

The Use of Small Group Methods in Higher Education

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Introduction

The task of this paper is to discuss the use of small group methods in teaching and learning in higher education. Small group methods have been in use for a very long time. Actually small group methods are older than the school system and higher education itself. For example the Socratic method, that is, the question and answer method was already in vogue by the time of the philosopher teacher, Socrates who was condemned to death in 399 B. C. for using that method.

In this paper small group method is defined; then the small group methods which include the seminar, group discussion, case study, socratic, simulations, and the like are discussed; the challenges of the small group methods are identified; their advantages are examined; the Socratic method is used to demonstrate how a small group method can be used in teaching; and in conclusion it is suggested that small group methods should be used because they fulfil the educative purposes.

Definition of the small group methods

Small group methods refers to a teaching strategy involving up to 30 students where student participation is expected (Ramsden,1992:156). The key issues in this definition are two:

limited numbers and student participation. Whereas many educators regard some limited numbers of class size to be the ideal teachable size, it is evidently true that higher education today is characterised by teaching large classes. Even the teachable number of students is relative because to a professor who is supervising ten research students can categorise his as a large class. This means small group methods

must be considered against the background of the prodigious numbers of students enrolling in institutions of higher learning and the learning task.

Small class size and effective teaching.

The question concerning the relationship between teaching and class size has occupied the minds of educators since the 1920s (Okebukola, 2000: 5.5) Okebukola points out that small classes are more effective if the instructional goals involve higher level cognitive skills including application, analysis and synthesis. They provide for greater contact between the students and the lecturers. This may be most needed by students with low motivation, little knowledge of the subject matter, and those who experience difficulty grasping conceptual material. In small classes students develop positive attitude towards the instructional goals being pursued. (Okebukola, 2000: 5.5).

In his comparison of the lecturer's views on teaching larger and smaller classes, Okebukola noted seven advantages teaching smaller classes has over teaching larger classes:

- (a) Students receive more individual attention.
- (b) There is flexibility to vary teaching and learning activities.
- (c) It may be possible to involve the whole class at once in a learning activity.
- (d) Group work can be employed effectively and flexibly.
- (e) Better quality assessment and feedback to students are possible.
- (f) There are more activities for active learning
- (g) It is possible for lectures to have extra input in the students' learning.

In view of all the above analysis, it is valid to assert that small classes enable the lecturers to carry out their teaching roles most effectively.

The **Small Group Methods**

(a) *The Seminar*

This is a teaching method which aims at an in-depth exploration of a specialised topic. Usually a seminar class has less than 20 learners who meet periodically in a given semester. The lecturer acts only as an expert moderator. Learners read texts on a particular topic. They write notes in a report form which they share with their fellow learners before the scheduled meeting, normally some days in advance. The discussion focuses on the contentions and conclusions raised by the participants. All this means that a topic should be identified and its objective also clarified. The facilitator should know the topic very well.

Through this method, learners achieve two things: one, they are able to examine a topic thoroughly; and two, they develop skills or abilities to synthesise, criticise, analyse, and to communicate.

The general difficulties encountered in the use of the seminar method are: weak prior organisation; inadequate literature on seminar method sometimes makes lecturers in higher education to shun the method. A successful seminar requires active and interested participation on the part of the learners. Otherwise negative attitude towards the seminar method can easily render the learning activity ineffective. The seminar also calls for availability of learning resources and minimal distraction.

To deal with the above difficulties, it is necessary to make a careful and detailed preparation before hand. During the session, a reward system has to be used in order to encourage the learners to participate.

(b) *The case study method*

This method encourages participants to analyse situations they might encounter and to determine how they would respond. A case

This method presents the learners with situations that are very much related to the ones they know or will know. In other words discover the relationship between various situations and the effect of different actions on those situations. Secondly, learners develop a sense of how to respond in certain situations. Thirdly, as the method leads to decisions like those which would be made in real life, the learner is able to seek all the necessary information about the issue at hand. Fourthly, the method is a good mechanism for introducing information and developing problem-solving skills.

(d) Discussion Method

Learners using this method engage in a conversation on a specific topic. Usually students will know the tasks they are to handle well ahead of the discussion time. In this way, students are able to gather the necessary information. The method also encourages critical and informed questioning from the students.

Discussion conducted in the

(e) *Tutorials.*

A tutorial is a study meeting between a university tutor and one or more students. Tutorials in many institutions of higher learning are used to supplement lectures or independent projects. In some universities tutorials are conducted by the junior members like teaching assistants in the department. It should be noted however, in cases especially in specialised fields, tutoring is carried by a senior member.

A successful tutorial necessitates both the tutor and learner to be aware of the study material to be discussed. In many instances the tutorial will be guided by the Learner's questions, or performance in the previous sessions.

The advantage of a tutorial is that it gives the learners the chance to go over the matter they might have missed in the main lecture. Secondly, it provides them with assistance when they need it, which thing is quite re-assuring to the learner. Thirdly, the interaction between the learners and the students is strengthened. Fourthly, the tutor, through tutorial sessions is able to know the learners better and can therefore evaluate them more adequately.

(f) *The Socratic Method*

This method is also commonly known as question and answer.

It is described as Socratic because of the Greek philosopher, Socrates, Tc(the) Tj0 86l st Tj0 86led

topic or issue before the questions are posed. Secondly, the lecturer should ensure that the learner is aware that it is a learning session but not a moment of disapproval. Thirdly, the questions should be sequenced in such a way that the topic is handled systematically.

The advantages of the Socratic method are: it enables the learners to contribute to their learning situation; it is exciting when learners give right responses to the questions; the interaction between the learner and the professor is enhanced; and are able to identify the key issues on a particular topic.

Demonstration of the use of the Socratic method.

The topic for demonstration is:

"The fact that the lecture method has been blamed for so much and used for so much, nobody can doubt its role teaching" Discuss.

In reference to the above topic, a demonstration is offered on how the professor would teach university students to answer academic questions. Instead of the professor telling the students that they should plan their essays, have introductions, major parts of the essay, and a conclusion, the professor asks questions and through their answers, the students discover the appropriate ways of answering written academic questions.

For the above topic, the following questions could be asked:

- i. How would you approach that question?
- ii. How would you plan your essay?
- iii. What would you include in the introduction?
- iv. How would you arrange your essay?
- v. How would you list the key issues or points?
- vi. How would you write the paragraphs?
- vii. How would you conclude?
- viii. Would you use reference or bibliography?
- ix. Why and how would you use endnotes and footnotes?

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The challenges of the small group methods.

There are some challenges which arise out of the use of small group methods. Some of the challenges include the following:

(a) Some students prefer the lecture method only because this is where they just listen and take notes.

(b) Small group methods can be time consuming right from the time of preparation on the part of the lecturer, to getting students involved.

(c) Students often do not prepare for sessions which thing ~~makes~~ discussion impossible. This is demoralising to both the professor and other learners.

(d) It is possible for one student to dominate the discussion and block it.

(e) Students normally want to be given solutions to problems rather discussing them, or leaving them to discover for themselves.

(f) The lecturers may be comfortable giving lectures and not conducting discussions or meeting.

(g) Sometimes students may not be ready to work with fellow students because they do not regard them as experts or for some other personal reasons.

(h) Often students do not take discussions seriously and may not even write any notes down.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the use of small group methods in higher education. The small group methods are many but only a few have been discussed in this paper. It is often thought that small group methods are better than large group methods like lectures and symposia. In this paper it has been noted that even small group methods can be a disaster if not well prepared and if the students are not

ready to be involved fully in their learning activity.

Some several small group methods have been defined, the process of using them effectively explained, and advantages identified. After enumerating the challenges that small group methods pose, the use of the Socratic method has been demonstrated. Small group methods do lead to effective learning. However, the first emphasis should be on the learning goals not on methods. Once the learning goal is clarified then the appropriate method can be identified and used.

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