Online Small Group Teaching and Learning Recommendations

Online Small Group Teaching and Learning Oversight Group:

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Overview

This guide is to help anyone involved with small group teaching online, in terms of both design and delivery. Suggestions could be applied to any group considered 'small' by those involved. We recommend starting with the curriculum, with careful thought about synchronous and asynchronous delivery options, based on sound pedagogical principles. The tips below will help you to enhance the small group online learning experience, in conjunction with the FMBH Online/Blended Delivery Strategy 20-21.

1. Promote a sense of belonging to The University of Manchester:

▪ Recent literature suggests that when considering a move to online teaching, fostering a sense of belongingness (for students, and educators) is important [1] and associated with increased engagement, academic success and mental well-being, plus student retention [2, 3].

▪ Materials with consistency of branding can help and mean that content (no matter who prepared it) is familiar and recognisable as part of a course, and importantly, part of The University of Manchester. This can help with belongingness. There are detailed resources available on Staffnet which are a good starting point for designing materials.

2. To help build connections with staff:

▪ Produce (branded) introduction videos from the programme/course/unit leads and teams, where possible, to include a clear objective guide (roadmap) and intended learning outcomes.

▪ Term dates, attendance/participation requirements for small group work and submission deadlines should be easily accessible to students from the start.

▪ Provide clear staff contact lists ideally before the start of the course.

▪ Be clear about timescales for communication (agreed in advance) for both the synchronous and asynchronous elements of your teaching, such as what tool/s you'll use, where/if communications will be archived, expected timeframes for replies, how often educators will communicate and what the expectation is in terms of communication within the small group.

▪ Provide 'Group Ground Rules', rules of engagement or etiquette and ask for group agreement, ideally in advance.

▪ Remember to be polite. Thank students for their participation and try to address them by name (in synchronous or asynchronous small groups).

3. To help students connect with each other:

- During the initial stages group members need to have enough opportunities to get to know each other.

    - Use ice breakers/introductions/team building activities.
    - Start on time and encourage everyone to speak or contribute early on to 'find their voice'.
    - Consider creating a discussion board to 'Introduce Yourself'. This should help students to identify peers with similar interests and who are on the same journey with them.

- Actively promote group collaboration. Consider community-building events, including more social/ informal meet-ups that could be for cohorts on specific courses (e.g. revisions groups, debates), encourage students to communicate with you about ideas they might have.

- Consider asking groups to establish their own identity e.g. ask them to choose a name or develop their team logo if they will be working together over several sessions.

- For quiet students, use private messaging or try to find time outside the teaching to find out barriers or if that student is struggling. Find way to engage them, such as setting a task or a role within the group, with their agreement.

4. To design optimal and inclusive online content for small groups:

- Carefully consider your policy on recording of sessions/materials – please consult University and Faculty guidelines and [FMBH Online/Blended Delivery Strategy 20-21](#) and specifically about recordings the updated [Guidance for Obtaining Consent for Recording Student Participation in Teaching Activities](#).

- Synchronous sessions need to be carefully timetabled to avoid other teaching, consider total screen-time for students (and tutors), and time-zone differences.

- Optimise group time and inclusivity by providing asynchronous tasks ahead of session. Synchronous time should be used to share and discuss thoughts/findings and obtain feedback from peer or staff. Consider if/how/what materials will be available if a student is unable to attend a synchronous component.

- If asynchronous learning is completed before the synchronous element (such as in the flipped classroom) ensure that the synchronous material explicitly builds on the asynchronous content.

- "Chunk" your session – design content so that different activities break things up e.g. break out rooms, videos, polls, quizzes.

- Provide suggested points for an 'eye breaks' or to stand up to prevent long periods of sitting.

- If transferring content to asynchronous delivery, try not to overload students with content and add materials 'just because you can'.

- For asynchronous small groups, consider the use of blogs which permit articles, reflections, diary entries, images, links to websites, audio, or video clips. Bear in mind copyright rules.

- Make sure teaching and support is accessible and inclusive – the NADP (National Association of Disability Practitioners) has a document for [ensuring your online webinars are inclusive](#).

5. To facilitate learning in online small groups:

- Try to keep it simple! Identify appropriate and recommended software and become proficient.

- Make use of advice/support/training and supporting programs, and attend appropriate University, Faculty, or programme training to ensure you, and all staff delivering content, are confident.

- Engage with communities of practice e.g. Yammer groups such as the Teaching and Learning Online Network (TALON) and FBMH eLearning Community *(use your university email address and join by using 'discover more groups')*, or @FBMHeLearning on Twitter.

Synchronous Delivery

- Have a dry-run of your session with some colleagues/student volunteers.
- Ensure you have a quiet teaching space, no windows behind you, a firm surface for your webcam and a good internet connection.
- Open the session 5-15 minutes early to allow everyone to meet and join in good time.
- Remind participants of the ground rules, which should usually include all students and tutors having their video and microphones turned on throughout the session – bearing in mind that some students may need their cameras off for disability or safeguarding reasons.
- Consider having someone (student volunteer or colleague) to monitor the chat function/raise questions with you, as it can be difficult to facilitate the group, run the session to time and see any questions, particularly if you are sharing your screen.

Asynchronous Delivery

- Build into the content regular checks of engagement and knowledge acquisition, such as quizzes, questions, blogs or reflections.
- Ideally have time for staff to comment on what has been done by students, or think of other ways to increase staff-student interaction e.g. could you produce a 'response' video or 'FAQ' section with answers to questions which have come up from students as they have worked through the asynchronous materials?
- For asynchronous interactions (e.g. discussion boards, shared documents) ask students to use clear titles so that they are easily searchable
- You can encourage peer-to-peer collaboration by agreeing that the tutor will only respond to queries on the discussion board after a student member has attempted an answer (this could be the person posing the question or another student)
- Make use of tools that include options for students to 'react' (e.g. to like another student post) or respond to one another.

6. To support students:

- Encourage students to complete the Library's Essential Skills for Online Learning course.

- If you are worried about a student in the online environment, share your concerns as you would if you were concerned about a student in the physical small group environment.

- Ensure you have read DASS support plans and are alert to students' requirements. Ensure that live transcriptions are enabled at the start of your session, as this is not automatic on all platforms.

- Embed and sign-post to resources from the Library and student support services (contacts to be made available to staff and students at a programme level).

7. To end the online small group work:

- Keep to the agreed timings – students/tutors may have other teaching online and breaks between sessions are important.

- Revisit Learning Outcomes for everyone, particularly important if breakout rooms or similar have been used for synchronous sessions.

- Think about how/if you will be available after the session if a student has any concerns or questions – e.g. how long will you be available at the end, would you prefer students contact you by email or could you use a breakout room to meet with students individually if needed?

- Always thank students for their participation.

- Gather feedback (as appropriate), review any evaluation and reflect on it.

References

1. Peacock, S., et al., *An Exploration Into the Importance of a Sense of Belonging for Online Learners.* The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, 2020. **21**: p. 18-35.
2. Peacock, S. and J. Cowan, *Promoting sense of belonging in online learning communities of inquiry in accredited courses.* Online Learning Journal, 2019. **23**(2): p. 67-81.
3. Vivekananda-Schmidt, P. and J. Sandars, *Belongingness and its implications for undergraduate health professions education: a scoping review.* Education for Primary Care, 2018. **29**(5): p. 268-275.

Consider preparing your students for their small group learning online by providing them with some preparatory information.

The following are tips which you might want to adapt and share with students

To Help You Learn in Small Groups Online

- **Prepare**

  - Eat and drink, take a comfort break before a synchronous session
  - Ensure you have completed any asynchronous work which is required before a synchronous session to make the most of the time with your facilitator – prepare any questions you have.
  - Think about your workspace – have you somewhere that you can concentrate? Are you happy to share what will be in your 'background' space if your webcam and microphone are on?
  - Technology – check your internet connection is optimised (is anyone else on the connection streaming video, audio or gaming and could they pause for your session?).
  - Check your 'username' which may be visible to others online is suitable and identifies you e.g. your preferred first name and surname would be best.

- **Present yourself appropriately for synchronous teaching sessions**

  - Camera – firm surface with good lighting – don't sit with a window behind you, switch your camera on to aid communication. When everyone does it, it makes a big difference.
  - Attire – get dressed and be prepared to have your top half on camera so that your hand gestures and face are in view.
  - Join a few minutes early if you can, chat freely and test your technology.
  - Sound – be aware of background noises. Can everyone hear you? Can you hear everyone?

- **Being 'Present' and engaging with online learning**

  - Headphones can help you to focus for both synchronous and asynchronous group work.
  - Making notes can help you focus on the topic. Think about how you will make notes during a synchronous session and how you will keep track of your asynchronous learning. The Library has resources which might help, e.g. note making.
  - Stay away from distractions like social media and email.
  - Try to keep on top of asynchronous work and regularly 'check in' with your group by commenting on their contributions.

- **Be a good online team member!**
  - Follow the established ground rules, for example around eating and drinking.
  - Ask questions.
  - Follow-up in online spaces, work with other students.
  - Make connections with your teachers and peers, get to know each other.
  - Respect opinions and think about posts or written replies, and the wording you use.

- **Ask for help if you need it**
  - If you are struggling, let your tutor know, and don't hesitate to ask for any support you may need.
  - There are resources available to you, such as those from the Library, Digital Wellbeing Resources and other support services and teams, who will be ready to help within your programme or course – don't be afraid to ask.