

Small group facilitation guide

This guide has been created for learners from across health professions who are engaging in continuing professional learning that is focused on co-facilitating small group discussions in a virtual space. The guide may also have a broader applicability. If it applies to your learning, please use it. Questions or comments? Email: Sanne Kaas-Mason at sanne.kaasmason@mail.utoronto.ca

Facilitation can be described as “the process of helping groups, or individuals to learn, find solutions, or reach consensus without imposing or dictating an outcome. Facilitation works to empower individuals or groups to learn for themselves or find their own answers to problems”¹.

Indicators of facilitation include:

- Setting a climate for learning
- Drawing in participants, prompting discussion
- Encouraging, acknowledging, or reinforcing learner contributions

Before your facilitation day:

- Connect with your co-facilitator sooner rather than later.
 - When you meet, invest some time getting to know each other. Developing relationships is important to building trust and key to learning.
 - Discuss the assigned article, your plan for the session and develop your guiding questions/prompts/activities to engage the participants.
 - At times, the topic of the session will be broader than the issues considered by the assigned article. You will want to link one to the other: use the perspectives and/or issues raised by the article(s) to structure the broader conversation. Therefore, when you prepare, ask yourselves: are we setting the participants up for a conversation that discusses the issues raised in the article(s) in relation to the topic and to people’s own experiences? Or, are we preparing for a discussion around the broader topic only?
- Connect with your session leads two weeks before session (optional)
- Post a reminder to the other participants to begin reading one week prior to your session. If you have it ready, post a comment about what participants should keep in mind when they read the article.

On the day - setting a climate for learning:

- To engage your colleagues into the conversation, consider *not* using a presentation tool (e.g. PowerPoint, Prezi, Visme, Slidebean, etc.). A presentation tool is an effective tool when teaching because it structures the conversation. However, it contains the conversation a bit too effectively for when you are facilitating.
 - If you do decide that it is relevant to your session, consider using it as little as possible and take it down when you are not using it.
- Set the tone: when you introduce yourself, consider *how* you would like to introduce yourself. For example:
 - If you begin your session by *credentializing* yourself, you may contribute to a hierarchical environment where performance of professional status is the standard.

¹ Evans, S. M., Ward, C., & Reeves, S. (2017). An exploration of teaching presence in online interprofessional education facilitation. *Medical Teacher*, 39(7), 773–779. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2017.1297531>

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- Instead, if you begin your session by considering your relationship to the content, to your colleagues in the group and aim for a practice that is informed by *epistemic humility* (the consideration that others may know as much or more about the topic or content than you), you will be more likely to contribute to an environment where open communication and curiosity are key.
- The development of trust begins with you: prepare questions that show trust in your colleagues, that they have read and reflected on the article(s) before the session. This will also help you become comfortable with the inevitable silence that exists as people ponder a question and formulate an answer. If you trust them to have prepared for the session and give them time to consider the prompts you give them, your colleagues will reward you with thoughtful, reflective comments and answers.
- Be you: your facilitation of the session is not intended to be a performance. If you are nervous, be nervous. If you are uncertain, be uncertain. If you are confident, be confident. If you wish, share authentically about your own story (beware of your own limits, and do not share beyond what you are comfortable with.)

On the day - drawing in participants, prompting discussion:

- Less is more: notice how much you are talking, and ask yourself: am I *teaching* right now? Facilitation is the practice of creating a learning environment with room for self-exploration and self-reflection. Your job is to listen, notice what is being said and guide the conversation so that it is useful to the learning needs of the group.
- When you are asked a direct question that you soooo very much wish to address, consider the *biting your tongue* technique, and saying to the group: "What do the rest of you think?" or "Would anyone like to take that on?"
- To help your learning draw connections, consider the following types of questions:
 - A *forecasting* question might look as follows: E.g. "When you consider integrating what you are learning today into your future practice, what do you predict this experience will be like for you? In what way does your future practice look different? Or not?"
 - A *recalling and organizing* question might look as follows: E.g. "1) If you were to draw a hypothetical map or tell us a story of what you already know about this topic, what would that look like? and 2) Now include what you would like to know about this topic in the future. How does the map, or story change?"
 - A *sequencing* question might look as follows: "When you consider what we are learning here in light of your future practice, what is the next step for you to engage in, in order to move towards it? What do you think you need to do or *know* before you can move to that next step? How does/does this experience today support a move to this next step?"
 - An *open ended* question allows for a range of possible answers and allows your colleagues to make connections to their own teaching and learning practice, to their professional fields and to their role within society.
- Consider asking your learners to engage with multiple forms of literacy for interaction or reflection:
 - (*some of these will not be possible for Journal Club, but you may wish to consider them elsewhere*): debate, logs, brainstorming, thought questions, rhetorical questions, quiet thinking time, movement, pen pals, poems, drawings, writing summaries, photography, lyrics, cartoons or think-pair-share.
- Engage your colleagues:

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- Use zoom tools such as polls, breakout groups or whiteboard, or external tools like: ideaboardz, mentimeter, lucidspark, jamboard, kahoots, padlet, shared google docs, etc.
- If you would like to add a zoom poll or specific breakout groups, let be sure to set it up beforehand.

On the day - encouraging, acknowledging, or reinforcing learner contributions:

- If you wish, do a bit of health professions education (HPE) community building. Ask:
 - Who are the authors? What is their background? Which institutions do they come from? Why does this matter? Does this matter? Which journal is our article published in? Why does this matter?
- Notice what is being said and acknowledge the speakers. Refer back to a previously mentioned point, where applicable.
- A note on participation: aim to help all learners draw connections to the content, while balancing the reality that everyone has different preferences for learning, and different demands on their time. Trust that your colleagues will come as prepared as they are able to and allow for someone to participate more or less if that is what they need to do on that day. Remember: listening is also participation.
- Leave time for a debrief. Debriefing is a time that allows for the learners to consolidate their learning. Models of debrief will often, but not always, have questions that relate to three²³ phases:
 - *Description*: this is where you get learners to describe what they just experienced with an emphasis of developing a *shared mental model* (if you are facilitating a group debrief) of the learning intervention. Open ended questions work well.
 - E.g. “So, what happened today?” or “How did it go?”
 - *Analysis*: where you get the learners to make connections between the discussion that just occurred and learning objectives (if developed), principles, or to practice *in general*.
 - E.g. “How might the content of today’s discussion apply in practice settings? Educational or clinical”
 - *Application*: where you get learners to make connections to their own practice.
 - E.g. “How does some of the content we have discussed here resonate with your own experience? As a learner and/or as an educator? If it does not resonate, share how so or why it does not resonate”
 - The debrief does not have to occur at the end of the discussion. You can structure the entire session using the debrief model, posing questions that fall into the *description* category first, followed by questions that are *analytical*, and then finish with questions that speak to the *application* of the content, concepts and/or problems discussed in the learning intervention.
- Last, but not least: you have limited time. It will go by fast. Have a timeline and be ready to be flexible: One of the parts of facilitation that can be difficult to navigate is that you do not have the control you may wish to have (over the timeline or the direction of the conversation), and yet, you have the responsibility for making it meaningful and useful to your learners. And, to finish within the allotted time.

² Steinwachs, B. (1992). How to Facilitate a Debriefing. *Simulation & Gaming*, 23(2), 186–195.

³ Jaye, P., Thomas, L., & Reedy, G. (2015). “The Diamond”: a structure for simulation debrief. *The Clinical Teacher*, 12(3), 171–175. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tct.12300>