How Might We:

Design good practice in small group teaching?

Contents

Overview

This framework provides an example for designing small group learning activities to:

- create an engaging, inclusive learning environment

- promote active learning through collaborative, team-based learning activities

- offer flexibility so that educators can adapt it to their needs

Student voice

Throughout the learning activity students can share feedback anonymously to ask questions or raise problems. The session is also designed to be responsive to student feedback, enabling the session tutor to adjust their session in accordance with student needs.

How might we...

This approach is structured into three phases: pre-session (activities in preparation for the small group learning activity), in-session (interventions during the learning activity), and post-session (activities to follow, conclude and lead into further learning or assessment).

Learning Experience (LX) Design approach

This approach draws on the Conversational Framework (Laurillard 2002) to design a cohesive learning experience to utilise six learning activity archetypes: Acquire, Collaborate, Discuss, Practice, Produce, Investigate.

This approach also indicates where digital technologies can enhance the learning experience, particularly to ensure that it is accessible and flexible.

Example Learning Experience Design outline

In this session, students will develop new knowledge, apply it in a collaborative setting, and reflect on their learning for further study, professional development, or assessment.

Pre-session (2-5 hours of learning)

Overview

Provides a purpose and plan for the session, indicating what students will need to go, what they get out of it, and what happens afterwards

Share your view

Provide students with a core question, topic, or idea central to the subject at hand to spark their interest, this might be a key theoretical issue ("Should we conserve nature?"), a key challenge ("How do we design cities to promote healthy living?") or technical problem(s) ("What would your approach be to X problem(s)?"

Students share their response to this prompt asynchronously either in MS Teams or a discussion forum for others to see and respond, the session tutor provides responses to students as well

Developing your knowledge

Student access core reading with a scaffolded introduction from the module tutor that contextualises

Your collaborative task

Students access a briefing the illustrates the core collaborative task for the live session – for example, in the live session groups of students will work together

on a set problem or case study to develop a solution

In preparation for this activity, students must investigate or research a given issue to contribute to the collaborative work – for example, a particular nation's climate crisis risk and response

Students share their findings with others students asynchronously for feedback, using a rubric or framework to respond to one another; reflecting on this feedback, students refine their findings in readiness for the live session

Question box

Throughout the module, students have the option to post (anonymously) a question or problem they would like feedback on from the session tutor, this could be picked up asynchronously or as part of the live session

- Digital education:
- Microsoft Teams
- Minerva Ultra

In-session (1.5 hours of learning)

Welcome and recap (15 mins)

- Session tutor provides overview, plan, and purpose of session
- Icebreaker: session tutor revisit the prompt at the beginning of the module, brings out responses that triangulate range of views from students, prompting further discussion

Collaborative activity (1 hour inc 15 min break)

- This is the core learning activity for the session
- In small groups (5-6 depending on student numbers, complexity of task) students contribute their pre-work to the set problem – for example, students use a PESTLE framework to analyse the strategic environment of a business, each group member looking at a different dimension drawing on findings from their pre-session work
- Students pull together their findings into a short summary or narrative to share with the rest of the class for further feedback
- The session tutor facilitates discussion with students, providing feedback on students' findings and interweaving responses from others

Reflection, summary, and next steps (15 mins)

- Tutor recaps on the discussion, highlighting any interesting findings, challenges or experiences, then provides a summary of next steps for the session
- Tutor revisits the Question Box and responds to any pertinent questions or problems

Post-session (2-5 hours of learning)

Extend your learning

- The module tutor provides a summary of the live session discussion and further reading or other learning activities to extend students' knowledge

Check your understanding/Peer assessment activity

- Formative assessment activity, students complete a quiz that covers material from the session providing feedback on where to learn more to improve understanding or how to extend their knowledge; tutor can see cohort progress on formative quiz to gauge class confidence with subject matter to inform further sessions
- Formative activity, students refine their collaborative task and own an individual element of it, submit this to other students form formative feedback and discussion, again tutor can participate in discussion and gauge class confidence in subject

Your portfolio

- After completing the live session and formative activity, students turn their attention to a portfolio activity or other form of reflection
- Students reflect on the learning process and record their outputs from the asynchronous learning activities

Digital education

- PebblePad E-portfolio

Practical tips for running an engaging small group session:

These three practical steps will help to build an engaged online learning community through your presence as a teacher:

- Expectations: Set expectations for your own and your students' participation.
- Validation: Ensure students feel that their contributions are valid.
- Feedback: Gain feedback on students' progress and their feelings about their study.

Let's take a look at each one in detail:

1. Set expectations for your own and your students' participation

Setting clear expectations will gain the trust of your students to ensure that they remain engaged in their learning. Below are practical tips you could apply to either live or asynchronous activities to set expectations for both teachers and students:

Teachers

State the time period that students can expect their teacher to be present

While asynchronous activities do not require everyone to be active at the same time, you can set a timeline for their engagement – for example, you will be active in the forum for a week. For live sessions, make it clear how and when you will participate in breakout sessions.

Explain the level of engagement students can expect of the teacher

Will you reply to each message, or read messages and post a general summary in response to interesting points? Will you provide feedback or ask probing questions?

Students

State the purpose of the discussion activity

What can students hope to learn from the activity? Will outputs from the discussion feed into other activities or assessments?

Explain the steps in the task or the nature their contribution to the discussion

Make it clear exactly what students need to do to contribute effectively to the discussion, include

numbered steps if necessary. This is not the same as giving them the answer – like a good exam question, an engaging forum activity or live groupwork exercise will be free from ambiguity.

Set the parameters for the contribution

Are students contributing a snapshot opinion or a considered analysis? Should they appeal to their reading or other sources? Provide a word count or a set amount of time for students to spend on an activity to avoid them spending too much effort time on the activity. For example: 'Spend around 10 minutes formulating your answer' or: 'Aim to write around 100 words to express your view'.

Establish the level and nature of students' dialogue

How will students be in dialogue with one another? Ask students to respond to at least two of their peers to provide feedback or commentary on a posting to help build dialogue. Providing two or three prompts to guide their response will scaffold more meaningful responses.

All

Agree a code of practice or rules of engagement

Agree with your students a shared code of practice or rules of engagement to govern appropriate behavior. Having students participate in developing this will give them greater buy-in. This may be an induction activity that takes place at a programme level. Think about how you will share and develop this as the semester progresses.

2. Ensure students feel that their contributions are valid

You will certainly hope your students dedicate time and effort to the tasks that you set them. They will likely expect you to reciprocate the same. If you do not acknowledge or validate students' contributions, you may imply that the activities are not worth the effort.

In small modules or small group discussions it may be possible to respond to individual students directly in a way that feels like a tutorial. But replying to each comment in a forum or responding to each student in a webinar will quickly become unmanageable as the group size increases.

Below are techniques you can use to validate student contributions that don't rely on unsustainable levels of teacher contact:

Acknowledge contributions selectively and meaningfully

Identify student comments in forums or make a note to pick points in live discussion that present the most value to the learning experience. This could be a critical insight that has not been recognized, a novel example that demonstrates a key issue or correcting an error. Explain why you are picking it out, what's interesting about it and how it contributes to all students' learning.

Interweave points made by different students

Where students agree or disagree on the same point you can respond by suggesting that they debate the issue together. You can do the same where if two or more students are struggling with the same problem – prompt them to work together to solve it and only come to you if they still have difficulties.

Provide a summary of comments and discussion

For larger forum discussions, you can read student comments and post a summary to highlight key points from a debate or findings from investigations. Make sure you set expectations on how and when you plan to do this. You can do similar things for large webinars as part of your closing summary of a session.

Nominate a student to share a summary of discussion

For webinars that use a breakout spaces for small group activities, ask students to nominate a spokesperson to take notes and report back findings or problems to the wider group. When they report back, you can respond to their points and discuss issues.

You will most likely use a combination of the methods for validating how students contribute to their learning community. When doing this, be sure to do it equitably – avoid responding to the same students each time; similarly, be sure to recognize and respond to comments made by students who rarely make contributions.

3. Gain feedback on students' progress and their feelings about their study

Much of the learning that students do on-campus will be invisible to you – it will happen outside of formal teaching session in private study at home, in the library, with friends. The same applies online.

Moreover, if students already know one another, they will likely have lively social networks where they discuss their learning. Be wary of putting too much emphasis on what you can see or measure. In online learning it is important that you set expectations that students should contribute to in class discussion in forums or webinar – but don't assume that is the only way that students will speak to each other.

The progress that students make will ultimately come through in their course work and assessments. However, here are three techniques you can use to gain feedback on students on-going progress:

1. Anonymous forums

Running an anonymous forum alongside regular discussion activities for learning can give your students a space to share problems or issues they do not feel comfortable sharing publicly. Be sure to make it clear that you are not seeking feedback on individual teachers, rather feedback on the learning experience students are having as they go.

2. Interactive whiteboards

Feedback doesn't need to be text based. Collaborate Ultra offers an interactive whiteboard that you can use to invite feedback; for example, you could ask students to place a mark on a scale of 1 to 10 to show how comfortable they are with the topic they are studying. In the space of a few minutes you could get a snapshot visualisation of the sentiments of your whole cohort.

3. Polls and surveys

Short polls can be added to the Posts in Microsoft Teams to quickly to gauge how students are feeling about a topic or whether they feel something is working for them. Polls can also be added to Collaborate Ultra sessions as well.
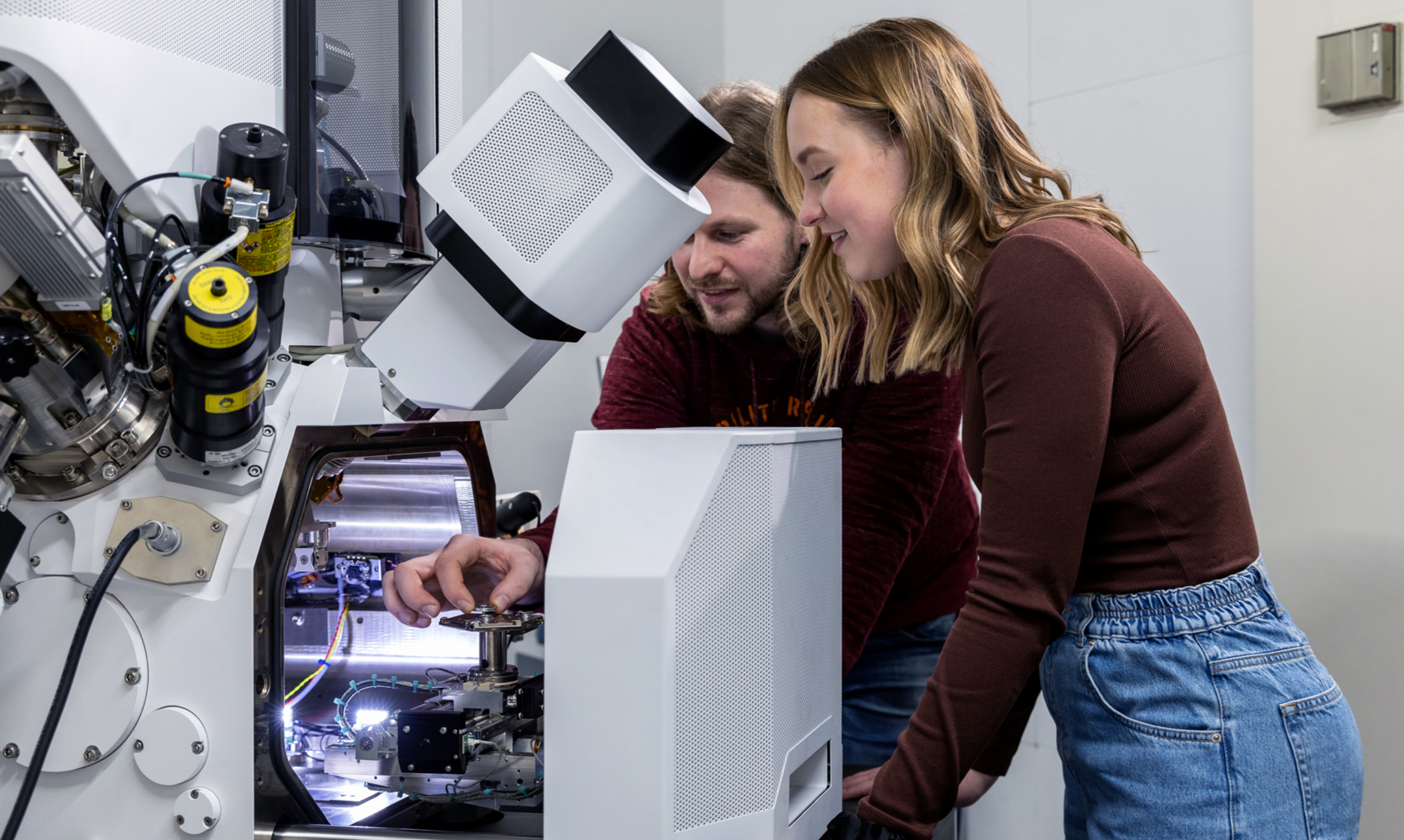
As your students learning community's confidence in the subject grows, the need for your presence will diminish. Your ultimate goal is to foster a learning community that will support itself.

More information

Links to more information:

- Digital Practice website
- External link to Laurillard
- Digital Education Systems Help
- ODPL

References

Case, J. 2008. Education Theories on Learning: An informal guide for the engineering education scholar. Higher Education Academy

Crippen, K. & Brooks, D. 2009. 'Applying cognitive theory to chemistry instruction: the case for worked examples.' In. Chemistry Educuation Research and Practice, 10, 35-41

Laurilliard, D. 2012. Teaching as a Design Science. Routledge.

Perovic, N. 2015. ABC (Arena Blended Connected) curriculum design. University College London. [Online]. [Accessed 16 May 2018] **http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/digital-education/2015/04/09/abc-arena-blended-connected-curriculum-design/**

Salmon, G. 2002. E-tivities: The Key to Active Online Learning. Routledge.

Stonyer, H. 2002. Making Engineering Students – Making Women: The Discursive Context of Engineering Education. International Journal of Engineering Education. 18: 4, 392-399

Twedeel, S & McCarter, B. 2018. What is Team-based Learning? #LTHEChat. [Online] [Accessed: 08 April 2018] **https://lthechat.com/2018/04/08/lthechat-109-team-based-learning-with-beck-mccarter-beckmccarter-and-simon-tweddle-simontweddell/**