SMALL GROUP TEACHING METHOD: AN EXPLORATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The teaching practice in 21st century requires multidisciplinary and collaborative approach to meet the changing demands of teaching which are more associated with student centred teaching. Now, there is a wide range of teaching methods in which co-operative activity and joint participation features are strongly found but small group teaching is one of best methods. This method differs from the traditional passive as well as expository methods which are totally dependent on the efforts of the teacher. In small group teaching, students can achieve skills from the collective contribution of the teacher and class mates. This paper is to compare characteristic of small group teaching and traditional teaching. Suppleness, interaction, reflexivity and appointment are the four major resources of small group teaching. This paper explores the new strategies of teaching and learning which can be referred to as 'discovery learning', Indirect instruction' or 'student-centred methods' where students learn in an integrated small groups. The skills and constraints of small group teaching has also been discussed also.

Keywords: Small group teaching, Traditional teaching, etc.

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INTRODUCTION

In the present era, innovation indicates small group teaching has always been compatible to the development of deep and meaningful learning at higher cognitive levels. It has also been found equally beneficial for the development of a range of professional proficiencies, personal skills and desirable attitudinal traits in childhood and adults. Teaching in small groups is more complex and challenging than generally realized because it calls for more flexibility and adaptability, higher facilitative and cooperative skills, as well as superior provision and organizational competencies. This means the effectiveness is more critical for successful learning than in other methods and, at the same time, perhaps riskier and less controllable. More specifically, learning in cooperative groups designed for high order thinking (HOT) like critical thinking, problem-solving, interactive skills, innovativeness as well as both inter-personal and team skills is gaining due importance. All of these are much in demand today with current external pressures and market forces.

Most of us are familiar with some form of small group teaching like tutorials and discussion. Tutorials, which have a long history in Universities, can be traced back to Socrates who led his students in critical inquiry to insight through discussion. This is a method that would all like to use with students to do some problem-solving task. Discussion in some form or other underpins all small group teaching for these methods seek to examine a topic or problem through the free flow of argument in which participants learn from each other by pooling ideas. As such it is an attempt to better understand knowledge and solve problems rather than acquire new factual information; thus, it is 'discussion with a purpose'.

Some definitions might help to understand small group teaching

Brown & race (1995) describes small group teaching as 'Getting students to talk and think,' which we feel is a useful and succinct description. McCrorie comments, 'group size is probably less important than what the group actually does' (2006, p. 5).

An American author, Bion (1961), emphasizes the key characteristics of *inquiry, discovery and problem-solving*. These initiate **'a process of generalization and discrimination which requires students to rearrange and elaborate their understanding of a topic'**. This is echoed by Curzon (1990) who talks of 'collective exploration and public evaluation of ideas'.

Small groups are just allowing students to work together; they are structured learning environments warn that only under certain conditions, we expect cooperative endeavours to be productive which is completely different from traditional teaching. Those conditions are:

1. recognized constructive interdependence.

2. Extensive face-to-face interaction.

3. Clearly observed individual accountability to achieve the group's aspirations.

4. Common use of the appropriate interpersonal and small group skills.

5. Regular group processing of current performance to improve the group's

    future effectiveness.

Table-1 below can help distinguish between traditional and Small group teaching.

Table 1: Comparison between Traditional and Small Group Teaching

Features	Traditional Teaching	Small Group Teaching
focus	Focus is on individual performance only. Only individual achievements are rewarded.	Focus is on group performance. Group as well as individual accomplishments are rewarded.
Teacher's role	Didactic lecture	Facilitator
Student's role	Passive learner	Active learner
Environment	Dull and monotonous	Motivational and fun
Learning paradigm	Content based	Concept based
Accountability	Only Individual accountability.	Both group and individual accountability. Members hold self and others accountable for high quality work.
Teaching	Teacher focused	Student focused
Social Skills	Social skills are presumed or ignored.	Teamwork skills are accentuated - members are taught & expected to use collaborative skills.

The purposes of Small Group Teaching can be as follows:

1. **The progress of intellectual perceptive** by illustrating concepts and theories through discussion and accepting interrelationships and connections.

2   **The advancement of intellectual and professional abilities**: by thinking and problem solving, e.g. analysing, evaluating evidence, logical reasoning and synthesizing.

3   **The improvement in interactive skills**: through discussions giving explanations, listening, questioning, presenting and defending a position and giving constructive feedback.

4   **Personal advancement:** by taking part in debate and discussion students can test their values and attitudes while developing self-esteem and self-confidence.

5   **Professional progress:** through close and focused exchanges with teachers and peers in the discipline, students become aware of the models of thinking, the accepted standards and the values and ethics of the discipline or profession.

6   **Support for independence:** by preparing for and taking part in small group teaching discussions and activities, students accept their personal responsibility for the progress and direction of their own learning.

7   **The advancement of group working skills**: working in a group gives an opportunity to practice a variety of group management skills and group roles including leadership, planning and organization, giving support and encouragement to others, setting tasks amd monitoring progress.

8   **Reflective practice**: by reviewing and reflecting on their action's students can learn from their successes and failures and so develop their skills and understanding and plan future learning. (adapted from Entwistle et al. 1992: 41)
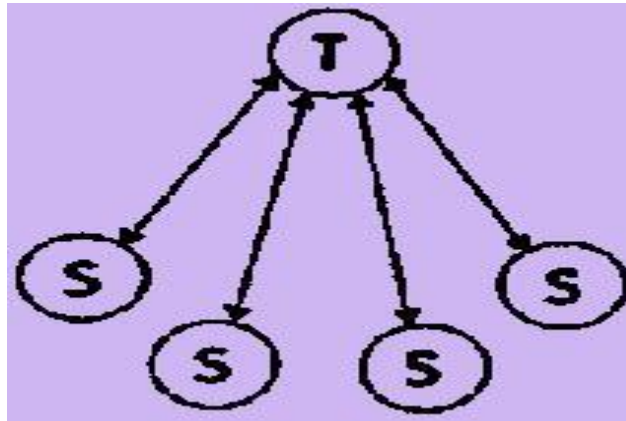
CHARACTERISTICS OF SMALL GROUP TEACHING

Small group teaching is complex, for it combines the strengths of individual instruction and the benefits of group interaction. This is also due to the fact that it can be highly structured and controlled by the tutor, or can be essentially free or open and largely controlled by students. In spite of its complexity, it can be very effective when well executed so it may help our understanding if briefly examine. There are five key characteristics of small group teaching: learning, interaction, development, leadership and student engagement.

   • **Learning**

The deeper learning that results from small group teaching occurs in two ways. Firstly, through *revision,* that is, the reinforcement of existing knowledge, and secondly, through *re-structuring,* or the modification of previous knowledge into a new conceptual framework.

Revision takes place through discussion modes, mostly in tutorials, while re-structuring is developed through deeper exploration, reflection and pilot testing, mostly in problem-solving activities with discussion. What happens in both cases is that with the help of the tutor, each participant's knowledge is supplemented with information possessed by other members and then interpreted.

• **Interaction**

The interaction of communication patterns that occurs between group members is of two types, and may be either two-way (fig-1) that is limited to dialogue between a tutor and individual students, or it may involve multi-way communication(fig-2) in which students interact freely with one another. This is illustrated in Figure 1 &2.

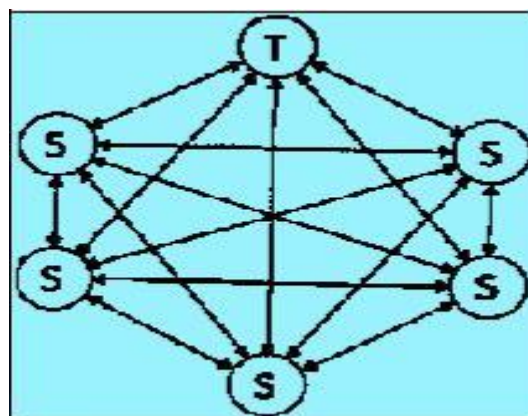*Figure 1 Communication patterns - Teacher Controlled: Two-way communication*

Figure 2 Communication patterns - Group Controlled: Multi-way communication

• **Development**

Another important finding from group dynamics, that is the interaction within a group, is that each group passes through several developmental phases before getting into a cohesive and productive learning group. A skilled teacher can accelerate this process, but without attention,

it may be unnecessarily prolonged as group members compete and clash over roles or in reaching a consensus on group norms. Regrettably, some groups never become more than a collection of individuals, and therefore, do not operate as a group or entity for learning purposes. In such cases the benefits are lost.

- **Leadership**

The tutor largely determines the type of group activity and interaction, so his or her 'leadership' role is of great importance and calls for high skills and adaptability, as well as a knowledge of group dynamics. The leadership role will vary according to several factors such as purpose, structure, tutor style, degree of control desired and group characteristics, but the quality of tutorship is vital and will enhance or hinder group learning. Several group leadership roles have been identified, for example:

Group Leader - giving strong direction to the discussion or activity.

Group Facilitator - generating self-expression and interaction within the group.

Neutral Chairperson - controlling and summarizing, but not contributing.\

Consultant - giving assistance, information and guidance.

Observer - noting events for reference later.

Another important aspect of leadership is that it can be shared or delegated to individual group members or sub-groups.

- **Student Engagement**

In teaching to groups, the teacher not only would work jointly with the learner in exploring the subject in various ways but also probably present some information, provide sources for further reading, ask questions and discuss ideas. In doing this, the learner would be encouraged to:

☐ give personal viewpoints and interpretations;

☐ provide examples;

☐ justify assumptions;

☐ explore relationships;

☐ apply ideas to new situations;

☐ test for confirmation.

Thus, as tutor, mentor and coach, one would ensure that student was engaged in active and purposeful learning. This is when the skills of the tutor are crucial.

SMALL-GROUP TEACHING METHODS

The common labels for small group teaching are tutorials, seminars and problem-solving classes, but this is, perhaps, too general for classification purposes. Five separate types have been identified to describe the full range of techniques, as shown in fig 3.

Buzz Sessions	*Group Discussions*	*Problem Solving Activities*	*Mediated Feedback Sessions*	*Group Projects*
• which refer to short discussions by very small groups within a lesson (also referred to as buzz groups or brainstorming).	• which consist of various forms of in-depth discussions, such as tutorials or seminars	• which cover a range of games, simulations and participative exercises such as case studies, role plays, business games.	• This refers to which specific skills are practised, analysed and discussed, such as micro-teaching and interactive skills training	• whereby a small group undertakes a cooperative task of a practical nature, such as a laboratory or field project

Fig 3: Five types of techniques for small group teaching

Classification of the techniques for different mode of small group teaching as described in fig 4.

Mode	Type	Method
Discussion	Buzz Sessions	Buzz Group Brainstorming
	Group Discussions	Tutorial Seminar
Mediated Activity	Problem Solving Activities	Case Study Role Play Business Game
	Feedback Session	Micro Teaching Interactive Skills
Independent Activity	Internal Projects	Laboratory Projects
	External Projects	Field Projects

Figure 4 Classification of small group teaching approaches

Small group teaching can be grouped broadly into three main modes, namely Discussion, Activity mediated and independent. There are wide range of methods, but these are the refinements of a basic method. The most commonly used methods are described in Table-2

Table2: An overview of Small group methods

Method	Description
Brainstorming	A modus operandi for producing number of ideas and evaluation to be considered later.
Buzz Groups	A short period during a lesson in which several small groups intensively discuss a given issue, often followed by plenary feedback.
Case Study	An in-depth analysis of original or pretended problems for students to identify principles or suggest solutions.
Controlled Discussions	A discussion in which students may raise questions or comments but the tutor controls the general direction.
Fishbowl	A discussion group in an inner circle surrounded by a silent 'observation' group. Often followed by plenary session or role reversal.
Free Group Discussions	A group discussion in which topics and direction are largely controlled by members not tutor.
Problem-centred Group	A group with a specific open-ended task which is discussed, with findings reported at plenary session or summarized on a poster.
Projects	A practical group exercise or scholarly activity involving investigation of a problem.
Pyramid (Also called Snowball)	An 'idea' generating technique whereby groups of two briefly discuss a problem, then form groups of four for further discussion prior to reporting back.
Questions	Tutor displays questions (on BB or OHP), gives time to think and then elicits answers for discussion and elaboration by group.
Role Play	A technique in which participants play different roles in particular situations and later discuss their feelings and aspects of the problem.
Seminar	Students presented an idea in Group discussion
Simulation and Games	An exercise involving essential characteristics of a specific real situation where participants re-enact specific roles.
Step-by-step Discussions	A discussion organized around a carefully prepared sequence of issues and questions to draw out the required information from students.
Syndicate	Several sub-groups forming part of a larger group each working on a problem for a set time and reporting later to the whole group.
Tutorial	A meeting with a small group, often based on a pre-set topic or previous lecture.
Workshop	A 'hands-on' participating experience involving several methods and directed at developing skills or attitudes.

SKILLS FOR SMALL GROUP TEACHING

In addition to basic skills, effective small group teaching requires special skills in preparation, questioning and responding, and facilitating, as well as using sub-groups and varying methods. Moreover detailed knowledge of group dynamics and learning provides a useful background. Special skills of small group teaching can be understood by fig 5

Preparation	Questioning And Responding Skills	On Being Facilitator	Sub Groups
Purpose	Promote Learning	Climate Setting	Nominal
Objectives	Motivate Learners	Generating Interest	Debate
Contents	Provide Feedback	Encouraging Participation	Case Study
Setting	Control Students		Pinwall
Method			Mind Map

Fig 5 Specific Skills for Small Group Teaching

➢ **Preparation**

Preparing for small group teaching is challenging, yet it is often neglected. Clarity of purpose and objectives is essential and consideration of strategy, setting, content and method is advisable. flexible framework and avoidance of too tightly structured a format, which invariably provokes a lecture.

❖ **Purpose**:

In determining purpose, the overall goal needs to be selected, for example, revision or the deepening and re-structuring of knowledge. General goals need sub-dividing into specific problems or elements making up a complex topic, and the special features or questions to be answered require to be identified. Having a topic alone is not enough, it must be focused on a particular goal like evaluate progress; provide for a skill; solve problems & appraise or compare different approaches. Clarifying goals is closely related to strategy.

❖ **Strategy**

A useful way of determining a strategy or framework for a discussion is to produce a 'map' of the topic. The procedure involves firstly, the development of ideas, concepts, related areas and then, secondly, the formation of questions, order of attention, and activities required.

This is best done by writing the topic or problem in the middle of a blank piece of paper and developing your conceptual framework. Such a 'map' is sometimes called a brain pattern' or a 'spider-diagram', for it is essentially a pictorial representation of a network of information. Such a 'map' can be used at the start of a discussion (or lecture) to overview the topic and show how it is to be tackled, to keep on track or to summarize. Additions developed by students can be incorporated, omissions noted and topics for future sessions determined. This approach is useful for revision purposes or sharing interpretations.

❖ **Content**

Content is closely related to the syllabus and course design. In small group work the knowledge already within the group is an important factor if discussions and activities are to be meaningful. For this reason, it is often necessary to prescribe readings or other tasks prior to small group work and to use these in the activities selected.

❖ **Setting**

The setting also needs to be considered and constraints of size, room layout and facilities can be taken into account in planning. In fact, this is a mini feasible study as methods, goals, or settings may require modification. The type of group, or their stage of development, innovativeness, autonomy are other factors that may affect the environment for group work.

❖ **Method**

The use of method is important and a wide variety of options are open. These needs to be selected during preparation and should be closely related to goals, strategies, content and setting. Variety, particularly in tactics, is important but unsuitable methods should not be used just for the sake of change. Try out new and different ones but strange teaching and learning should be avoided.

➢ **Questioning and Responding Skills**

Questions are requests for information that enable the questioner to draw out responses or build on them to acquire new intuitions. Questions are used for many purposes, for example, to:

☐ **Promote learning by**

- drawing on the knowledge and experience of group members

- provoking thought and opinions

- ensuring analysis, comparisons, examples, summaries

- deepening learning through reinforcement and restructuring.

☐ **Motivate learners by**

- arousing interest

- orientation and direction

- establishing rapport.

☐ **Provide feedback by**

- assessing progress

- checking pace and level of learning

- diagnosing difficulties.

☐ **Control students by**

- bringing them back to the topic

- waking up sleepy ones

- breaking up private discussion.

While framing questions following instructions should be kept in mind:

- it is advisable to use broad, thought-provoking and open questions rather than narrow, recall-type ones.
- It is a good idea to formulate a series of several open questions for course covering conceptual, empirical and value aspects that have to be answered to achieve objectives and these act as points of reference for direction, targets and progress.
- It is usually advisable to use simpler, even recall type questions at the beginning of a discussion to start the thinking process, but it is important to move on to higher order questions as quickly as possible.
- Pauses are often advisable to give time for reflection, even to the extent of allowing time to note the main elements or list thre examples before opening the discussion.
- Other questioning tactics include ensuring suitable direction and distribution of questions. For example, it may be necessary to nominate a student to answer a question, but care must be taken that the discussion does not become a dialogue between one student and the tutor.
- Prompts and probes are vital to eliciting learning responses. The former should contain clues or hints in a rephrased question, whilst the latter should probe deeper by narrowing the focus.

Before closing, it should be noted that listening skills are also of great significance. More importantly, many of the attributes described here apply equally to the students and teachers because small group teaching is about participatory activities.

❖ On Being a Facilitator

In small group work to start the discussion or activity, keep it going, and constantly monitor and control the learning. In doing this f*acilitate* learning in several ways, for example, by generating interest, encouraging participation, adjusting the focus and pace as necessary, and generally allocating tasks and setting the tone to ensure meaningful contributions from all members. This rarely happens on its own but has to be managed or facilitated. It requires the understanding of group dynamics and the use of small group methods. Some of the requirements are briefly examined as follow:

❖ **Climate Setting**

The need for a safe friendly climate is important if students are to talk and share thoughts without risk or fear of 'being put down'. A good idea is to attend to this at the beginning of the academic year by discussing group work with new students, clarifying their (and your) expectations, and agreeing on simple ground rules such as, 'Must contribute . . .', 'No interrupting others . . . '. We suggest that one should do this in two separate stages. First of all, explain, discuss and formulate preliminary rules. Second, modify and ratify these after a short trial period. Doing this helps 'clear the air', trains members in group work and accelerates group formation and autonomy.

Figure 6: Setting the tone to ensure meaningful contributions is important

❖ **Generating Interest**

This can be done in a general way by:

☐ using students' names;

☐ demonstrating your own enthusiasm;

☐ varying activities;

☐ relating learning to the 'real world';

☐ showing an appreciation of students' contributions.

More importantly, motivate students at the start of each small group teaching session when it is vital to outline the purpose, state the objectives and brief the group on the task and how it is to be tackled. The use of advance organizers such as buzz groups or brainstorming tactics to generate ideas, stimulate thought, or determine an agenda are other ways to energize a learning group.

❖ **Encouraging Participation**

Active participation by group members is central to small group teaching and teacher's ability to make this happen will largely determine the effectiveness of the learning. We may ensure participation in several ways, for example by:

- skilful questioning;
- using sub-groups;
- using methods that facilitate active participation;
- handling members in a way that promotes interaction

Sub-Groups and Varying methods

Handling group members requires patience, politeness, the avoidance of argument, and an ability to deal with different persons 'nicely', that is, without excessive authority or belittling them publicly. For example, quiet or unresponsive students need to be brought into the discussion, perhaps by asking them easier questions so that they gain in confidence. Conversely, any student dominating the discussion excessively should be restrained, possibly by recognizing his or her contribution but requesting information from someone who has yet to be heard. Sometimes it may be necessary to be more assertive, though rarely authoritative, by reminding a member of the objectives and the limited time available, or discussing the matter with the group for a democratic decision

Using Sub-groups within Larger Groups

A number of skills are required for small group teaching not only to create a group, generate interest, but also organize activities which focus on deeper learning by the techniques of discussion, reflection as well as problem-solving inquiry. In undertaking this we need a 'super' skill, that is the skill of knowing when to use smaller groups within a larger group and how best to use a particular technique. This comes with practice and experience, but to help accelerate some variations of small group tactics should be utilized in conjunction with the overview of small group methods as in Figure 2.

In addition, we can summarize some of the cogent reasons for utilizing small groups, viz:

- to ensure participation and contributions from each student, e.g. pyramiding, buzz groups;

- for re-structuring information to a higher level of cognition, e.g. debate, case study, mind-maps;

- to obtain consensus, e.g. Nominal Group Technique;

- to generate divergent ideas, e.g. fish bowl, students' questions;

☐ for developing personal skills, like assertiveness, working with others;

☐ for developing various communication skills, e.g. simulation, project

work, syndicates;

☐ for solving problems, e.g. brainstorming, Force Field Analysis, case study;

☐ to reduce task or question when group gets 'stuck', e.g. buzz groups, syndicates

TACTIC	DESCRIPTION	USES
Rounds	Each group member gives an idea, comment or suggestion on a given topic. The rules require members only speak in turn; all must raise new items, comment on previous contributions, or pass each time round.	Ensures all members participate. Useful to set agenda for discussion or task.
Pinwall	Formats may differ but basically to generate ideas or information anonymously, as participants write items on cards for posting on a board for subsequent attention as agenda, problem-solving ideas or evaluation items.	Ensures all members contribute. A kind of written anonymous brainstorm.
Force Field Analysis	A technique to identify the forces, favourable and unfavourable, bearing on a problem.	Generates ideas on problems and solutions.
Students' Questions	Students' questions are identified using 'rounds' or 'pinwall' exercises. Selected questions are then answered by group discussion, small group/plenary work or by students chairing their own discussion.	Identifies and attends to concerns of students. Students learn from each other.
Nominal Group Technique (NGT)	A technique starting with 'rounds' to identify topics, then allocation and individual working on topics for small groups, then buzz group discussions and production of a poster displaying findings for plenary reporting back.	A formalized problem-solving technique in which consensus is obtained through discussion.
Mind Map	Involves a group in the joint production of a pictorial representation of a topic (a 'map'), which divides the topic into main elements and sub-elements and shows relationships.	Used as a framework for discussion or problem-solving.
Debate	Division of group into small group to prepare case 'for' or 'against' an issue. Sub-groups meet later to finalize 'for' and 'against' case and debate ensues.	Involves all in planning, develops skills in argument, increases understanding.
Figure 7 Varying tactics for small group activities		

CONSTRAINTS IN SMALL GROUP TEACHING

There are several constraints and prerequisites which impose limitations on small group teaching like: Limitation regarding size, group knowledge, and environmental factors.

Limitations of Size

Size limitations are clearly necessary due to the interactive nature of small group teaching. Group size is dictated by the type of interaction desired and by practical and economic considerations. Most authorities cite 'not more than ten students if full benefits are to be obtained'. Obviously, the larger the group, the more difficult it is to undertake small group teaching. Very large groups over 50 persons are not suitable for small group work, although some aspects may be incorporated on a limited basis. Figure 8 shows the type of interaction you may achieve with various group sizes.

| Size	Type of interaction
Very small groups of five persons	**Personal instruction (Individual tutorial, buzz group)**
Small groups of 6 to 17 persons	Group instruction (tutorial, brainstorming, case study)
Medium groups of 18 to 29 persons	Class instruction (seminar, problem solving activities)
Large groups of 30 to 49 persons	Workshop instruction (syndicates, small group/plenary sessions)
Very large groups of 50 or more	Mass instruction (only limited group work)

Figure 8 Size limitations for small group teaching

Pre-requisite Knowledge

A second consideration in using small group teaching methods is that in order to have a meaningful discussion, some previous knowledge or relevant experience should be available within the group. This is normally provided through earlier lectures, reading assignments, or practical tasks and is often supplemented with a lecture or brief talk immediately prior to group work. In the latter case, care needs to be taken that this does not develop into a lengthy monologue or another lecture.

Environmental factors

Finally, a brief note of several organizational or environmental factors that cause problems may be: Small group teaching may require more staff which may not be possible if the student/staff ratio is rigidly fixed by tradition, politics or financial constraints.

Similarly, more time may be required and this may pose time-tabling problems. Another factor is that space and seating need to be intimate and flexible to be suitable. Seating arrangements are very important. Some suitable seating configurations are shown in Figure 9 where the lecturer is identified as ▣ or   and the students as ◻ or ⬭.
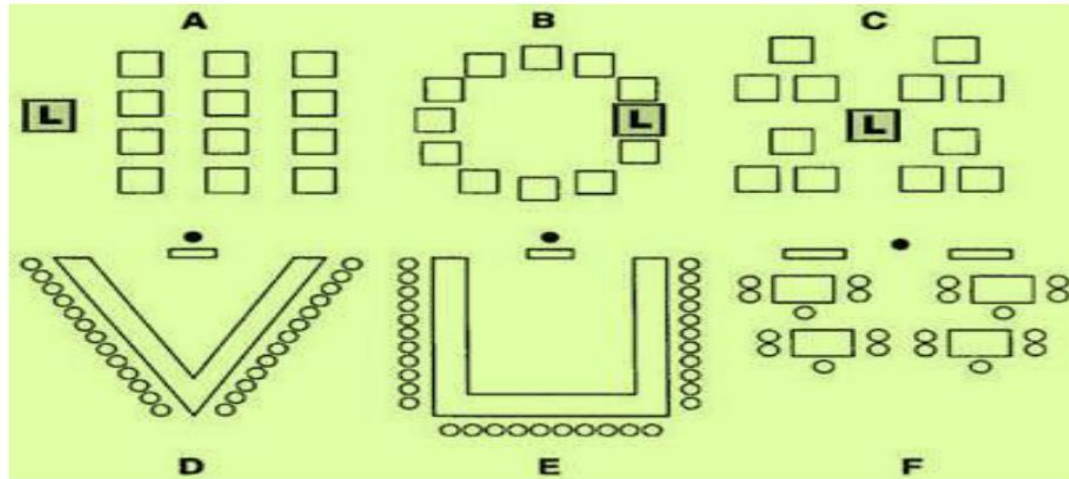

Figure 9: Some possible seating arrangements for small group teaching.

Lastly, small group teaching is a student-focused approach with an open, non-threatening environment which is acceptable to both staff and students.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Small group teaching is better than traditional teaching as helps students to grasp difficult concepts and wrestle with misconceptions. Small group teaching is an intimate, interpersonal experience that challenges us to critically engage with our teaching practice. In doing this, it enjoys the best of the more traditional didactic approach and the contemporary discovery strategies. The primary purpose of small group teaching is to develop discussion and thinking skills. Evidence indicates that small group as compared to traditional teaching is better in promoting thought and developing attitudes and values. learners take part in discussion, active participation, feedback and reflection, and to consolidate learning, clarify understanding, and explore ideas and concepts. Depending on the purpose and nature of the group, small group teaching can also help to develop 'transferable' skills, such as study skills, communication skills, teamwork, problem solving and personal development. Facilitating methods, such as thinking time and buzz groups, can encourage students to talk and can improve the major methods of small group learning. Small group method helps in maintaining peer groups relationship and self-concept

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