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## Teaching Notes: Facilitating Breakout Sessions

### Background

By definition (1), small group work encompasses seminars, tutorials, and break-out sessions. Continuing Medical Education frequently utilizes break-out sessions to better provide access to a variety of experts that meet the diverse interests/needs of delegates. Breakout sessions can range from 8 to more than 50 delegates and can range from skill development to informal discussions to lectures. Breakout sessions provide an opportunity for experts to develop a presentation that goes beyond lecturing. Learning together in small groups provides a more comfortable opportunity for delegates to talk, discuss and question a subject. Discussion and debate in the safe environment of a small group allows delegates to examine, develop, and change their understandings and beliefs, and develop their practice (4). Small group work encourages active, higher-order learning. (1-3).

### Facilitating breakout sessions

Delegates are independent adults with unique backgrounds. In many cases, the delegates that attend a course or conference come from many backgrounds including, family physicians, specialists, nurses and nurse practitioners, pharmacists, and other allied health professionals. One of the most critical steps to ensure a successful breakout session (besides preparation) is to know the background of the delegates in attendance at your breakout session. You can find that information from the course brochure.

Develop learning objectives at the higher cognitive levels that describe the 3-5 key points that you would like the delegates to take away from your presentation. (7) Develop an outline of the structure of your presentation within the presentation timelines and consider how you might encourage active participation of the delegates.



### Characteristics of effective breakouts (12)

- Objectives are clear
- All contributions are received positively
- One person speaks at a time
- Start and finish on time

### What you must know at the start

Well-planned sessions will almost run themselves (1). Manage the session by planning and careful time-tracking. Introduce your proposed schedule and be strict about time-keeping. Make learning goals and objectives explicit at the outset

#### **Learner needs**

Assess learners' prior knowledge at the start of breakout session and be prepared to adjust your plan for the breakout if you discover your audience's background is significantly different than from what you planned.

#### **Your needs**

Familiarize yourself with the course program, your presentation and activities, the learning objectives, and locate references for your session. Utilize the course chair or educational consultant for any help. Consider any physical resources you may want to have available and organize these ahead of time; would note cards or a flip chart be useful, for example?

**Group needs**

Groups are defined as collections of people who can all see and respond to one another (1), so, if possible, arrange chairs to best support your session's activities. Your task is to build a safe learning environment that allows delegates to participate; begin with introductions and ground rules for your session, facilitating an atmosphere for open exchange of ideas and opinions. Express your enthusiasm – it's contagious! Observe group dynamics and encourage interaction using effective questioning techniques and counting to ten before answering any of your own questions (5).

**Large group sessions**

Large group sessions of 30 or more delegates will often require a presentation. Human attention spans vary between 12 and 20 minutes (6;7;8;9) so introduce different delivery techniques and delegate activities to maintain interest. Consider directing attention to handouts, audiovisuals or short video clips; poll the audience with a show of hands; ask delegates to get together briefly in pairs or small groups to undertake a task - frame a question, answer a question, solve a problem, make a comparison – then poll the room or check the answer with a few groups to check for understanding before moving on.

**Small group sessions**

Small group sessions are an opportunity for active learning. Having a relevant problem to solve is the initial motivation for adults to learn. (10) Bring something (such as an ECG strip, an x-ray, a video) that will trigger a discussion and form the foundation of your session. Or develop activities or tasks the group will accomplish, and be ready to break up larger groups into subsets if necessary. Get everybody involved. Make delegates responsible for identifying areas of uncertainty. Act as a knowledge resource. Intermittently, draw the group together and summarize on the board or flip chart, highlighting what is most important, pointing out progress, and moving the group ahead. Help learners to incorporate their new knowledge by drawing explicit links with how this knowledge can improve their practice.

**Clinical Skill Development**

Clinical skill development can occur in breakout sessions, ranging from a single skill (casting) to a complex simulation scenario. Ideally, skills are best developed in stages. First the demonstration occurs

with no talking. Then the demonstration is repeated and explained. Finally the delegates can attempt the skill (11). If resources are unavailable, a number of techniques can be used to solidify the skill – the delegates can talk the demonstrator through the procedure, one delegate can volunteer to work through the skill with the demonstrator, or the delegates can build a checklist for performing the skill.

**Interprofessional group sessions**

More and more, courses are being offered with the intent of improving health care delivery through interprofessional teams. The main aims of this work is to break down the strong hierarchical nature of the healthcare field, to better understand the roles of the various healthcare professionals, and to learn how to work effectively and efficiently in teams. These sessions require an inclusive topic or activity as well as superb facilitation to ensure that everyone's input is valued and the variety of learning needs and levels are accommodated (11).

**At the end of the small group session**

Consider asking a group member to reflect on what has been achieved, which questions remain, and what needs further clarification? Help delegates make a commitment to change.

Continuing Medical Education collects delegate evaluations and you will be provided with their feedback on your presentation about one month after the course.

***Enjoy your teaching!***

For further information or confidential no-charge teaching consultations, contact us:

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