

SHORT COMMUNICATION 

Small group discussion technique in Pharmacology: An insight from a medical school in Mauritius

Indrajit Banerjee^{1*}, Brijesh Sathian²

***Corresponding author:**

¹Dr. Indrajit Banerjee, Associate Professor, Department of Pharmacology, Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Medical College (SSRMC), Belle Rive, Mauritius.

Email: indrajit18@gmail.com

²Dr. Brijesh Sathian, Academic Research Associate, Trauma Surgery, Hamad General Hospital, Doha, Qatar

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ABSTRACT

Group discussion is a training technique in which most of the ideas, thoughts, questions, and answers are initiated by the participants. Mostly, medical schools follow undergraduate teaching through didactic lectures, practical training, and clinics, where active student participation is minimal. Small group teaching-learning activities have been in the limelight of medical education for many years, which enhances skills like problem-solving, critical thinking, role-playing, team-based learning, brainstorming, debating, and leadership. Teaching and learning in an active way, develop problem-solving or reasoning skills will help the students to become better doctors in future. In SSRMC, Mauritius, we introduced small group discussion sessions in the Department of Pharmacology in 2015, which were highly appreciated by the medical students. The content to be covered for the small group discussion is selected based on the learning outcomes of pharmacology covered in the concerned module. We follow the buzz group, step by step, controlled discussion format and snowball/ pyramid groups for small group discussion. Small group discussion session is usually carried out once a month. Students found this technique to be more interesting and informative, engaging as compared to the traditional lecture classes. This technique also encouraged students to ask questions for clarification and better understanding. It helps students in the deep learning process and stimulates them to comprehend the subject more critically and effectively.

Keywords

Mauritius, medical education, small group discussion

The curriculum of medical school ought to be designed in such a way so that it will not be loaded with a large number of facts and figures crammed in the preclinical and clinical years for the students. Generally, medical schools follow undergraduate teaching through didactic lectures, practicals, and clinics, where student's involvement is minimal. [1-3] Teaching and learning in an active way, developing problem-solving or reasoning skills will help them to become better physicians in the future. [4, 5]

Group discussion is a training technique in which most of the ideas, thoughts, questions, and answers are initiated by the participants. Small group teaching-learning activities have been in the limelight of medical education for many years, which includes problem-solving, role-play, team-based learning, brainstorming, leadership and debate. [6, 7] The concept of small learning groups was started in the late 1950s by Michael and Enid Balint in England. They started small group seminars on real patient problems for General Practitioners. In 1992 a practice-based small group learning (PBSGL) programme was introduced jointly by McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, and the Ontario College of Family Physicians. The main purpose of this programme was to encourage clinicians to reflect on their individual practices and to promote the implementation of relevant changes to patient care. One important aspect of small group learning is that it can target knowledge which is relevant to the learners, more effectively when compared to traditional lecture-based teaching.[8] Ample amount of scientific literature demonstrated the effectiveness of group discussion for greater synthesis and retention of materials, when compared to traditional teaching. [9-12]

Seewoosagar Ramgoolam Medical College (SSRMC), the first premium medical college in the country, was established by the Honourable Chairman Shri RPN Singh on the 18 September 1999 at Belle Rive, in the beautiful island of Mauritius. SSRMC admits students from different countries across the globe such as Mauritius, India, South Africa, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique, UAE, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. [13] At SSR Medical College, Pharmacology is being taught for one and half years, in the 4th-6th Semester. We started small group discussion in the Department of Pharmacology in 2015 which was really appreciated by the medical students. Small group discussion is usually carried out once a month. The content to be covered for the small group discussion is selected based on the learning outcomes of pharmacology covered in the concerned module. The group size varies from 6-12 students per session. The session lasts for 1.5-2 hours approximately. Out of the various techniques of small group discussion, we follow the buzz group, step by step, controlled discussion format and snowball/ pyramid groups.

- Buzz group design: In buzz group, a group of 12 students are divided into 4-6 buzz groups

consisting of 2-3 members each. A case or a question on a topic is given to the students. Each student is asked to write down his/ her ideas. Then the students in this group are asked to share their views with a colleague for a couple of minutes. Then they are asked the same question again and to present their findings after discussion. This design helps the students to think creatively and rationally and bring up the ideas together.

- Step by step discussion: A topic is broken down into several segments via case presentation, classification of drugs related to the case study, mechanism of action of drugs, indications, adverse effects, contraindications, pharmacological basis etc. The facilitator alternates between the presentation of subject matter and discussion periods after each segment. This design is carried out for a group of 6-8 students.
- Controlled discussion format: It is conducted for a group of 6-12 students. In this format, the facilitator leads the group usually by using open-ended questions and encourages all the members of the group to participate actively in the discussion. At the end the facilitator concludes by summarizing the key points, clarifying the doubts and wrapping up the session by getting feedback from the students.
- Snowball/ pyramid groups: It is an extension of the buzz group design. Here the pairs join to form four and four to form eight. In this method the size of the working group gradually increases and aids in increasing the range of views. This technique allows students to think for themselves before bringing their ideas back to the whole group. It is generally carried out in larger groups of students ranging from 12-16.

Students found these techniques to be more interesting and better as compared to the traditional lecture classes. These techniques have encouraged students to come up with more questions to put to the facilitator. Small group discussion allows them an active learning process and stimulates them to learn the subject more critically and effectively.

Abbreviations

Indian Ocean Medical Institute trust (IOMIT), Seewoosagar Ramgoolam Medical College (SSR Medical College), Seewoosagar Ramgoolam Medical College (SSRMC)

Authors' contribution

IB designed the study, drafted the manuscript, and revised it. BS critically revised the manuscript. All the authors approved the final document.

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Competing interests

None declared.

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