

3.1.1 Introduction to facilitating small group learning



In this module, you will learn how to prepare and implement facilitation strategies for small group learning interventions. These facilitation guidelines can be used in combination with other educational interventions to deliver integrated CE sessions.

Key Terms:

Group Dynamics: The behavior and attitude patterns involved when learners interact with each other [20].

Mind Map: A creative and logical method of note-taking and note-making that maps out your ideas [21].

Why facilitate **small group learning**?



Small group learning is an advantageous education intervention for CE sessions. Through promoting a collaborative and **team-oriented** environment, learners develop skills in problem-solving, team building, decision making, and critical thinking [20,22]. Learners engaged in small group learning activities constructively work together to attain a mutual objective and build their own understanding in conjunction with peers [20]. The main goal of small group learning is to have a **learner-driven session** rather than an instructor-led one, however, the facilitator plays a crucial role in the success of a small group learning intervention by fostering a supportive environment to encourage group engagement and collaboration [19,20]. Effective **facilitation** strategies are an indicator of productive CE sessions [20].



Case scenario

An organization has been developing a collaborative care model for patients with both mental and physical health challenges. This model is a new way of working for the organization and poses several significant challenges for the health professions team. Katrina, a CE leader, has observed the need for educational support in achieving their clinic's new goals. In Katrina's planning for a CE session, several committee members have suggested that they include small group learning to improve collaborative goal setting and increase completion rates of patient-reported outcome measures. These areas are essential for implementing a collaborative care model.



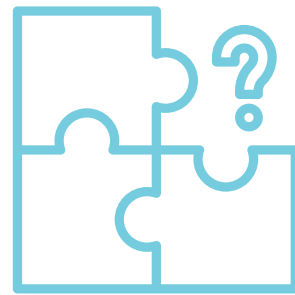
As Katrina is planning her small group learning session, she encourages facilitators to consider the following questions:

1	What are the important principles and considerations for small group learning experiences you should consider? How comfortable are you with this type of learning format?
2	What steps are necessary to create a safe, inclusive, and collaborative space for learners? How confident are you in achieving this?
3	How would you manage group dynamics and prompt discussion?
4	How would you identify and mitigate barriers to participation? Could you manage unexpected events that come up?

Key enablers



Targeted
planning



Question
effectively

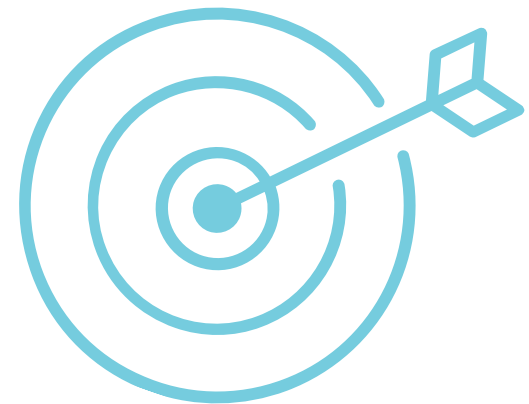


Balanced
facilitation

Targeted **planning**

Planning is crucial to the success of a small group learning activity. It is sometimes seen as the most important role for facilitators. During planning, facilitators should outline learning objectives and have a plan to foster a safe and productive learning environment [23-25]. Additionally, factors such as time, space, and recruiting faculty should be considered in the planning phase [23].

Learning objectives that guide a small group learning intervention should be clear, measurable, and identify a behavior or attitude change [24].

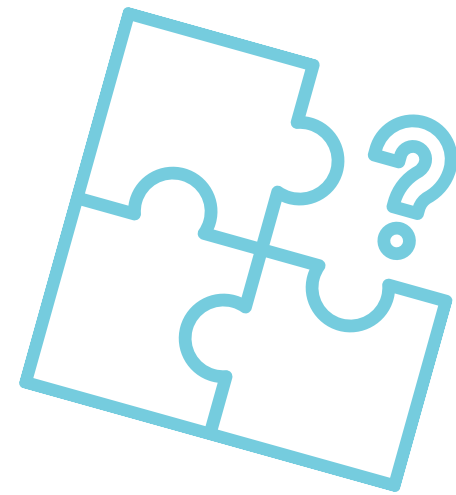


Question effectively

Questions allow the learners to evaluate their understanding of key concepts [24].

The facilitators play a pivotal role by asking thoughtful questions, actively listening, and responding positively to learners. Questioning allows facilitators to understand the learner's needs, monitor progress, and provide support [20,24].

Questioning is crucial in establishing a meaningful learning experience.



Balanced facilitation

Effective facilitation is a balance between encouraging learners to lead the conversation and understanding when it is appropriate for the facilitator to provide guidance [20,25-26].

Effective planning through targeted learning objectives and mind mapping can help facilitators balance when to guide and when to listen. This can help learners achieve the desired mastery of the material and support gaps in knowledge that arise during group discussions [25].

Note: See [page 62](#) for a definition of mind mapping.



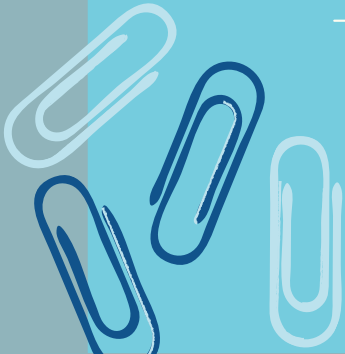
Formula for success

- 1 Identify facilitators, select time, space, and delivery modality for the CE session.
- 2 Facilitators should create a small group to focus on individualized learning needs and encourage active learning.
- 3 Facilitators should ensure group dynamics that foster inclusion, fairness, and critical reflection on constructive feedback.
- 4 Facilitators should prompt discussion, understand learners' progress, stimulate curiosity, sustain and initiate conversation among learners, and outline follow-up action plans.



Facilitating small group learning

3.1.2 FRAMING THE PROBLEM AND PREPARATION





Planning your **small group discussion**



Just as it is important for learners to arrive in a small group well prepared, it is equally important for the facilitator(s) to have properly planned and anticipated ways to engage learners in discussion [19-20,22-29].



Consider creating group sizes between 4 and 5 learners in a virtual setting or 6 to 8 learners in an in-person setting. These group sizes allow the facilitator to focus on individual learning needs, tailor content, and encourage active participation [19-20,23-24,29].



Mind mapping can be used as an informal technique to organize a facilitator's discussion points for a small group session and during the learning session to summarize key points [21].

Mind map: A teaching resource

Mind mapping



Mind mapping is a creative and logical method of note-taking and note-making that maps out your ideas [21]. Facilitators can use it as a teaching resource to:

- Prepare and review CE sessions
- Prepare questions
- Facilitate small group discussions

Prepare and review CE sessions

- Summarize information from different sources into key topics and keywords [21].
- Map them to identify how they are interrelated [21].

Prepare questions

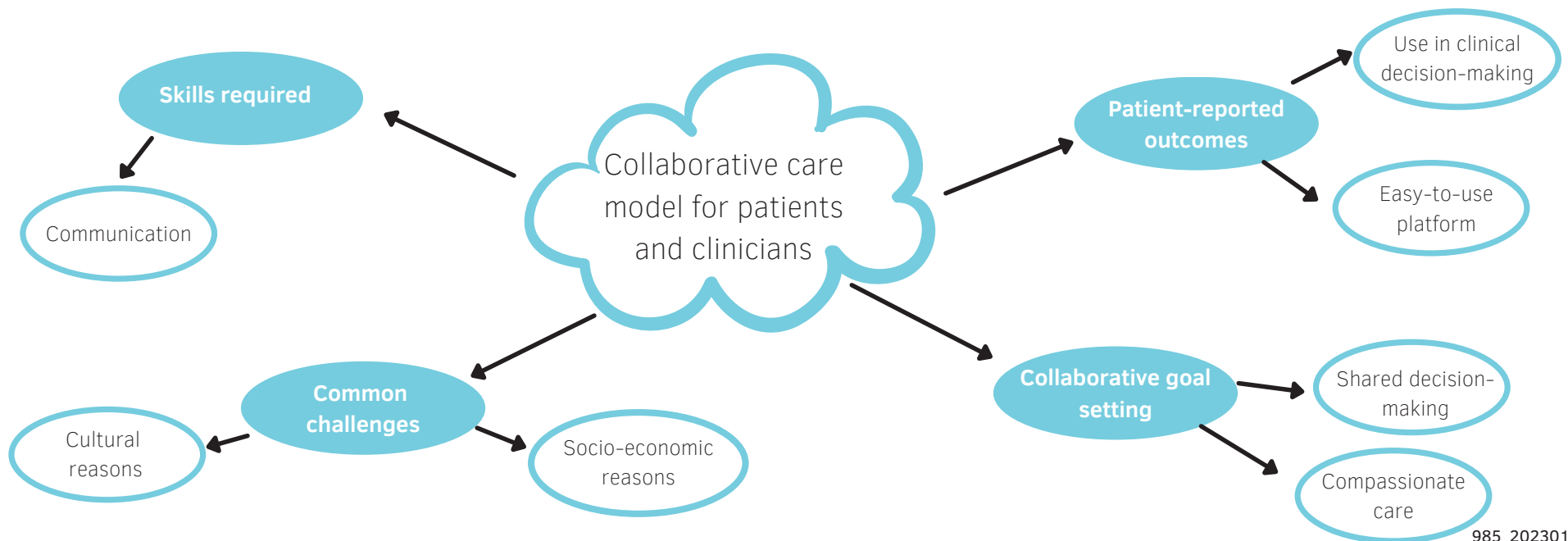
- Write the session topic down in the center of the page and follow up with subsequent sub-topics or questions around the topic [21].
- Re-draw or tidy up the map and group similar topics together [21].
- Use this method to identify key questions for discussion [21].

Facilitate small group discussions

- Summarize key points and action items discussed during a learning session [21].
- Visually depict how the discussion evolved [21].

How to create a mind map

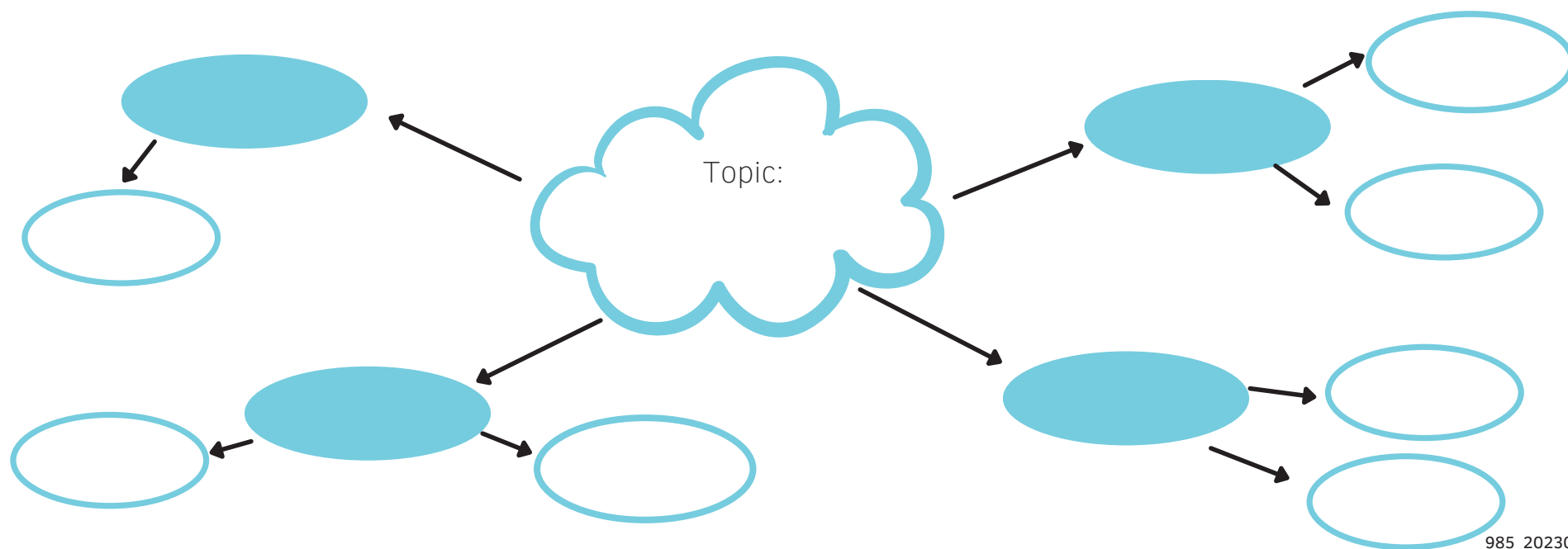
For Katrina's CE session on the novel collaborative care model at her organization, she creates the following mind map to structure the group's discussion:



HOW TO PREPARE

Practice: Create a mind map

Mind maps can be a useful tool in planning out your session's discussion and identifying key concepts that you want learners to take away from the CE session. Use the following template to create a mind map for your CE session.



Creating an **inclusive, safe, and supportive** space

An important step in planning your CE session is to consider how the facilitator will foster an **inclusive, safe, and supportive environment**. Creating a space where learners can be themselves and feel respected and not judged is necessary to encourage engagement amongst learners. Integrating strategies for **inclusion** within your CE sessions provide opportunities for learners to have meaningful participation in discussions.

For developing a CE session on the novel collaborative care model, Katrina considers strategies for creating an inclusive space to ensure that learners are comfortable, actively engaged, and participatory. The next page explores strategies Katrina can use to foster a safe learning environment.



Strategies for creating an inclusive, safe, and supportive space

CONDUCT INTRODUCTIONS



Allow time at the beginning of the CE session for brief group introductions. This is an important step to allow the group to become familiar with each other [20].

SET GROUND RULES



Creating and monitoring expectations throughout the session can promote shared responsibility and respect [20].

BALANCE LEARNER TYPES



When possible, ensure groups represent an equal balance of learner types (dominant, enthusiastic, quiet) [20].

WEAR NAME TAGS AND USE TENT CARDS



Having everyone wear name tags allows facilitators to address learners by their names and builds rapport with the learners [20].

AVOID USE OF FORMAL TITLES



Facilitators should avoid the use of titles to promote an inclusive space and reduce potential disengagement due to hierarchy [20].

ROLE MODEL APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR



As a facilitator, demonstrate good interpersonal and communication skills. Hold yourself accountable to the same ground rules as the learners [20].

MONITOR WHO IS CONTRIBUTING



Involve every learner in the discussion by moving the conversation away from dominant individuals while encouraging less dominant, quiet individuals to contribute [20].

INTERVENE WHEN NECESSARY



Encourage learners to ask and answer each other's questions before intervening or providing guidance [20].

PROVIDE POSITIVE FEEDBACK



Positive reinforcement of constructive contributions promotes a supportive environment and encourages learners to continue participating [18].

Example of ground rules

Ground rules help learners understand acceptable behaviors during the CE intervention. They make the role of the learner clear in order to stimulate the best environment for learners [30]. If time permits, it can be a useful exercise to engage the group in creating the ground rules. As Katrina is designing the CE session, she identifies the following ground rules that will be introduced at the beginning of the small group learning session:

1 Be on time

2 Be respectful of others' ideas and opinions

3 Be empathetic and considerate of others

4 Be involved in the discussion

5 Be patient and wait for your turn to share your ideas

6 Be objective and share only factual information

7 Avoid posting or sharing inappropriate materials

8 Ensure confidentiality

9 Be careful with humor and sarcasm

10 Critique ideas, not people

Framing the problem and preparation checklist

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT WHEN PREPARING FACILITATION OF SMALL GROUP LEARNING

- Check to confirm that the content is relevant and suitable for attendees.
- Develop targeted learning objectives that are concise, measurable, and identify a specific behavior change.
- Create group sizes between 4 and 5 (virtual environment) learners or 6 to 8 (in-person) learners.
- Plan out discussion points using a mind map prior to the small group learning intervention.
- Consider ground rules that you want to incorporate into your CE intervention.
- Consider how to create a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment.
- If you are conducting the intervention virtually, refer to best practices for virtual delivery on page 45.

The background features a light blue folder with a darker blue tab on the left. In the bottom left corner, there are four paper clips: two dark blue and two light blue. On the right side, there is a large orange pencil with a black eraser and a sharp lead tip.

Facilitating small group learning

3.1.3 IMPLEMENTATION GUIDELINES

How to facilitate **small group learning**

1

Briefing



Introduce concepts and learning objectives [20]

2

Group dynamics



Foster a safe, inclusive, and supportive space [20]

3

Leading activities



Prompt discussion and gauge learner progress [20]

4

Debriefing



Close session and deliver knowledge assessment [20]

1



Briefing checklist for small group learning

- Set the stage for the session and activity.
- Facilitate introductions and icebreakers.
- Outline the objectives and provide overview of the session.
- Review ground rules and expectations of behavior.

2



Importance of maintaining group dynamics

- 1** Understanding and maintaining group dynamics are important skills for a facilitator. A facilitator should start the CE intervention by outlining guidelines and ground rules that will help create a positive group learning environment. The facilitator should then continue monitoring the group to ensure mutual respect is being upheld and there is equal participation among group members. Facilitators need to be aware of and then mitigate disagreements if they are escalated [26,31].
- 2** Tuckman's stages of small group development explain how group dynamics evolve through the duration of a small group learning intervention. Facilitators play an important role in guiding each stage and can use Tuckman's stages to structure their facilitation technique as well as manage group dynamics [20,32-33].

2



How to guide learners through Tuckman's stages of small group development

HOW TO IMPLEMENT

TUCKMAN'S STAGE	FACILITATOR ROLE
<p>1 FORMING The initial formation of the group and getting acquainted [20,32-33].</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead introductions and icebreakers, outline objectives, and provide an overview for the session [20,32-33]. • Facilitator needs to be directive to provide structure for the team and clarify expectations [20,32-33].
<p>2 STORMING Group actively performs the task; however, some conflict may emerge [20,32-33].</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator coaches the learners by helping them focus on goals and expectations, managing the process and conflict, generating ideas, and explaining decisions [20,32-33].
<p>3 NORMING Develop consensus and begin to focus on team goals [20,32-33].</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator provides encouragement, helps to build consensus and gives feedback to the group [20,32-33].
<p>4 PERFORMING The team is mature, well functioning, and focused on problem-solving [20,32-33].</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator has a non-interfering role because tasks and objectives are delegated among the group [20,32-33]. • Facilitator provides alternate perspectives and uses questioning techniques to engage learners' critical thinking [20,32-33].
<p>5 ADJOURNING Group successfully worked together and documented results [20,32-33].</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator engages learners in the reflection process by asking questions and providing feedback to the learner group [20,32-33]. • Facilitator is receptive to feedback from the learner group and uses feedback to adjust facilitation approach in future sessions [20,32-33].

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2



Role of facilitator during small group learning

Consider the following tasks when conducting a small group learning intervention to maintain group dynamics and encourage the flow of discussion:



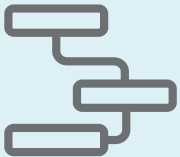
Prepare learning materials

- Support the activities and learning process [20].
- Outline guidelines and expectations [20,25].



Summarize discussion

- Explain and provide guidance when necessary [20].
- Highlight the group's progress and identify key points that were discussed [25].



Provide a structure

- Keep the group on task and focused on the topic [25].
- Ensure the session runs on time by monitoring discussion and tabling discussions that run long [19].



Develop learners' thinking

- Prompt learners with open-ended questions [20,25].
- Encourage learners to move beyond memory recall and mobilize critical thinking skills [20,25].



Engage learners in discussion

- Ensure active participation of learners [19-20,25].
- Monitor and support learners' progress [20,25].



Safe and supportive space

- Maintain group dynamics by upholding guidelines [19-20].
- Take steps to ensure learners feel comfortable and safe participating [19-20].

3



Facilitator techniques to encourage small group discussions



Seating arrangements

When providing large activities, avoid using large desks, which can inhibit interaction among learners [16-17]. A circular arrangement can promote eye contact among learners and improve engagement [20,25].



Snowball groups

Learners form pairs and discuss a topic, then increase group size to four learners to discuss the same topic [16-17]. This technique increases the comfort of learners by starting off in a smaller pair [20,25].



Cross-over groups

Useful in larger groups and if the topic has multi-facets. In the first stage, subgroups discuss one facet [16-17]. Then in stage 2, the subgroups are reformed so that each new subgroup contains representatives from all the stage 1 groups [20,25].



Write/Pair/Share

When posed with a question, learners formulate their thinking in writing before engaging in a discussion with a partner. The pair then shares their ideas with the group [20,25].



Buzz groups

Brief discussions in small groups where learners talk among themselves. The facilitator monitors, drops by and listens but does not actively participate in the discussion [20,25].



Role play

Group members act out a scenario. This technique allows group members to directly apply content [16-17]. It allows for real-time feedback and for group members to develop a sense of self-efficacy [20,25].

3



Importance of questioning for small group discussions

Aim of questioning



Understand the needs of learners and provide adequate support [20,25].



Stimulate curiosity; sustain and initiate conversation among learners [20,25].

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Capture in-depth responses, allowing the facilitator to ascertain the learners' **comprehension** of topic, **problem-solving ability**, and thinking skills [20,25].

CLOSED-ENDED QUESTIONS

Yield a specific answer to the question, enabling the facilitator to **check the knowledge** of learners but not their level of understanding [20,25].

3



Questioning technique for facilitators

Use the following questioning technique to prompt discussion and gauge learner progress. Silence can feel uncomfortable but should be welcomed as it allows learners time to process the question, think, and formulate a response [20]. With this approach, avoid immediately rephrasing the question or answering the question yourself [20].



POSE

Pose an open-ended question to the group; e.g.,
What challenges of the collaborative care model for patients and clinicians should we consider?



PAUSE

Pause, allowing learners to reflect, and formulate a response.



POSITIVE FEEDBACK

Provide a positive response to encourage engagement.



DISCUSS

Engage learners to discuss the question with the group or in pairs.



Debrief checklist for small group learning

Consider
integrating with
Reflective
Learning
Intervention 3

- Summarize key points from discussion, unresolved questions, and important clinical links that have been made throughout the session.
- Provide feedback to learners and encourage reflection among learners.
- Be receptive to facilitation feedback from learners and adapt facilitation techniques for subsequent sessions.
- Thank learners for their contributions.

Implementation checklist

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT WHEN FACILITATING SMALL GROUP LEARNING

- Identify learning objectives, expectations, and activities.
- Modify your involvement as a facilitator based on the group's progression through Tuckman's 5 Stages of small group development.
- Provide learners with support, materials, and structure to guide them through the CE intervention.
- Utilize different activities and questioning techniques to encourage discussion.
- Encourage discussion and support differing perspectives; however, mitigate conflicts within groups if they escalate.



Facilitating small group learning

3.1.4 KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Tips for **effective delivery** of small group learning

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

	In-person delivery	Virtual delivery
Develop ground rules to foster a safe environment for learning and engagement [20,26-27].	✓	✓
Outline your expectations of the learner and have a plan to foster a safe and productive learning environment [20,26-27].	✓	✓
Communicate agenda with timelines, learning objectives, and learning materials [20,26-27].	✓	✓
Communicate technical requirements and set-up.		✓
Test video and audio quality as this can impact the level of interactivity within the group.		✓
Ensure an active and engaging learning environment for all participants [20,26-27].	✓	✓

Challenges of facilitating small group learning sessions

LACK OF A LEARNER-CENTRIC DISCUSSION

In some cases, the group is overly reliant on the facilitator to answer questions and lead the discussion [19]. The facilitator should encourage the group to work through the questions collaboratively and ask prompting questions to help guide the group's thinking [19].

MINIMAL PARTICIPATION

Small group learning is dependent on active participation to sustain discussion; however, poor preparation and disengagement can hinder critical discussion [19]. Facilitators should try engaging learners by asking direct questions to learners who look disengaged [19].

INEFFECTIVE FACILITATOR QUESTIONING

If the facilitator's questions do not rise above the level of recall, this will impact the learner's development of skills to critically analyze and problem-solve clinical issues [19]. Poor questioning techniques could also impact the flow of discussion [19].



Mitigating challenges in small group learning

Consider
integrating with
Case-Based
Learning

Intervention 2

Learners unprepared

A short knowledge test at the beginning of the session ensures the accountability of the group [20].

Learners are reluctant to participate

Facilitators can share their clinical experience to draw connections to the topic where appropriate [23]. Divide groups into pairs for the task and positively reinforce contributions [27].

Individual learners monopolize discussion

Summarize the main points discussed and divert the discussion to others by addressing the learners by their names. Provide groups with different tasks and roles to ensure equal involvement [20].

Heated discussions

Healthy discussion and differing opinions are good in order to have critical analysis; however, the facilitator should intervene when disagreements escalate [20].

Sample: Planning canvas for facilitators

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

What techniques and activities will you use to encourage discussion?

How will you work through conflicts that arise in groups?

What challenges do you anticipate and how will you mitigate them?

What strategies can you use to create an inclusive, safe and supportive space for the learners?

What group size will you choose?

How will you support groups through Tuckman's Stages of group development?