

Small Group Instruction
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Overview

Small group instruction in adult literacy has greatly expanded in the last 10 years. It is part of a conceptual shift in thinking from a deficit view of students having an overwhelming need for privacy and confidentiality, to more expansive notions of students as active participants in their own educational program and as autonomous, self-directed individuals capable of making their own decisions. The student support and advocacy movement fostered by Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) and Labauch Literacy Action (LLA) over the past decade is also a contributory factor to the rise of small group instruction. In addition, small group tutoring beyond the LVA/LLA network has been widespread since the 1970s.

What Is It? Advantages

Small group instruction is a creative blend between one-to-one and classroom instruction. From the former it preserves the intimacy of the student and tutor relationship and ability to focus extensively on the learning needs of, in this case, a manageable number of students; 3-5. From the latter, it draws on collaborative learning in which students learn from each other as well as from the tutor. It reinforces a learning environment in which issues from reading and writing assignments can be discussed and a greater range of ideas shared. It fosters teambuilding among students and contributes to a climate in which student support systems are built into the very fabric of the instructional program. In that respect it helps to break the strong dependency on the tutor often typical of the one-to-one match, with greater reliance developed among students themselves. The informal support students establish with each other also helps to increase retention.

From a management perspective, it allows a program to work with more students with fewer tutors and provides a reasonable way of centralizing administrative functions, especially testing. For large programs this is especially important. By serving more students with fewer tutors small group tutoring may be the only viable way of providing services in the urban context or in any program with more than 250 students. That goes for tutor training as well, in which the needs of supporting 100 tutors is considerably different than supporting 400 tutors in larger programs that depended exclusively on one-to-one tutoring. While small group instruction is more pervasive in ESOL, it is also viable for Basic Literacy.

Caveats & Limitations

Limitations include difficulty in serving students who need intensive one-to-one support, students who have very specific goals that others may not share, and those who do not

learn well in group contexts. Programs that can provide some individualized support or computer assisted instruction can help to overcome these problems, though recruiting issues also need to be considered. That is, a major shift to small group tutoring can and should have a large impact on your overall program, including perhaps a re-definition of which groups of students an agency will best be able to serve. Other limitations include logistics (lack of regular sufficient space to hold group tutoring as well as lack of sufficient or relevant materials, a copy machine, a white board or flip chart, and reasonable quietness).

Also, unless working with a standardized or common curriculum, tutor preparation can require more prep time at least initially. Tutors would need to be prepared for that and given assistance in materials selection, not only from week-to-week, but also over a longer course of time. There will always be variation in the group in terms of reading ability, interest, and temperament, even in groups organized according to approximate reading level. Working well with groups requires attention to interpersonal dynamics as well as to instructional issues in which tutors creatively combine the skills of a facilitator and a mentor. Tutors may need advice and feedback in attending well to both of these aspects of group instruction.

Instructional Issues

Group tutoring can accommodate a wide range of instructional materials and methods, from phonic-based to whole language approaches, from basic skills-oriented to content-based driven. Critical components include:

- Interactive learning in which all students get to participate.
- Tutor as coach as well as facilitator—building on learner strengths and knowledge, and only providing minimal support needed to assist students in difficult areas, while providing abundant opportunities for all students to participate.
- Peer tutoring with the more advanced students helping out in group reading and vocabulary and phonic drills.
- Multisensory awareness—students read from the text, they listen, they write or copy, and read from the board. Board reading in particular is a good way to draw on the more advanced students to lead the group in choral reading. It is also valuable to ask other students to the board to lead the group, in which all, if possible, all get a chance both to teach and to learn.
- Tips on working with students at different level even within a generally common range:
 - Offer materials at various levels so students can choose what is right for them;
 - Pair students with different strengths to work together;
 - Tutor rotates around the group, providing assistance as needed while students work independently;
 - Rather than call upon students, allow them to volunteer for activities;
 - As a group, read difficult material chorally before asking students to read independently;

- Have students read a difficult passage twice, the second reading is generally a significant improvement;
- For particularly difficult passages, preview vocabulary in advance and/or read the passage to the students initially.
- Regardless as to method or topic, helping students to make their own inferences while they are learning so that they build on their own innate sense of logic, reason, knowledge, and experience, and learn from their own mistakes, should underlie any educational program. Tutors very well may need assistance in paying attention to this subtle matter in which support should neither be too little or too much. Rather, it should be in just in the right amount in order to stimulate the capacity of students to draw on their own inference making abilities.

Tutor Training and On-Going Support: Suggestions

- Trainees observe groups before the workshop
- Trainees observe a group during the workshop
- Trainees participate in a student-teaching assignment
- Have a successful group (students and their tutor) come to the training or a tutor meeting and talk about what makes their group work well
- Include key handouts on group tutoring in the workshop and allocate specific workshop time to the topic
- The entire workshop could presuppose a small group tutoring focus
- Hold regular tutor meetings among group tutors
- Organize tutor materials sharing notebooks
- Hold occasional in-services on key topics—materials, methods, working with multi-level students, writing, integrating goals, etc
- Have tutor lesson share sessions every few months so people get new ideas about what works.
- Create an electronic list network for and among tutors
- Keep a dialogue journal with willing tutors

Organization

Groups can be organized in a variety of ways, whether through approximate levels, goals, or content-subject matter. The latter two are feasible if tutors can teach in a multi-level context. They also may be appropriate for specialized topics. Group tutoring can be the mainstay of the program, supplemented by one-to-one and computer assisted instruction. It can be a supplemental offering, or it can become the only way a program provides instruction. Groups can also be open-entry, or term based, depending on what is most feasible for a given program at any given time. These are local decisions that need to be worked out with each program based on its own history and context.

Group tutoring in adult literacy has much to offer. There are also many considerations to factor in, some of which are touched upon here.

Critical Issues

Management/Organization

- Keep in mind the purpose(s) of including or expanding a small group program. How does it fit in with your broader affiliate objectives?
- Determine the types of small group program you think would best meet your needs:
 - Open entry/term based
 - Levels-focused/topic focus
 - ESOL/BL
 - Main focus/supplementary
 - Permanent/temporary
 - Centralized location/community-based distribution
 - Relationship between group program and one-to-one tutoring

Instruction

- Make sure students are grouped based on approximate level for general groups
- Specialized courses on citizenship, getting a driver's license, and workplace readiness can be offered on a more multi-level basis, though avoid extreme differences of level, if possible.
- Make sure tutors have a good sense of available materials. In a self-directed program, the affiliate should have a well-stocked library of basic texts and resources. Often tutors work well with a few selected texts. Materials can be copied.
- Group tutoring is also effective with a structured curriculum, and in certain respects easier, though loss of flexibility in content focus is also a matter to consider.
- Regular space is important, as is the use or access to a copy machine.
- Regular on-site staff support is important to recommend resources, to provide encouragement, to trouble shoot, and to provide continuity if a tutor is absent.
- In many respects group tutoring is similar to one-to-one tutoring. Key differences:
 - Need to involve all students, which is often accomplished through turn taking in the reading or speaking
 - Need to balance students providing assistance to others with allowing students the time to figure out the word or what to say
 - Focusing on problems that students have in common such as vocabulary or pronouncing words and using the board for group participation, asking each student at a time to go through the list of words
 - Using advanced student in peer teaching roles whether with a single student or the group. Putting part of the lesson on the board and having more advanced students lead the group in the work while providing only the minimal support needed to help the peer tutor succeed in this teaching role
 - Individualizing some of the class where students are using worksheets or writing while moving from student-to-student. Students can also work together in pairs or as a group
- Tutors need to be trained and supported, keeping in mind that tutor training workshop activities can be based on a group-tutoring model.