining an inclusive atmosphere can be a challenge. As mentioned above, acknowledging this potential tension and setting ground rules as a group can help keep sessions productive, lively and inclusive.

Remember working in groups may be a new experience for many students. Take time to consider how groups are formed. For example will it be by student choice, randomly assigned or set by the teacher. Choose the most appropriate approach for the task set and set out clear expectations of what you want the group to achieve.

Examples/case studies/dilemmas

1. How to manage the behaviour of a student who expresses views that are offensive to other members of the group.

    It is important not to let offensive statements go unchecked otherwise the seminar leader may be seen to condone such views. This could offer an opportunity for teaching the difference between robust, academic debate and a personal attack and it can be useful to distinguish between the two in seminars. Such a discussion could also refer back to session ground rules that may have been agreed amongst the group at the start.

    Additionally, it is possible that an offensive statement may have been uttered in ignorance by a student. So, while any such statement should be challenged, particularly in a context of inclusivity, generally care should be taken to educate but not ostracize the speaker.

2. Working with a student who has a hearing impairment. Ben has moderate hearing loss. He uses a hearing aid and he can read lips and knows British Sign Language (BSL). Ben is going to be joining a 2nd year seminar group in politics, and the lecturer, Sarah, has made the following provisions:

    She has spoken with Ben about how to raise the issue with the rest of the group at the start of the semester. He has asked for the room to be arranged so that students' faces are visible when they are speaking so that he can lip read, and that they speak loudly and clearly and ensure that only one person speaks at a time. Sarah is going to arrange the room in a horseshoe formation or circle so that all students can easily see each other. Additionally, she is going to ensure that when small, 'buzz' groups are working that the room acoustics are managed in such a way that Ben can hear his peers. If necessary, a portable hearing induction loop will be used.

    She is also aware that Ben sometimes finds note-taking difficult, because it is not easy to write and read lips at the same time, so she is going to ask that seminar participants take turns to write a summary of the session and share it on Moodle. (For more information on working with students with hearing loss in lectures and seminars, see Davis, n.d.)

Summary checklist and key questions

- Are attempts made to draw all students into the discussion?
- Are spaces 'held open' for students who have made fewer contributions?
- Are materials made available before and after the session in Moodle or similar?
- What provision is made for students who cannot attend the small group session? (For example, as suggested above, could students take turns at writing a summary of the session and posting it online for others to read? This would benefit everyone, particularly those who could not attend. It would also be useful, potentially, to those who struggle with note-taking.)
- How can the different experiences and perspectives within the group be harnessed to enhance the learning for everyone?
- Has the group been asked to establish a collective set of ground rules for discussion at the start of semester?
- Does everyone have the same opportunities? For example, have situations arisen, whereby male students interrupt or speak over female students? Do students get selected for contribution regardless of gender or ethnicity? Is there a range of voices being heard in discussions?
- Small group teaching is frequently undertaken by GTAs, who may be relatively new to teaching. Are they sufficiently supported to address and manage inclusive practices? Is there consistency in this area across an entire programme team? One possible staff development workshop might be built around the OER 'Small group teaching: inclusive curriculum design' session from ORIC, 2011 (details below.)
- Are students encouraged to continue conversations begun in the seminar or tutorial in Moodle or an alternative online environment? This might enable those who are quieter in face to face sessions to contribute more fully, and build their confidence in discussion ideas with peers.

Summary

Small group teaching and tutorials offer excellent opportunities to engage more directly with students and for students to interact with their peers. These sessions can, in themselves, be part of an inclusion strategy, and they can offer many students, particularly those with confident verbal skills, an opportunity to thrive. However, sessions often have to be carefully and sensitively managed to ensure that all students feel able and supported to contribute fully. The use of negotiated ground rules can aid the smooth running of small groups. Similarly the negotiated learning agreements can aid the effectiveness of groupwork.

By valuing the range of student experiences and viewing the breadth of perspectives as an asset, teachers can use an inclusive approach to its full advantage in small group settings.

References

Davis, K.. (n.d.) 'Information for staff working with deaf or hearing impaired students'. Leicester. http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ssds/accessability/staff/supporting-students-with-disabilities/information-for-staff-working-with-deaf-or-hearing-impaired-students

ORIC (2011) 'Small group teaching: inclusive curriculum design'. http://www.slideshare.net/oricproject/oric-small-group-teaching

Race, P. (2006) 'Making small group teaching work' from The Lecturer's Toolkit. 'London: Routledge. http://phil-race.co.uk/download/small-groups-handout-from-toolkit/

Checklist

Programme designers
- Small group teaching can offer the flexibility and more personal interactions that make it a component of an inclusive learning strategy. Do students have regular opportunities for small group/tutorial teaching across a programme of study?
- Is the rationale for small group/tutorial teaching communicated to academics and students in programme documentation?
- Are there opportunities for those teaching small group classes within the programme to discuss how to make the sessions as inclusive as possible?
- Are there sufficient resources available (sufficient number of appropriate rooms? movable and adjustable furniture? availability of assistive technologies if appropriate) to enable teaching of small groups?

Academics
- Have the expectations of how students will prepare for and participate in small groups been made explicit?
- Are inclusive practices modelled for students? These might include negotiating ground rules for small group sessions; explicitly drawing all students into discussions; ensuring that all students have the same opportunities to participate in discussions?
- Do students have opportunities to continue conversations outside the small group session, such using the forums in Moodle?
- Are the diverse experiences and perspectives of the cohort drawn upon to enhance learning for everyone?

Students
- Do students contribute to and apply negotiated ground rules for the small group sessions?
- Does everyone in the group or tutorial respect the contributions of others and approach discussion from an inclusive perspective?
- Do students value the potential for a range of perspectives and experiences to be voiced in small group sessions?
- Are all peers supported to contribute within small groups and in collaborative sub-groups?
- Do peers ensure that everyone in the group is encouraged to offer ideas?
- Do students value diversity when working with peers in small groups?
- Are students willing to take turns to share notes with the group?