

Small Group Discussion, an Effective Tool for Learning

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: With the rapid change in teaching methodologies small group discussion gained a lot of popularity due to its wide impact from multiple dimensions on the learning of students. It is not only influences the learning of the students but also polished many skills not previously explored by the student such as communication skills, leadership qualities, ethics of group dynamics, respect of views of peers and so many.

Objective: To expedite the views of Second year MBBS students at Azra Naheed Medical College about Small group discussion.

Material and Methods

Study design: Quantitative, cross sectional study.

Settings: Azra Naheed Medical College, Lahore.

Duration: Six months i.e. 1st January 2021 to 30th June 2021.

Data Collection procedure: This study is conducted at Azra Naheed Medical College, Lahore, a total of 150 students divided into 10 groups each comprising of 15 students participated in the study. Students and the facilitators were briefed about the study; the topic assigned to each group were told them a couple of days before the session. Pre validated questionnaire from the department of medical education was used and the collected data was analyzed by using SPSS version 23.

Research question: What is the perception of Second year MBBS students at Azra Naheed College, Lahore about small group discussion an effective tool for learning?

Results: Majority of the students were satisfied with the punctuality, constructive feedback, role of facilitator, improvement in the communication skills, interaction and positive feedback.

Conclusion: It concludes students learned how to maintain a good balance of the session. Our study provided enough opportunities to the students to focus on the dynamics of learning in a modern way of self-respect, respect to the peers, improved self-confidence, and importance of positive and constructive feedback and in the end how to summarize and conclude a session.

Key words: small group discussion, student centered learning, integrated learning, lecture

INTRODUCTION

The curriculum followed by majority of medical colleges in Pakistan is a typical traditional system in which teacher plays a dominating role, nearly all aspects of the topic are taught in a didactic way where teacher has a predetermined set of mind and has decided before the start of lecture what he thinks is important for the students. All matter of the topics whether theoretical or practical are tried to cover in the lecture. Students have no active role during all this process, they just come and sit in the class room attend the lecture and leave. This is usually followed by the next lecture in the same way.

Since the introduction of basic and clinical subjects by Flexner in the early nineties, the concept has rooted deeply in the minds of medical community globally and so far there seem to be no way out from it. Whenever new methods of teaching are introduced or new techniques incorporated have raised a lot of suspicion among the medical teachers. Some of the countries with a strong medical system have made changes in their curriculum quite effectively with fruitful results. This encouraged other countries to follow their footsteps some of them have succeeded and many have faced failure.

The typical traditional system of medical education was

a success when this system was introduced due to reasons which were conducive at that time, when the number of students in a medical college was very low. With the passage of time new environment of hospitals and medical college, unfortunately, the system of education remained the same and left room for criticism. The system followed to date is a passive teaching learning methods in which teacher passes his knowledge and information through didactic lectures, practical, wards and clinics at all undergraduate level. The reasoning and arguments in the minds of students are never exposed and are discussed among their peers but not with their teacher. Students hardly play any role in their learning process.

Small group discussion which has been exposed under the umbrella of medical education in the recent past has provided an opportunity to the students to express themselves in the class and discuss it with their facilitator during the teaching time. Small group discussion has polished a lot of hidden skills among the students which was never expected before, such as, problem solving skills, brain storming, open discussion, positive argument, and

respect of view of their peers, communication skills and understanding group dynamics.

Literature review has highlighted that discussion at this grass root level results in better and in-depth learning and retention of the subject. Students find and develop their own ways to correlate basic science subjects with the clinical scenarios. This motivates them to become self-directed learner.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study is conducted at Azra Naheed Medical College, Lahore a total of 150 students participated in the study. These students were divided into 10 groups each group comprising of 15 students. A teacher was assigned as a facilitator for each group. Facilitator and students were informed about the study. A couple of days before the session students were informed about the case. The cases were taken from the topics which already have been taught to them during lectures. The name of the facilitator and student group were notified and displayed on the notice board of the college. The students were given the task to study the case in detail before coming to attend the session and the facilitator was briefed how to conduct the session and enhance learning process among the students. A

feedback form with 05 point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree was provided to the students, which they were supposed to fill at the end of the session. 06 students from each group were supposed to fill the form. The questionnaire was validated through a pilot study by the Department of Medical Education.

RESULTS

The result of the study is quite interesting as all the students in the study participated to an extent in all the activities. There was not a single student who did not showed any response which is a very encouraging sign. More than 77% of the students were satisfied with the punctuality of the session and followed the time specified to them. 66% of the students agreed that objectives of the topic were quite clear whereas 15% of the students disagreed with the objectives and showed their reservations.

Eye contact of the students and facilitator was good 88% of the students agreed with it. 83% of the students were satisfied with environment which was quite relaxed. As compared to other items students showed concern that facilitator was not aware of the name of the students, approximately 55% of the students agreed with this statement (Table-I).

Table 1: Small group discussion response by students SA (strongly agree), A (agree), D (disagree), SD (strongly disagree) (n=90).

Q #	Comments	SA	A	D	SD
1	Punctuality of session	70(77.7%)	10(11%)	10(11%)	0
2	Objectives were clear	60(66.6%)	10(11%)	15(16.6%)	05(5.5%)
3	Students and facilitator had good eye contact	80(88.8%)	8(8.8%)	2(2.2%)	0
4	Environment was relaxed	75(83.3%)	5(5.5%)	5(5.5%)	5(5.5%)
5	Student name were known to facilitator	50(55.5%)	9(10%)	11(12.2%)	20(22.2%)
6	Interaction was appropriate	55(61%)	15(16.6%)	15(16.6%)	5(5.5%)
7	Leading question from facilitator were from previous lectures	65(72%)	10(11%)	5(5.5%)	10(11%)
8	Facilitator guided the students to healthy debate	45(50%)	20(22.2%)	15(16.6%)	10(11%)
9	Communication skills were encouraged	70(77.7%)	5(5.5%)	10(11%)	5(5.5%)
10	Facilitator maintained the group dynamics	60(66.6%)	10(11%)	10(11%)	10(11%)
11	Facilitator encouraged active participation of students	75(83.3%)	10(11%)	5(5.5%)	0
12	For higher level of thinking appropriate question were put to them	60(66.6%)	15(16.6%)	5(5.5%)	10(11%)
13	Constructive feedback to group was given during session	70(77.7%)	10(11%)	5(5.5%)	5(5.5%)
14	Constructive feedback to individuals were given	70(77.7%)	15(16.6%)	5(5.5%)	0
15	Important and confusing points were clarified	80(88.8%)	5(5.5%)	5(5.5%)	0
16	Appropriate balance was maintained in discussion	50(55.5%)	10(11%)	10(11%)	20(22.2%)
17	Session was summarized by the students individually	80(88.8%)	10(11%)	0	0
18	Feedback about the facilitator	90(100%)	0	0	0
19	Outcome of the session were achieved	70(77.7%)	10(11%)	10(11%)	0

61% of the students had concern about the active interaction with their facilitators, whereas rest of the students disagreed to an extent. 72% of the students agreed that majority of the things discussed during the session had been taught to them previously, a small portion of the students didn't agree with it.

Nearly half of the class in different groups agreed that facilitator guided properly for healthy debate whereas rest of the students had some concerns about this issue. 77% of the students agree that good communication skills were always encouraged. 66% of the students agreed that group dynamics was a difficult job but was maintained effectively. 83% of the students agreed that active participation from students was encouraged during the session. 66% students agreed that for thinking at higher level relevant

question were put to them. 77% students agreed that at individual level and for the whole group constructive feedback was supported. Only 50% of the students thought that session was well balanced. At the end of session 88% of the students summarized the session. 77% were satisfied that outcome of the session was achieved, active feedback was given by 100% students.

DISCUSSION

This study has shown that small group discussion is a very effective tool of teaching and majority of the loop holes which were ignored during didactic teaching are plugged during these sessions, a study conducted in 2012 by Hamann K, Pollock PH, Wilson BM addressing benefits of discussion in small group and in another study conducted

in 2017 by Ramnanan CJ, Pound LD supports the finding of our study^{1,2}. The beauty of such sessions is that a small group of students are addressed by the teacher who can focus on the students individually which usually is not possible during a whole class room lecture, a study conducted in 2019 about the dialogue between teacher and student and its impact on the learning of the study by Howe C, Hennessy S, Mercer N, Vrikki M, Wheatley L and another study conducted by Darling-Hammond L, Hylar ME, Gardner M in 2017 is in favor of our study^{3,4}. The whole session of small group discussion had a long lasting impact not only on the learning skills of the students but also in grooming of the students as a good human being, a study conducted by Rani S, Hussain M, Afzal M, Gillani SA in 2019 about the grooming of students in small group discussion supports our study⁵.

As the group is comprised of limited number of students, individual attention is given to every student and he feels his importance, even if the topic has not been studied before the session by some of the students, he has lot of opportunities to find ways of learning from his peers and realizes and identifies the weak areas which need to be addressed, a study conducted in 2019 by van de Pol J, Mercer N, Volman M supports finding in our study⁶.

With the start of the session he become aware of the importance of punctuality, a study conducted in 2020 by KISHORE RN A, GANAPATHY D, SASANKA K highlights the importance of time and punctuality in small group discussion⁷. These sessions provide opportunities to the students to express themselves and become vocal in front of others, this gives confidence to the student and he soon realizes the importance of group dynamic, a study conducted in 2018 by Bion WR highlights the importance of group dynamics which supports our study⁸. He learns how to become an effective member of a team, a study conducted in 2018 by Lacerenza CN, Marlow SL, Tannenbaum SI, Salas E shows the importance of a useful member of team which is in accordance with the present study⁹. Group discussion guides the students how to get involved in brain storming sessions and to achieve maximum output from these sessions, a study conducted by Paulus PB, Kenworthy JB in 2019 supports the effect of brain storming in small group discussion which supports our finding¹⁰.

He soon realizes the importance of facilitator and learns to control the environment and turn unfavorable circumstances in his favor, a study conducted by Pate A, Smith J, Caldwell D, Horace A, Zagar M in 2018 supports the present study¹¹. When encouraged by the facilitator he realizes the importance of positive encouragement and its overall impact on the individual and on the group, a study conducted in 2017 by Collaço CM is in favor of our study¹². He soon become aware that how leading questions can relax a tense situation, a study conducted in 2020 by Suksak SP supports our study¹³. Students who feel shy in expressing themselves in front of others find that their

communication skills have improved a lot, a study conducted in 2021 by Shapiro H highlights the role of good communication skills which supports this study¹⁴.

CONCLUSION

As the session concludes students learned how to maintain a good balance of the session. Our study provided enough opportunities to the students to focus on the dynamics of learning in a modern way of self-respect, respect to the peers, improved self-confidence, and importance of positive and constructive feedback and in the end how to summarize and conclude a session.

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