Adventures in Teaching
Virtual Teaching - Facilitation Pearls in Small Group Settings

It is important to create small group learning environments that are inclusive, engaging, and foster effective learning. Here are some strategies for facilitating small groups in a virtual environment and dealing with common challenges.

Scenario A: Responding to an Incorrect Answer and Maintaining a Safe Learning Space

It is important for teachers and learners to reflect on how we respond when a student provides an answer that is incorrect. This is especially true in a virtual teaching environment where non-verbal cues are harder to read and trust is harder to develop and easier to lose. Learners do not want to be put on the spot or make a mistake. Think about the assumptions you've made when a student gives the wrong answer and how you've responded in such cases.

Setting the Space

Set up the learning environment as a safe space to foster productive struggle. Let students know that it is ok to take risks, and that incorrect or incomplete answers are a learning opportunity. Gently correcting misconceptions or errors is a useful teaching technique when done in a sensitive and respectful manner.

Strategies to Use

- Highlight the part of the answer which is correct, or in which context that answer might have been correct. Ask the group when this answer might be correct, and why it's not entirely correct in this case.
- Encourage learners to think out loud to see if the student or group recognizes the error.
- Discuss the correct answer and why the incorrect answer is wrong. Often, there are common misconceptions and it is helpful to highlight why they are so common. Remember to thank the learner for raising misconceptions and creating this learning opportunity.

Scenario B: Silence – Learners are Hesitant to Engage

Existing curricular materials and plans may need to be adapted for a virtual teaching environment. What works virtually may be different than what worked face-to-face. Consider these strategies to encourage learner participation.

Addressing Expectations for Engagement

- **Get to know** members of the group; have and use their names.
- **Eliminate distractions**, your own and the learners.

- Create and maintain a **safe learning space** where it's OK to make mistakes; we can all learn from these moments. Be comfortable as a teacher to make mistakes with the new technology. Remember to **be kind** to yourself and others.
- **Build trust** by validating student responses and gently correcting misconceptions.
- Discuss when and how **questions** will be managed (e.g. using the chat box, hands up in the participant field, encouraging learners to unmute and "jump in."). Provide examples of questions students should ask, "Could you go over that again?", "Can you provide a different example?" Ask them to label their questions and comments as, "curious, confused, or confident."
- Discuss how **communication** will occur and how one might signal that they'd like to speak. At first, group members might interrupt each other without the typical visual cues. With time, groups tend to get a sense of the rhythm of the group. Provide opportunities for individuals or groups to participate, while avoiding putting anyone on the spot. For example, "go around the room" or ask the student who just answered a question to nominate the next to speak. Ask those interested in pediatrics, "What if this was a baby…" and those interested in geriatrics, "What if this was a 78 yo man…"

Techniques to Address Silence

Wait	There is a time delay between asking a question and the participants hearing it. It may take a few seconds to unmute. Participants can't easily recognize if someone is ready to jump in as they would in person, so they might wait a bit longer before interrupting. Participants may be hesitant and afraid to speak up in a virtual environment.
Restate the question	Sometimes the way we ask questions is not clear, too vague, or maybe it is not a question that the learners can easily answer. Consider the use of Guided Discussion Questions. For example, start with why? or how?, build on existing knowledge, or provide a clue.
Cold call	Invite a student to answer a question. It is important to consider how we do this while creating a safe space; there is potential for unintended consequences and miscommunication in a virtual teaching environment. Consider setting up a guided discussion to start, versus vague questioning. For example, ask "So, what do we do now? " or "OK, maybe [name] could get us started…" NOTE: Consider your tone, the cadence of your voice, and non-verbal communication (gestures) and the impact they can have on creating and fostering safe space and accurately communicating your intent.
Encourage learners to communicate using different functions	Encourage the students to use the chat box, annotate function, offer reactions, and raise their hands.
Break up the group	Incorporate smaller breakout rooms where learners may feel more comfortable speaking.

Learner engagement and participation is a shared responsibility between the teacher and learners. **Consider reflecting with the group** at the end of the teaching session and ask, "How did we do?" or "What can we do differently next time to make the session more engaging?"

References: (1) Morgan N. Can you hear me? How to connect with people in a virtual world. (2018) Harvard Business School Publishing. Boston, USA. (2) Fosslien L, Duffy M. How to Combat Zoom Fatigue. Harvard Business Review April 29, 2020. (3) Johnson A. Excellent! Online Teaching. 2013. (4) Adapting Quickly to Teaching Online. By Bill Schiano. Harvard Business Publishing March 19, 2020 1. (5) How to get people (students) to actually participate in virtual meetings (classes). By Justin Hale and Joseph Grenny, with commentary from Luch Swedberg. March 17, 2020 Harvard Business Publishing. https://hbsp.harvard.edu/inspiring-minds/how-to-get-people-students-to-actually-participate-in-virtual-meetings-classes