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Tips for small group teaching

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This article forms part of a series of articles published in *In Practice*, aimed at providing veterinary staff and students with tips and tools to enhance the teaching moments which occur on a daily basis in practice. Previous articles introduced the different ways in which people learn, and gave tips on fitting teaching into a busy working day and tips for making feedback effective. This article draws from evidence in the literature and the authors' experience, and will focus on ideas for optimising small group teaching situations, which may equally apply to small group formats with colleagues (e.g. sharing new techniques from a recent CPD course) and clients (e.g. puppy parties or smallholder seminars) as well as students and veterinary nurses. Specific techniques for teaching practical skills will be discussed in a later article in this series.

Why is small group teaching important?

Small group teaching sessions can vary hugely in their formats, and in the number of participants involved. Compared to the relatively impersonal experience of a traditional lecture format, where the speaker addresses a large audience with minimal interaction, small group formats facilitate and encourage interaction both amongst the participants and between the session leader and participants. This helps foster a collaborative learning environment, and can enable participants to learn from one another as well as from the session leader (Race, 2006). If an appropriate learning environment is created, small group teaching sessions can provide a forum in which people feel safe to ask questions, thus promoting discussion and debate, clarification of misunderstandings, and enabling problem solving by participants (Steinert, 1996). If pitched appropriately and delivered successfully, small group sessions can also provide an excellent tool for generating positive publicity and helping to bond clients to your practice.

Planning your small group session

1. **Key content:** Jot down the key points that are important to get across during your session, and design your session around them, being careful to include a manageable number for participants who may be new to the subject. If appropriate, these can be turned into "learning outcomes" (or statements of what the learner should be able to do by the end of your session) e.g. By the end of this session you will be able to successfully give your puppy a worming tablet.
2. **Participants:** Decide on the optimal number of participants; this will often be influenced by the room availability and the topic that you are covering. Also consider whether you want to divide participants into smaller subgroups within your session (e.g. groups of 3 to 6 can work well for generating discussion). It's also worth considering the range of participants who may be attending, and whether you're happy for them to form subgroups 'naturally' or would prefer to do this strategically in advance e.g. to provide a range of experience and knowledge within a group, or to 'separate' two strong personalities.
3. **Background knowledge:** Consider what the background level of knowledge is likely to be amongst your participants, and whether you need to recap any key topics at the start of your session to ensure understanding amongst everyone.

4. **Timings:** How much time do you have available for your session, or is this flexible? Jot down an outline 'session plan' which includes rough timings for each section and importantly includes plenty of time for tea/coffee/refreshment breaks!
5. **Format:** As we discussed in article 1 of this series, your participants are likely to vary in their individual preferences for how they learn best, and also in the length of their concentration spans. Try to build your session around a variety of presentation types (e.g. short presentation, demonstrations, discussions, annotating images etc), and break your session down into 'manageable chunks' of 30 minutes or less to aid concentration.

Starting a small group teaching session (see Box 1)

We've found the '**LOGIN**' acronym helpful when designing and starting off small group teaching sessions:

1. **Layout of room:** Many practices will have significant limitations on their options for room layout. If possible, select an appropriate sized room that has flexible furniture and configuration options. Arrive in plenty of time before the start of your session and try to arrange furniture in either a horseshoe (if using a screen or whiteboard) or circle configuration, ideally around a table, so that you can make eye contact with all participants throughout the session. Try to sit at the same level as the participants within the horseshoe or circle (rather than at the front of the room) in order to encourage discussion and also to reduce the impression of a teacher/student divide. "Cafeteria-style" seating arrangements around several tables can also work well, facilitating small group discussion. If you're using visual aids such as Powerpoint slides a 'wireless presenter' mouse can be very useful to facilitate this layout, and can be purchased for less than £20.
2. **Overview of session:** provide participants with a brief overview of the session, ideally both verbally and in writing, so that they know what to expect and can also set up 'mental folders' in their brains for material that you will be covering. It is also very helpful to provide a 'hook' at the start of your session which explicitly states how the content of your session will be relevant and useful to participants.
3. **Ground rules:** Establish the ground rules and expectations in collaboration with the participants at the start of the session e.g. "please turn mobile phones to silent mode", "we'd like all participants to get involved in the session and to offer their opinions", "no question is a silly question tonight – please feel free to ask anything that you are unsure about"
4. **Icebreaker:** A carefully chosen icebreaker activity at the start of the session can help to introduce participants to each other, relax them, and encourage them to 'talk out loud' early in the session. However, icebreakers are not everybody's cup of tea, so select one that you personally feel comfortable with which may range from a short, light-hearted group activity (there are lots of ideas online) to simply asking participants to state their name and one thing that they hope to get out of the session. Also, don't forget to introduce yourself, and give a brief, relevant overview of your background to make it clear why you are leading the session.
5. **Names:** Using participants' names can help to set a relaxed and friendly tone for your session, and can also be a very helpful tool for drawing quieter participants into small group discussions

e.g. “Amy, what methods have you tried for training Barney to walk on the lead?”. A sheet of blank labels and a dark marker pen can be very useful if you don’t know the names of all participants in your session. You can ask them to stick them in an easily visible place near their shoulder.

During the session

1. Questioning techniques: Try to anticipate areas that participants might struggle with, and plan relevant questions in advance that will draw out key issues or concepts. Learners may need varying amounts of mental processing time before coming up with an answer to your question, so it is recommended that you count to five before expecting an answer (the “5-second rule” - it can feel like a very long time!). After five seconds, if no-one responds to your question consider rephrasing it, or take your question back a level in complexity. Acknowledging incorrect responses to questions in a non-threatening manner can also be important, so phrases such as “That would be true if...” can be helpful, for example “That would be true if we were feeding an adult dog, but in this case we’re thinking about feeding a young puppy”.
2. Engaging quiet or shy participants: Setting the mood at the start of the session, and defining ground-rules and expectations, can help to encourage contributions from all participants. Other techniques which can help encourage contributions from quiet or shy participants include using their names to draw them into discussions, and also asking participants to discuss an issue or question with the person next to them for one minute before opening it to the whole group for responses. The latter technique can give hesitant participants reassurance that they’re ‘on the right tracks’ before volunteering an answer in front of the whole group.
3. Managing ‘dominant’ or interrupting participants: If you’re aware that certain participants have (or think they have!) considerable experience or knowledge about your subject you might want to include a comment when you define the ground-rules at the start of your session (see examples in Box 2). Careful use of participant’s names and targeted comments may also help (see Box 2). If these techniques fail to manage the situation then you may need to adopt more direct tactics such as handing the dominant individual a marker pen and asking them to scribe on the board for you; this removes them from the circle and from direct eye contact with you. Alternatively, using humour tactfully or having a quiet word with the individual (perhaps introducing them to the 5-second rule) can help, but may need to be judged carefully (see Box 2).

Closing a small group teaching session

Timekeeping is important, so you may want to nominate a colleague to give you a subtle sign if the timings in your session plan are not on track. Try to allow at least 5 minutes for drawing your session to a close, and if necessary you may need to decide to sacrifice some of your content ‘on the hoof’ rather than missing out on drawing the session to an appropriate close.

Techniques to consider within this closing period include summarising key points, restating learning objectives, inviting questions, and using a short quiz format.

If you have follow up sessions planned it’s also helpful to make links to these explicit e.g. “Tonight we’ve covered grooming your puppy and checking it’s eyes, nose, teeth and ears. Keep practising these techniques with them over the next week, and next time we’ll discuss preventive treatments such as wormers and flea control and teach you how to give your puppy a worming tablet.”

It can also be very helpful to ask participants to complete a short evaluation form about your session so that you can use their feedback to modify future sessions if necessary.

Box 1

Starting off your small group session - LOGIN acronym

L: Layout of room

O: Overview

G: Ground-rules

I: Icebreaker

N: Names

Box 2

Examples of phrases that could be used with different types of participants

Type of behaviour demonstrated by participant	Example responses
Not contributing to discussions (quiet, shy or disinterested)	<p>“Ok, so we’ve discussed a couple of ideas for socialising your puppy with children. Lucy, what methods have you tried with Blue and how did you get on with them?”</p> <p>“I’d like you all to spend the next minute discussing possible reasons for castrating lambs with the person beside you, and then we’ll come back to the larger group and I’ll ask each pair for one idea.”</p>
Dominates discussions	<p><i>At start of session:</i> “I realise a couple of you have a lot of experience with sheep already, so please bear with me if I cover areas that you’re already familiar with. My job tonight is to ensure that everybody’s level of knowledge and skill gets to a point where they’re comfortable assisting with an uncomplicated lambing”.</p> <p>“You’ve obviously had a lot of experience in this area Steve, so thanks for sharing that with us. I’d also like to hear what methods everyone else in the group has seen or used”</p>
Interrupts other participants	<p>“Mark hasn’t finished making his point yet Claire, so just hold that thought and I’ll come to you next”</p> <p><i>If humour is appropriate to situation:</i> “OK Helen,</p>

	we've heard a lot from you already, so it's time to give everyone else a chance now – it's 50p in the charity box for every interruption you make from now on"
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References

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Steinert, Y. (1996), 'Twelve tips for effective small-group teaching in the health professions', *Medical Teacher*, 18, 3, pp 203-207

Further reading

Ramani, S. and Leinster, S. (2008) 'AMEE Guide no 34: Teaching in the clinical environment', *Medical Teacher*, 30, pp 347-364