# SMALL-GROUP TEACHING: A GUIDE

Gordon Clark and Terry Wareham,

Lancaster University

**INDEX**

***Tutorial n.*** *- a group of students and a lecturer who meet regularly to admire their fascinating knees; they can admire them silently for at least 50 minutes.*

***Seminar n. -*** *monologue by a reluctant student to a small reluctant audience on a topic of interest to neither (Gibbs, 1992b).*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the 'definitions' above are a little over-drawn, but they do signal some disquiet about a distinctive feature of higher education in the UK. Do we always make the most of small-group teaching? Pause at this point. If you are a tutor, are you satisfied with your small-group teaching? Can you identify any aspects of it which you are not happy with or which you think could be improved? Bear your answers in mind while reading this Guide

Teaching in small groups is expensive. Imagine a class of 200 first-year students. A one-hour tutorial each week in groups of six requires 11 times as much teaching time as the class's three lectures a week. Clearly small-group methods can be justified only if we can demonstrate that they are used to maximum effect. The 'definitions' at the start of this Section suggest that this may not always be the case, with students and staff disillusioned, bored or frustrated.

This Guide has one over-riding purpose: to help you teach small groups of students more effectively. We shall explore various ways of improving small-group teaching, many of which will widen the aims of this style of teaching. By helping to develop new methods and approaches, the result should be better educated geography graduates prepared to go on to postgraduate study or to compete successfully in the labour market.

To achieve this, the Guide has four sections:

- a clarification of the potential value of small-group teaching (Section 2.1);
- an exploration of some of the general challenges which all staff face in small-group teaching (Sections 2.2 and 2.3);
- suggested remedies for specific difficulties with small-group teaching (Section 3);
- case studies of two departments which have taken a series of measures to improve their small-group teaching (Section 4).

By ‘small groups’ we mean tutorials, seminars and workshops - lecturing, practicals, laboratory classes, projects and fieldwork are covered by separate Guides. The majority of small-group teaching takes place in groups of between 2 and 20 students meeting on a relatively frequent and regular basis over a term, semester or session. This Guide does not cover the teaching of larger groups. Of course, the notion of ‘small groups’ has changed radically during the recent rapid expansion in student numbers. It is not unknown for staff now to have ‘small groups’ of 25 or 30 students. The crucial criterion for the purposes of this discussion is that the focus is on interactive teaching, probably using exploratory or problem-solving approaches. This is one of the key dimensions of small-group teaching as we understand it and illustrated in this Guide. Such interactive teaching can also occur in lectures, laboratory classes or during fieldwork, but it is most commonly used in small groups such as tutorials and workshops. However, we do recognise that the location of the boundaries between different styles of teaching is neither precise nor particularly important.

Before we move on to specific issues and practical suggestions for improving small-group work, it is useful to explore briefly in Section 2 some of the benefits of small groups and some of their problems.

# 2 GENERAL ISSUES IN SMALL-GROUP TEACHING

## 2.1 The advantages of small-group teaching

The potential of teaching in small groups is immense. To be with a group of 6 - 10 students for an hour on a regular basis provides enough unbroken time to achieve a great deal.

- Students can learn rigorous academic discourse.
- The group can get to know each other well, which is more difficult in a large lecture theatre. This means that staff and students can be more than two-dimensional beings to each other.
- It is possible for the students to interact with you and each other on a sustained basis.
- They can work in teams, thus developing the key skills of teamwork and co-operation.
- The smaller group can be mobile and does not need to be confined to a single location, as with lectures, nor to a set timetabled period. The group can move to a laboratory or computer room, the library, outdoors, or to any suitable location as needed.
- The small group can be used to develop specific research skills, such as questionnaire design, or more general transferable skills like oral fluency.

- Students can negotiate the agenda far more easily so that they can deal with their particular difficulties within the curriculum or with the tasks they have been set.
- The tutors of small groups can have a pastoral role.
- Students may feel more comfortable participating in smaller groups.
- Small-group work gives students an opportunity to develop higher-level intellectual skills such as analysis, synthesis, interpretation, judgement and problem-solving.
- Geography can be linked to the 'real' world.
- Finally, the personal contact implicit in the tutorial structure can open the way for the tutorial to have an inspirational role, with the tutor modelling how to be a geographer, genuinely enthusing students about geography.

*The potential is immense for small-group teaching to give students a fuller, rounder and more challenging experience. Students can think and reflect; they can learn and practise skills; they can discuss and learn how to be critical thinkers; they can become more active and 'deeper' learners by participating in their own teaching and learning.*

### 2.2 What are the challenges with small-group teaching?

However, small-group work is arguably the aspect of teaching with which many academics feel least secure - Unwin's paper (1984) entitled "Things I do badly: tutorials" will strike a chord with many staff. And curiously, it is the form of teaching we most frequently ask our inexperienced, frequently untrained, postgraduate students to undertake for us. Traditionally concerns have focused on

uncertainty as to the aims of small-group teaching, how to achieve them and how a tutor knows whether he/she is doing a good job. As for the students, why do they frequently seem ill-at-ease with small-group teaching; why do they participate so grudgingly; and why are they so slow and ill-prepared? Gibbs' article (1992b) points out how unlike any other kind of group activity a formal seminar is, and how divorced it is from the reality of the small-group interactions which students will face when they leave university.

Added to these traditional concerns about small-group teaching are new ones which are signs of the times. How can you run intensive discussion tutorials when worsening staff-student ratios raise the size of tutorial groups to a point where this is impossible using traditional methods? What if, in the new semesterised syllabus, there is no longer time for every student to give a seminar paper? How do you run workshops with less equipment, more students and tighter timetables? Will the quality of small-group teaching be raised or lowered when it is done by a team of postgraduates or teaching fellows? How is small-group work to be marked, second marked and verified by an external examiner? How can one sustain the argument for retaining small-group teaching when there is such pressure on resources? If groups meet less often and with more students, will the tutorial syllabus not be thinner and will the social benefits of staff-student interaction not be impoverished?

When the traditional lack of confidence in small-group teaching among individual staff is compounded by these new institutional concerns, it is scarcely surprising that small-group teaching raises numerous questions for geography lecturers in higher education today. This Guide examines these issues and offers tutors some potential

ways of dealing with them. This is timely since the strictly geographical literature contains less guidance on improving small-group teaching than it does on fieldwork, IT or oral skills. Over the last 20 years the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* has had fewer than ten articles on small-group teaching as such. The guidance on small-group teaching in, for example, Habeshaw *et al.* (1984), Gibbs (1992a) and Forster *et al.* (1995) is generic rather than geographical, and much of it has been available for several decades (see Rudduck (1974) and Abercrombie (1971)). The main exception is the chapter on 'Teaching by discussion' in Gold *et al*.

## 2.3 Common issues in small-group teaching

Small-group teaching is arguably both better than lectures (though certainly more expensive to provide) and also cheaper and more effective than one-to-one tuition when it comes to developing the following range of intellectual accomplishments:

- acquiring critical judgement
- active learning
- applying principles to cases
- challenging attitudes and beliefs
- developing oral skills
- gaining practical skills
- generating self-confidence
- learning from other students
- learning to work in a group

- promoting understanding
- solving problems
- taking more charge of one's learning using reflective practice.

Some of these points can be included to some extent in other styles of teaching (e.g. the interactive lecture) but arguably the small-group structure allows their fuller development.

Yet these benefits, so often asserted, are all difficult to prove and measure. Small-group teaching is partly an article of faith. It is also beset with ambiguities, paradoxes and contradictions and we now examine five key problem areas:

(i) authority and the role of the staff;

(ii) the role of the students;

(iii) the syllabus, coverage and progression;

(iv) participation and assessment

(v) the size of a 'small group'.

**(i) Authority and the role of the staff**

One area of uncertainty is the role of the member of staff in the small group. What should they do? They are variously in authority (an upholder of university procedures and academic standards), an authority (on geography or a branch of it), friend and counsellor (especially when the group also has a pastoral function), neutral chairperson, examiner, facilitator, devil's advocate, instructor, participant, *primus inter pares* and may even be invisible (as in no-tutor groups). The tutor is torn

between Socratic dialogue which guides students to a right answer (and does so in under 50 minutes) and a free-flowing expression of personal views and student self-discovery. If the students are slow or make mistakes, at what point should the tutor resume leadership and show them the way? If it is too soon, the students will clam up and wait to be told. If it is too delayed, the meeting will end without a conclusion.

It may be disconcerting for the tutor (not to mention the students) when so many 'faces' and 'voices' are turned on and off (cf. the Cheshire cat). For staff, small-group teaching leaves them vulnerable - to teaching plans going awry and to their academic limits being exposed. Staff are less in control and, for some, this is unsettling.

Here are some questions for you to reflect on at this point. As a tutor, do you find yourself leading discussions for too much of the time; indeed, do you talk too much? Why is this? How might you induce the students to participate more?

*One of the major issues with small-group teaching is how to train staff to use the potential in small-group teaching and to be confident of their ability to do so. This Guide aims to help in this.*

**(ii) The role of the students**

Traditional small-group teaching is also unsettling especially for new students. They are expected to 'discuss' things with a tutor who may not appreciate that they do not yet know what an academic discussion is. The setting is more sociable than a lecture theatre yet they very soon realise that the informality is a veneer. Similarly, student

choice is encouraged but a syllabus may rule in the end. They are urged to express themselves but may end up being shown the right answer, whatever they say. And are the other students in the group their friends, colleagues or rivals? At different times they may be all of these. Small-group teaching presents particular challenges for students who are shy, non-native speakers of English, overseas students used to conventions of education where it is improper to express a view in the presence of their teacher, those with a stammer or strong accent, and anyone lacking self-confidence. If active participation is encouraged, what are its limits? Often these are unclear and may vary among tutors and even from meeting to meeting. The brighter students may suspect that the invitation to participate in activities is really a siren call to become socialised into the 'academy', which they may welcome or resent. Are they expected to develop their intellectual independence only by becoming like their tutors? The social rules for small-group teaching are much more complex and novel than those for fieldwork or lectures.

Think now about your own tutorial groups. How quickly do the students latch on to what you expect of them? Can you think of ways in which this could be improved or speeded up?

*So another major problem with small-group teaching is how to get across to students what their roles are in the group without a plethora of rules which would destroy the independence of action of the group. Section 3 of this Guide provides ideas on how to achieve this.*

**(iii) The syllabus, coverage and progression**

Does small-group teaching need a syllabus? A departmental syllabus gives a comparable experience to all students whoever their tutor; it guarantees coverage of core topics and skills linked to the rest of the course and degree; and it removes some of the uncertainties from both staff and students - everyone knows their place. Yet this task-orientation may obscure the social interaction and group dynamics whose appreciation are so important a part of the experience of being in a group. A syllabus (whether departmental or specific to one tutor) restricts the ability of the tutor to mould the teaching to his/her areas of expertise, but it also exposes the tutor to teaching topics which the students will discover that he/she knows less about. A departmental syllabus may therefore require resources to prepare guidance notes or teaching packs so that all tutors are equally competent and comfortable with the whole syllabus (particularly if the tutors are increasingly being drawn from among postgraduates). Alternatively each topic on the syllabus could be taught by its expert, the group therefore getting a variety of tutors (though tradition is against this consortial approach to tutoring). The free-wheeling approach where the tutor (and perhaps the students) chart their own course is harder to sustain and defend when the tutors are on short-term contracts and where quality assurance procedures require documentation to demonstrate equity of treatment, acceptable standards, value for money, progression between years, and coherence of teaching within a year. Reflecting these concerns, guidebooks on small-group teaching tend to emphasise the need for openness, getting organised and clarity of aims (Gibbs, 1992a; Cockburn

and Ross, 1977b). This is in sharp contrast to the 'secret garden' quality of tutorials in the past.

*A complex and under-researched issue with small-group teaching is discovering what kind of structure will guarantee coverage and equity, and also allow for creativity and for individual staff and student interests to flourish independently. The Guide contains many ideas on this, particularly in Section 4.*

**(iv) Participation and assessment**

Everyone agrees that participation (or active learning) is at the core of small-group teaching. Wittingly or not, students play their part and learn how to play a part. By interacting they learn; they discover how to work with others, develop oral skills, learn critical judgement of themselves and of others, and acquire understanding. Furthermore staff too can learn from the students about the topics the latter have researched for their projects.

However, placing participation at the core of small-group teaching as a process and an experience is not without its problems.

- How do you get all the students to participate?
- How do you quieten the dominant students and enliven the quiet ones?
- How much should the tutor participate?
- How do you deal with free-riders, intra-group conflict and the group that fails?

- Should you force the participation of those who would prefer to learn by listening?
- If you would normally assess the end-product of the small-group teaching (e.g. the report, essay or public speaking), should you not also assess (but how?) student participation and personal development (the key social benefits of small-group teaching)? How should such assessment deal with the group which falls apart? How would a regime of assessing participation affect student involvement and staff workload?

There is quite a lot of common-sense guidance on the first two topics, rather less on the third, and very little discussion of the others (Gibbs 1992a; Habeshaw *et al*. 1984, 1987). There are numerous practical case studies with innovative methods for assessing oral skills, for peer- and self-assessment, and for marking group-work, but little on how to judge whether the small-group experience has helped the students' personal development.

You might like to pause here and think about how you deal with the taciturn students and the over-talkative ones. What methods do you use to ensure that everyone participates in group activities - indeed are you able to monitor this? Can you identify here areas where your current practices could be improved?

*An important concern with small-group teaching is deciding on what to assess, how to assess it and the side effects of assessing it. This Guide (particularly Section 3) will help tutors to work through these issues as will the separate Guide on Assessment.*

**(v) The size of a 'small group'**

How big is a 'small group'? How big should it be? In the past these questions were answered by reference to either tradition or resources. By tradition tutorials were perhaps of a certain size - one or two in Oxbridge, five to seven in many older universities. Alternatively, groups had to be of a particular size because there were limitations in the resources available (e.g. staff time) to teach that group of students in a given way. In recent years the 'resource' arguments have tended to displace the 'tradition' arguments.

There is, however, a third reference point from which one can answer the question of how big a small group should be. A small group should be as big as is necessary to conduct the type of teaching and achieve the educational objectives your department has set. For example, if you want each student to have a sustained individual discussion with a member of staff for an hour each week (and so develop the intellectual agility this requires) then only the Oxbridge model of tutorial will suffice; small groups must be just one or two students. Alternatively if the purpose of the teaching is for each student to acquire and practise the skills of working effectively with a group of other students, then small groups of four to eight students are more suitable (whereas pairs and bakers' dozens are respectively too small and too large to achieve this). If, however, the aim is to teach students a straightforward practical skill (e.g. how to use email or design a questionnaire) then groups of 25 will be just as adequate and successful as much smaller groups. But first, of course, the

department must have calculated the full costs of its current methods of teaching. Has your department done this? Would it be useful if it did?

*There is much to be said for determining the size of small groups in the context of the department's overall teaching aims, and then using for each aim the largest size of group that is suitable for it. This may mean that, instead of having only six-student tutorials and 150-student lectures, a department would regularly use a variety of group sizes according to the aims for their teaching in that particular part of the course.*

# 3 SPECIFIC ISSUES IN SMALL-GROUP TEACHING: IDEAS AND INITIATIVES

## 3.1 Introduction

So far in this Guide we have considered the broad advantages and problems associated with small-group teaching. In this Section we shall concentrate on very specific issues which can often prove problematic, and on possible ways of dealing with these issues. In Section 3.3 we group these issues under six headings:

- better understanding of geography and its concepts;
- going into more depth than in a lecture;
- learning specific skills for research and general personal transferable skills;
- inspiring students and linking geography to the real world;
- reflection and judgement;
- participation.

These six headings were chosen to illustrate aspects of the process of small-group teaching. They are either consequences of it or are among its intended aims. They are not, however, self-contained issues. For example, some of the ways of improving understanding involve going into more depth than is possible in a lecture; some methods of getting students to participate will require them to acquire useful skills; and helping students to reflect on ideas and on their own performance and ways of

studying will also improve their understanding of geography. These six areas overlap; in each we draw attention to some of the specific ways of dealing with the key issues, while recognising that other initiatives will also affect that topic.

Reference will be made throughout Section 3.3 to a collection of 'thumbnail sketches' of ideas and initiatives for small-group teaching which geography tutors have supplied. These are all available for inspection on the Geography Discipline Network's WWW site at **http://www.chelt.ac.uk/gdn**. This site provides full details about each suggested initiative in more detail than can be achieved in this Guide. We suggest that you access these contributions by searching the database using the author or originator's surname and their topic which are given in Section 3.3 of this Guide. Most of these initiatives have more than one point of interest and so they will be referred to whenever appropriate.

One does, however, need to consider how to assess the suitability of these ideas for one's own teaching and Section 3.2 provides some useful criteria and questions which will help you.

### 3.2 Criteria for tutors reviewing initiatives

The first thing to note about these initiatives is that they all work or, more precisely, they have all been shown to work in particular contexts to someone else's satisfaction. Second, they all deal with real and important aspects of small-group teaching which have been shown to be problematic or troublesome. However, any initiative should be subjected to various tests. We suggest the following criteria which you might

apply to the ideas below; they have been divided into academic and practical questions.

*Academic questions*

- Will the idea work in your courses and with your students? If not, why not? Could it be adapted so that it might fit?
- What academic and other benefits would you expect to gain from implementing this idea?
- Would there be any group of students who might have difficulty working in this new way and how might you cope with their needs?
- To which year and courses is the idea best suited? How could you link it to their previous experiences and their other current work?
- How might you build on this idea in future years?

*Practical questions*

- Will the idea be acceptable in your department and institution? How might you gain your colleagues' support or weaken their objections?
- Can you afford the time, money or other resources to implement the idea, or how might you get these resources?
- Could you try it out on a small scale with a 'tame' audience to gain experience and confidence?
- Have any of your colleagues in the department or elsewhere in the institution tried this kind of thing and could they advise as to advantages and pitfalls?

- Would there be any negative factors or costs? Could these be minimised in any way? How great are the positive benefits from the innovation which can be set against the costs?
- How might the idea help in the context of course reviews and teaching quality assessments?

By applying these tests to an initiative which you wish to try out, you should be able to avoid false starts and pitfalls. Every style of teaching will be more effective in some circumstances than others; every initiative has drawbacks and pitfalls as well as advantages. There is only the space in this Guide to sketch the outline of each idea; if you find it interesting, you can obtain full details and interim evaluation on the WWW database.

A safe rule of thumb is to "start small and think big"; develop a plan of how you want to alter your teaching and advance towards that goal by a series of small steps.

### 3.3 Ideas and initiatives

#### (i) Better understanding of geography and its concepts

Of course, the central aim of all geography teaching is to help students obtain a better understanding of the subject, and to help students acquire the skills and confidence to

become a good practising geographer. Small-group teaching provides many opportunities to help with these goals.

There are many topics in geography which can be appreciated better if the extra time inherent in small-group teaching can be applied to their further exploration. Rigby's contribution to the Geography Discipline Network's database (see Section 3.1) sketches out a tutorial where regions and their boundaries are explored to show how complex they are although they seem so simple and objective when printed on a map. Banks does the same with the core-periphery model and shows how during a discussion tutorial this concept can be interpreted in novel ways which lead the student to expand on the usual simplistic interpretation of the model. Clark's tutorial on statistics shows how they can be used to illuminate complex ideas such as 'safety' (for whom? from what? to what extent? and under what circumstances?). Harrison uses media output to explore the idea of the 'Third World', emphasising how artificial is the construction of what poses as a self-evident and uncontroversial concept. This tutorial (the method can also be used in a lecture setting) exploits the variety of ways in which the term is used to stress issues of identity and positionality which can be difficult to get across to students. The idea of understanding is applied in a more spatial sense in Clark's local field trial which helps foster an appreciation of the ideas of locality and sense of place. In all these cases the extra time in a tutorial setting can be used productively to help students to understand better one aspect of geography. However, all these initiatives have the possible drawback that some students will be disconcerted by the approach or even will reject it, because it is 'not geography'. The link to the rest of geography course needs to be made clearly if the idea is to succeed.

The development of students' understanding can go wider than just a single concept or model as Banks's tutorial on 'Everyday geography' shows.

---

BOX 1

The aim here is to get students to question what geography is and where its boundaries lie - a particularly valuable exercise for new Year 1 students. To get them to reveal their definitions of geography, the students are asked to cut out all the 'geographical' items from either one newspaper during the week before the tutorial or from a range of international, national and local titles. The comparison of the students' selections should focus on the items selected by some students but not by others. The discussion should focus on clarifying how one can define geography, what the subject is about, and indeed whether it is possible or desirable to define the field.

---

Bryson's tutorial on 'breaking the A level effect' has a similar goal (see also Bryson 1997). The students examine and critique a well-known school textbook on geography. One of the outcomes from this is that the students are encouraged to re-think what geography is about, and come to appreciate that the subject is a contested set of ideas rather than a neutral and objective description of the world. In these cases what is being understood better is the whole subject of geography and not just a

small part of it. However, one does have to be careful not to be too destructive too soon of new students' established ideas about the subject. These should be built on and modified rather than cleared out in a single tutorial.

The process of inculcating better understanding can also proceed in various other ways. In the tutorials suggested by Banks, Bryson and Harrison it is achieved by a process of reviewing material before the tutorial and then discussion during the tutorial. In Clark's tutorial on pyramid reading and in Healey's on 'teaching each other' the process works by getting students to engage with ideas so as to be able to explain them to others through an informal process of teaching each other. In Livingstone and Shuttleworth's tutorial the students first have to engage with the ideas in a set of published papers - these could be drawn from any part of the course or from the areas of the tutor's expertise. Then they have to debate and answer questions on them; and finally they have to be able to critique the text. Together, this set of activities gives the students a far better understanding of both the specific material being studied and also of how academic study works in geography in general. Clearly the more taciturn and shy students will need special encouragement to participate, especially early in Year 1. The danger with these types of teaching is that some students do not participate or they drop out.

Perhaps the most ambitious tutorial is the one used by Maddrell who asks students to work their way into the minds of late-nineteenth-century geographers debating whether to admit women to the membership of the Royal Geographical Society. Not only do the students have to achieve an empathy with unfamiliar frames of mind, they also come to appreciate how different philosophical positions can affect the course

and form of the debate, and they have to understand the protagonists' positions well enough to be able to convey them by role play to the rest of the class. Other role-play ideas are recorded in Gold *et al*. (1991).

*The recurring themes in this section are that the key requirements to achieve a better understanding of aspects of geography are these:*

- *providing time to think, read and discuss outside the lecture theatre;*
- *students preparing material for tutorials;*
- *students working with ideas and expressing them in different ways;*
- *students explaining ideas to the tutor or to each other in a quasi-teaching role.*

*The end result should be students with a more secure appreciation of both geography as an academic practice and of specific aspects of the subject. The students should acquire a generally 'deeper' learning involving a more subtle appreciation of the role of language in shaping geography, an ability to apply general ideas to specific cases, and an appreciation of the effects of different perspectives on issues which are rarely black and white or unchanging.*

**(ii) Going into more depth than in a lecture**

Clearly related to achieving a better understanding of geography is the advantage which small-group teaching presents of being able to go into matters in greater depth, though obviously over a much narrower field of study than in a lecture.

Flowerdew's tutorial is a good example of one way of going into more depth.

---

BOX 2

The ideas of deprivation and social inequalities have been introduced to the students in lectures prior to this tutorial. In the tutorial itself the students explore the concept of deprivation and its spatial distribution in more detail. The students discuss what the multi-dimensional concept of deprivation means; how official statistics may be used to measure deprivation; how variables might be combined statistically into an index of deprivation; and how to evaluate the usefulness of alternative indexes of deprivation. In this tutorial the students learn more about a concept, data sources, statistical methods and critical evaluation.

---

There are also other ways in which one can go into more depth. Vincent *et al*.'s tutorial using the Internet and computer conferencing introduces the students to new technologies and to geography students overseas. The tutorial is based around an in-depth research project which will give the students a deeper understanding of how to do research as well as of the specific topic they have chosen. Both Ballantyne and Short exploit the depth idea through group projects carried out within the framework of small-group teaching. Similarly, the debates on environmental topics which Petts

uses in his tutorials will require the students to understand their subject matter more fully. Livingstone and Shuttleworth's reading seminars will perform much the same function. The students' first-hand engagement with the evidence should enhance their learning experience. In her tutorial Orr exploits the 'time equals depth' advantage of tutorials in another way; she uses the tutorial to help the students practise designing their own questionnaire. They can take the principles of this methodology learned in a lecture and apply them to a trial survey. The strength of all these approaches is that they provide the students with practical work and clear structures and goals.

*The key points here are:*

- *the extra time given by small-group teaching can lead to a more detailed appreciation of issues than in a lecture, but inevitably over a narrow field of study;*
- *the extra time may well extend beyond the timetabled hours of the small-group teaching as the group continues to work in its own time;*
- *first-hand work with evidence and personally practising a skill are both very valuable ways of learning for students in small groups whether these are part of tutorials, practicals and on fieldwork.*

**(iii) Learning specific skills for research and general personal transferable skills**

Probably the most common theme running through the small-group teaching sessions on the Geography Discipline Network's database is that of skills training. There is a widespread belief that students should acquire skills of various kinds - general

transferable skills, practical research skills, geographical skills and higher level skills. The Guide on Transferable Skills in this series provides a fuller review.

Among the general skills which can be learned through small-group teaching are the following:

- the use of the Internet and conferencing software which is central to Vincent *et al.*'s tutorial;
- how to interview and be interviewed for a job which is the theme of one of Hindle's tutorials (see BOX 3 below);
- how to work in groups to achieve a common task (see the tutorials featuring group projects run by Ballantyne, Lynch, Petts and Short);
- how to write in different styles (e.g. a brief policy proposal as in Lynch's tutorial, or a poster as in Short's tutorial);
- how to express oneself orally to good effect which features in the tutorials by Healey ('Teaching each other'), Lester, Maddrell and Petts.

Tutorials and workshops of various sizes (see Section 2.3(v)) have the potential to train students in practical research skills which will be very useful later during field courses and for dissertations. This is most clearly displayed in the tutorials from Ballantyne, Lynch and Vincent *et al.* in which the students have to investigate a topic together over a number of weeks and report on their results. Clark's field trail tutorial develops observational and interpretational abilities which will also be useful for researchers.

Small groups can also offer possibilities for the exploration of more specific skills for geographical studies. There are examples of these in the database - Orr's tutorial on questionnaire design, Flowerdew's on constructing an index of deprivation and Rigby's on maps and regions. Hindle's tutorial on interviewing is a good example of what can be done (BOX 3).

---

BOX 3

In this tutorial students are taught how to interview people, how to be interviewed and how to prepare a letter of application and *curriculum vitae* (résumé) for a job. Each student is both a member of a group of students who interview individual students for a fictitious post of research assistant, and individually each student is in turn interviewed by their peers and staff for this post. They have previously received training in how to apply for a job and be interviewed. Hence three distinct but related vocational skills are learned.

---

One can also inculcate higher-level skills through tutorials. For example, students can practise how to interpret evidence. This is a feature of Harrison's tutorial on the meaning of the concept of the Third World, Mulligan's on data and image interpretation, and Clark's on understanding statistics. Other tutorials focus on the skill of critical appraisal - of logic and arguments (e.g. Livingstone and

Shuttleworth's tutorial), of the work of established authors (e.g. Bryson's), and of other students' work or one's own (e.g. the tutorials contributed by Bondi, Lidster, Penrose and Rees).

Training students in any of these types of skill is very worthwhile but the question is immediately raised of whether, since skills are important, one should check or even assess the extent to which students have acquired and can use them. Opinion differs on how formal this checking or assessing should be. Consider, for example, the skills of reflective practice and self-evaluation. Bondi asks students to assess their own essays but this exercise is for the students' benefit; it does not contribute to formal assessment procedures. In Lidster's tutorial peer-assessment may affect the final mark after negotiation but it need not do so. Pain uses the tutor's assessment of essays in conjunction with both the student's own mark for it and the peer-group assessment. All three marks go towards the final essay mark. Healey's contribution to the database on how to use peer- and self-assessment is also germane at this point. Hence the final skill which tutorials can help develop is the ability to judge one's own performance and that of others.

There is also the difficulty of linking the skill to geography - fail in this and the link to the rest of the curriculum will be missing and lack of interest may set in among the students (cf. the teaching of basic statistics in a cookbook fashion). The relevance of the skill to geography and to a career has to be made explicit.

*The key points in terms of skills are these:*

- *many skills can be developed through small-group teaching ranging from specific practical skills and research methods to general skills and higher-level intellectual skills;*
- *the question of whether to assess the acquisition of skills separately from that of the student's understanding of geography is currently a matter of debate;*
- *students need to be told explicitly why they are learning the skill.*

**(iv) Inspiring students and linking geography to the real world**

When tutors think back to the really interesting parts of their own undergraduate experience, it is unlikely that the seminars and tutorials will feature as highlights. Yet it is possible to use tutorials in a creative way which will generate the level of enthusiasm which can also come from a first-class lecture or field course. Some tutorials capture students' imagination by showing them new ways of seeing things and challenging orthodoxies. Banks uses a novel tutorial on the core-periphery model which he re-interprets in the context of the drug trade. His tutorial on everyday geography and Short's project on the changing geography of Dundee are examples which seek to show that geography can be found in unexpected places and this element of surprise can intrigue students (see BOX 4). The novelty can also derive from how the tutorial is run. Examples in the database include Clark's field trail outside the tutorial room, Vincent *et al.*'s tutorial project where students in the UK use the Internet to work with geography students overseas on a joint project; and Maddrell's use of role play.

---

BOX 4

Short's group project has many of the normal features one would expect to find - active learning, development of research skills, non-traditional means of reporting results, team management, group-work assessment and an oral presentation. What is particularly interesting here is the use of the local area as the setting for the various research themes. The students become immersed in their locality - Dundee's archives, documents, people and statistics. The geography they study comes alive because they can see the evidence around them in the physical and built environments of their daily lives as Dundonians.

---

More subtly, Bryson's tutorial (critiquing a school textbook) boosts students' confidence in their own abilities by showing them how they can challenge the authority of published texts. Rees's tutorial, where the students assess the work of the previous cohort of students, gives the students the self-confidence to appreciate their own powers of judgement quite early in their university careers.

*The key point is that small-group teaching can be exciting as well as valuable*

*and this can be achieved by:*

- *the use of novel material;*
- *different ways of running the tutorial;*
- *using the tutorial to bolster students' self-image and self-confidence.*

**(v) Reflection and judgement**

Reflection and judgement are activities both to be practised during tutorials and also skills to be learned from them. Reflection can focus on geography in general in terms of its scope as a university subject; the tutorial by Banks on everyday geography and by Bryson on 'breaking the A level effect' show how this can be put into practice (see BOX 5). More narrowly students can have the opportunity to think more deeply about ideas (e.g as in Banks's core-and-periphery tutorial) or about the interpretation of statistics (e.g. Clark's tutorial on understanding statistics and Flowerdew's on how to measure deprivation).

---

BOX 5

In this tutorial the tutor asks the students individually and then collectively to read (or re-read) a popular A level (high school) geography textbook in the light of their early experience of university teaching. The aims of this tutorial are:

- to reveal the production process by which geography texts are constructed;
- to develop critical reading skills;
- demonstrate the limitations of A level (high school) geography;
- to encourage students to develop arguments for when they are reading around the lecture course.

The students become self-reflective, critical of textbooks and start to appreciate that geography is not a neutral unchallengeable set of facts.

---

The tutorials by Rigby on maps and Harrison on the Third World illustrate another idea. These tutorials help students to reflect on the subjectivity of geography as an academic practice by highlighting the students' role (Rigby) and the media's role (Harrison) in determining how the world is to be portrayed. Maddrell's role play exercise has a similarly enlightening function.

One of the qualities of the academic mind which one seeks to measure during a degree programme is the student's ability to form securely based judgements of academic arguments. Small-group teaching can help that process directly by focusing on a key text and analysing it in detail in the group (see Livingstone and Shuttleworth's tutorial).

More reflexively, several tutorials use the small group to encourage students to assess either their own work or that of their fellow students. Bondi and Lidster's tutorials focus more on self-assessment while those from Orr, Pain, Penrose and Rees use

more peer-group assessment. There is, of course, a link between the two since an awareness of the good and bad points of one's colleagues' efforts may well feedback into a re-appraisal of, and improvement in one's own performance.

Again, the danger with these kinds of initiatives is that the students will not realise that the ability to reflect and judge fairly oneself and others will be valuable for them in later life. It is important to explain at the outset why honing judgemental skills is useful.

*The key point here is that:*

- *the work of a small-group will benefit from time being set aside for staff and students to evaluate what they are doing as individuals and as a group. This is not only a key academic skill in its own right, it may also help improve the subsequent performance of both the group and of its members individually.*

**(vi) Participation**

The tongue-in-cheek definitions of a tutorial and a seminar at the start of this Guide highlight the traditional problem with small-group teaching; it may be too tutor-centred with the students too passive. All the small-group teaching in the database is highly participative since the students have a major and well planned part to play in ensuring the tutorial's success.

The sections above have shown the wide range of ways in which one can incorporate the students into the running of the group:

- before the meeting, gathering or preparing material (e.g. collecting data, reading a text or rehearsing a talk);
- during the tutorial, working on a practical task such as drafting a questionnaire;
- engaging in debate with the tutor or other students;
- participating in a visit or mini-field trip during the tutorial period;
- involving the students in the agenda/syllabus of the group;
- involving the students in the assessment process;
- getting the students to teach each other during the meeting.

A useful example of various forms of student participation combined into a single tutorial setting is given by Ballantyne (BOX 6).

---

BOX 6

In this tutorial the students work in groups of six to produce in the first semester a group report on some research, each student providing a discrete chapter and all of them 'knitting together' the chapters into a coherent group report. In the second semester a group poster is produced. In both cases the students give an oral report on their work. In the second semester the students act as peer assessors of the quality of the posters. So these students are participating during the two terms' tutorials as: (i)

individual researchers; (ii) team members; (iii) authors and designers; (iv) editors; (v) assessors.

---

The problems with participation were set out in Section 2.3(iv). How do you get every student to participate fairly and equally? Structures can help here - giving every student a task to do for the next meeting, for example But the tutor's sensitivity, tact and personality will also be important - knowing how to encourage the quiet students and to quieten the over-enthusiastic.

*The consensus is that:*

- *active learning (that is, the involvement of students with geographical ideas and in the running of small-group teaching) is likely to lead to a better understanding of the subject, more academically aware students and students with a wider range of practised skills.*

This Section has focused on issues within the small-group setting - what to do, how to run the meeting, how to involve the students, the material to work with, and the aims a tutorial might have. In Section 4 we turn to wider issues for the successful use of small-group teaching.

### 3.4 Common issues revisited

In Section 2.3 we reviewed five common issues which are generally problematic in the running of successful small-group teaching. In this section we revisit these five issues so as to provide guidance on how to cope with them; we refer again briefly to the ideas and initiatives set out in Section 3.3.

**(i) Authority and the role of the staff**

The numerous examples of tutorials in Section 3.3 have demonstrated how the member of staff can be variously a guide to the complexity of geography, a (co-)marker of coursework, a facilitator of projects, a resolver of conflicts, an arranger of resources and activities, as well as a teacher. The lesson here is that the tutor's role is multi-dimensional, perhaps changing from meeting to meeting.

**(ii) The role of the students**

Just as the tutor's role is varied, so is that of the students They may be invited to teach each other geography (Healey's tutorial), to work with ideas and arguments (Livingstone and Shuttleworth's tutorial), role play (Maddrell and Gold *et al.* 1991) or learn a skill (Orr and Hindle's tutorials). Team projects are a commonly used idea and in these the students perform many tasks as well as that of apprentice researcher (see BOXES 4 and 6).

.

**(iii) The syllabus, coverage and progression**

There are a lot of reasons for having a syllabus for a set of tutorials or workshops - see the Lancaster and Leeds case studies in Sections 4.2 and 4.3 for ideas on syllabuses. A syllabus gives more equal treatment of all the students in a cohort, it can widen the teaching (see Banks's tutorials), and it can deepen the teaching (see Livingstone and Shuttleworth's tutorial and others in Section 3.3.ii).

**(iv) Participation and assessment**

Section 3.3.vi has summarised the many procedures and activities that tutors can use to get students to participate in the work of the small group. This Guide also has examples of more student-centred ways of assessing their work through self-assessment and peer-assessment. The assessment of oral skills and the acquisition of other skills can also be used to diversify how tutorial assessment works.

**(v) The size of a 'small group'**

The Leeds case study which follows (Section 4.3) exemplifies the use that can be made not only of large lectures and small-groups but also of intermediate sized groups of 20-40 for teaching straightforward skills such as statistics and the use of IT. The small group of 6-20 students can also be divided into quartets for project work, pairs for buzz groups and discussions, and individual work for essays and oral presentations. Small group teaching can and should use a range of group sizes depending on the purpose of each meeting; it need not be restricted to any one size.

# 4 CASE STUDIES

## 4.1 Introduction

Section 3.3 has offered a number of suggestions aimed at the individual tutor and specific tutorials and seminars. Although such changes in teaching practice are a necessary condition for the optimum use of small-groups, they are not sufficient. One must also ensure that the wider teaching environment is conducive for every tutor to work as well as possible and for the programme of small-group teaching to be integrated into the rest of the department's geography teaching. Successful small-group teaching requires a department to integrate a series of measures which will assist individual tutors; there is no single panacea.

These 'system' issues are discussed in this Section using two case-study departments which have both adopted a wide range of measures aimed at facilitating the better use of small-group teaching. Neither the present authors nor the case-study departments would claim that these measures have solved all the problems. Their experiences are presented here simply to provide ideas on how other departments might attempt to produce a coherent and comprehensive plan for improving small-group teaching. These initiatives are widely applicable in any university.

## 4.2 CASE STUDY: LANCASTER

***The Department of Geography at Lancaster University has adopted eight measures with the aim of improving its small-group teaching in Part 1 (the first year of the undergraduate degree).***

*The key points are these:*

*- a library of tutorials;*

*- each tutor incorporates core elements into his/her tutorial programme;*

*- each tutor runs a group project during the year;*

*- a standardised marking sheet for all essays;*

*- the staff who run the lecture programme in Part 1 have provided tutorials and practicals on themes related to their lectures;*

*- there is departmental mentoring for new tutors;*

*- formal training in how to be a tutor is available for new tutors in the Faculty;*

*- a more extensive system of training is under development by the Staff Development Office of the University.*

### (i) A library of tutorials has been established.

Staff and postgraduate tutors are encouraged both to contribute successful tutorials to this collection and to use or modify existing tutorials for their own groups of students. New tutorials are still being added to the collection. The collection is divided into sections with separate groups of tutorials for 'the first tutorial meeting', skills training

and topics related to the parallel lecture course (these being provided by the appropriate lecturers). There is also a suggested tutorial syllabus which can be used as the basis for planning the series of tutorials through the semester or year. Each tutorial is complete with rationale, aims, handouts, details on how to run it, reading material and other resources, and briefing notes for tutors less familiar with the subject matter. The tutorials can be used immediately or in a modified form to suit individual tutors' expertise. The collection is particularly appreciated by those new to tutoring. A side benefit is that there has been an informal convergence of the tutorial programmes used by tutors without the difficulties of devising and imposing a single rigid syllabus. A more fully defined tutorial syllabus operates at Salford (see Hindle's contribution to the database on 'Small group tutorials') and Ballantyne's contribution ('Developing students' skills...') suggests a similar development at St Andrews.

**(ii) Each tutor has to incorporate a number of core elements into his/her tutorial programme.**

These core elements include skills training, oral presentation, pastoral care, academic feedback, a field visit and group work. It is up to each tutor to combine these as they wish and to decide (based on their own skills) in which academic context they will explore these elements. Again, these are guidelines rather than a standardised syllabus for the 12-15 people each year who act as first-year tutors.

**(iii) Each tutor must run a group project during the year.**

To complement the individual work involved in essays, a small-group project is done by each tutorial group; the Department recognises that the skills benefits of group work are very important. The topic for the project is selected by the staff member depending on their interests, skills and practical resourcing considerations. Similarly, a field visit is a formal part of the syllabus and can be combined with the project. A collection of field projects is being built up which can be used by tutors if they wish. The tutorial structure is ideal for small-group research projects and field projects. Issues of resourcing and safety need to be addressed and may prove to be constraints on field visits particularly.

**(iv) A standardised marking sheet has been instituted for all essays.**

This sheet requires not only the usual textual comments on the essay overall, but also an assessment on a five-point scale of specific aspects of the essay such as its structure, argument, style and referencing. Comments on essays will be most students' main source of formal academic feedback on their performance, and it was felt that a standardised marking sheet would improve the quality of feedback for all students. Again, new tutors find it valuable as a guide on how to mark their first sets of tutorial essays. There is a very useful and much fuller guide to marking and commenting on essays in Forster *et al.* (1995, Chapter 6 by Hounsell).

**(v) The staff who run the lecture programme in Part 1 have provided tutorials and practicals on themes related to their lectures.**

These are available for all tutors and they have to incorporate a given number of these academic themed tutorials in their tutorial syllabus. This improves the integration of the tutorials within the overall course framework so that the different teaching elements reinforce each other. It also helps to train all the tutors in the various approaches and types of material which comprise the current Part 1 lecture course.

**(vi) The Department operates a system of mentoring for new tutors.**

About half the first-year tutors are postgraduates for whom the tutoring fee is a valuable source of extra income. However, most of them have never taught before, and some have not yet had any formal training in how to run tutorials. Each postgraduate is assigned a mentor who is an experienced member of the teaching staff. The pairings are such that new physical geography tutors are mentored by human geographers and *vice versa*. The system is described in more detail in the database (Geography Department, Lancaster, 'Mentoring new tutors'). Suffice it to say that the system is easy to operate, much appreciated by the new tutors, and is flexible enough to be able to respond to tutors' needs as they occur.

**(vii) Formal training in how to be a tutor is available for new tutors on a voluntary basis within the Faculty of Social Sciences.**

This course - run by Dr Mary Smyth of the Department of Psychology - comprises five two-hour workshops on how to be a tutor. These are held at the start of the first

term of each session. The course is open to new tutors across the Faculty and is voluntary. The session focuses on the following themes:

- an introduction to how people learn and the role of small-group teaching;
- different ways of organising small-group teaching;
- issues of interaction and participation and how to achieve these;
- the role of the tutor;
- how to assess the quality of inter-personal communication within a small group;
- getting into and out of trouble (which deals with the role and effectiveness of different types of questioning);
- how to deal with students who do not cope well with the tutorial setting;
- helping students to study, to read critically and to take notes from lectures and from texts;
- marking and assessing essays and other course work during tutorials including how to give constructive feedback and how to use reflective practice.

This is similar to the training for all new postgraduate tutors run by the Staff Development Unit at the University of Birmingham. However, the latter is a much shorter course (it lasts only half a day) but it is compulsory for all new tutors. This course focuses on the do's and dont's of tutoring and helpful guidance on issues like giving feedback, encouraging participation, listening and questioning.

**(viii) A newer, more formal and much more extensive system of training is under development by the Staff Development Office at Lancaster University in conjunction with the Department of Continuing Education.**

This programme has been designed to fit within the limited time available for postgraduate tutors to devote to improving their teaching. It consists of a three-day intensive course before the beginning of session which covers a range of issues to do with teaching and learning, including areas in which postgraduates may well not actually participate immediately (e.g. lecturing or course design) but which it is important for them to understand from the point of view of the lecturer. This is followed by a series of weekly three-hour workshops from which they can select an appropriate programme to meet their needs. These workshops cover a range of topics which are of interest and relevance to the participants' situations, including:

- talking and listening in seminars and tutorials;
- working and teaching laboratory classes;
- preparing students for assessment;
- assertiveness;
- self-esteem and confidence building;
- juggling teaching and research;
- evaluating your teaching;
- efficient marking without stress;
- developing a teaching profile.

At the same time, of course, the tutors are doing their tutorial or demonstrating work and this is counted as part of the contact hours of the programme, since the aim of the programme is to encourage tutors to become reflective practitioners. Each tutor will also have support and mentoring from within their home department. One element of this is that they will be observed by a colleague, be given feedback and helped in the reflective process.

At the end of the term there is a one-day session for review and future planning. If participants wish to be accredited for their work on the programme, they can submit a 5,000-word piece of writing reflecting on their experience and demonstrating their development, not only in practical terms, but also through researching and discussing the issues that have arisen. Successful completion of this stage gives the participants a Statement of Training.

Two further stages to the programme give access to a postgraduate diploma and MA in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, although for many postgraduates these stages will be attempted only following completion of their PhD thesis.

### 4.3 CASE STUDY: LEEDS

***The School of Geography in the University of Leeds has radically altered its approach to small-group teaching. It has integrated different styles and formats of teaching, altered its teaching and assessment practices, and addressed the staff training requirements of this new system. Pauline Kneale describes the changes they have introduced.***

*The key points are these:*

- *changing the small-group teaching was part of a wider restructuring of their teaching;*
- *stress was laid on the need for clear, explicit and specific aims for the small-*

*group teaching in general as well as for each meeting;*

- *a variety of group sizes are used from week to week, each optimised for the type of teaching and its aims;*
- *small-group teaching has been largely integrated into courses rather than being a free-standing activity;*
- *when small-group teaching aims to teach a skill, then the acquisition of that skill should be formally assessed;*
- *encouragement is given to using a variety of activities within the one-hour period with the group;*
- *student preparation before the group meets is vital for successful meetings;*
- *the postgraduates who assist with the small-group teaching need to be well trained beforehand both in general teaching skills and in the specifics for each meeting.*

**'GEOG1080 Study Skills in Geography;' a Year 1 alternative to tutorials.**

In 1994 the tutorial system for first-year geography students at the University of Leeds was replaced by the 10-credit module 'GEOG1080 Study Skills in Geography'. With increasing student numbers, and modularisation extending core lecture courses to many elective students, student-centred learning was built into every module with integrated workshops and seminar sessions (Kneale, 1997). 'Study Skills in Geography' is compulsory for single-honours geography students and is an option for those students who have Geography as a named part of their degree. The module therefore must stand alone in terms of its geographical

content. The module was piloted originally as an Enterprise in Higher Education initiative with a volunteer group of students. Its content has developed each year as new material and techniques are introduced, and others discarded (Kneale, 1995).

The formal objectives of the module are that students will acquire:

i) effective study skills and be able to apply them to topical geographical issues;

ii) skills in a range of areas including discussion, presentation, writing, and IT including wordprocessing;

iii) research skills through preparation of material for presentation in tutorial discussion and essays.

The module is run over two semesters with three types of teaching.

***Workshops*** All students (currently 165) in a lecture theatre with one member of staff. Postgraduates help in some sessions to chair and gain feedback from focus/brainstorming groups.

***Tutorials*** 5 students meet with a tutor who may be an academic member of staff, a teaching assistant or senior postgraduate. Each group chooses four topics, from a list of over 20, to research during the year. Students come to the Topic Tutorials to present the results of their research as oral presentations. These are assessed. Essentially the tutorials are the place where students demonstrate that they are developing the skills covered in the workshop sessions.

***Practicals*** Computer laboratory sessions, led and managed by a teaching

assistant, supported by four or five postgraduate demonstrators (class sizes of 60 in two laboratories).

Because students have different kinds of sessions in different weeks they have to develop diary and time-management skills to get to the right place each week. Staff involvement is reduced from a weekly meeting to nine meetings per year. In terms of quality control we can be sure that all students will have had the opportunity to demonstrate the skills included in the module.

**The Syllabus**:

*Semester 1*

Week

1 *Workshop*:

Introduction to the Module, how it works and assessment. Emphasis on the difference between school and university teaching and learning. Importance of personal learning strategies.

2 *Tutorial*:

First meeting with tutor, to select and discuss how the work for Topics 1 and 2 will be organised. 'Get to know each other' session.

2-6 *Practicals*:

Three one-hour practicals to be completed in these five weeks. Word processing skills, BIDs, e-mail and e-mail with attachments, WWW, downloading hard copies of references from library, BIDs and e-mail sources.

3 *Workshop*:

Research resources, libraries and what they can do for you. Introduction to the

university and department resources. Worksheet - involves tracking down references across the five main libraries.

4 *Workshop*:

Getting your points across, presentation and discussion skills. Uses the BBC's 'Speak for Yourself' video, followed by discussion. Worksheet.

5 *Tutorial*:

Not in the original module plan but it was felt that some support was needed at this point to encourage the progress in topic preparation, sort out any problems, and cheer up students feeling overwhelmed by university.

6 *Workshop*:

Effective reading, note taking, thinking and summarising. Uses Rowntree's (1988) SQ3R amongst other techniques. Optional worksheet.

7 *Tutorial*:

'Topic 1' Student presentation to tutors on first topic. Most tutors ask the group to assess each other so as to help focus on technique as well as content.

8 *Workshop*:

'How to pass modules and stay in bed 'till 12.00 and party all week'.
A time-management session. Mix of discussion and planning for the next week (Kneale, 1997).

9 *Tutorial*:

'Topic 2'.

10 *Workshop*:

Memories of revision, effective university examination techniques. An interactive session with example questions and alternative answers. Uses postgraduates to chair focus groups (size = 25) within the lecture theatre, which

helps the students' active input.

11 *Tutorial*:

Useful if previous presentations have overrun, also used to review the term, chat about examinations and toast Christmas.

CHRISTMAS VACATION

*Semester 2*

14 *Tutorial*:

Welcome back after examinations; a session where work for Topics 3 and 4 is organised

15 *Workshop*:

Different approaches to research and learning. Uses the Learning Styles questionnaire and check-lists to identify the skills required to manage research for Topic 3. Aims to improve personal confidence in skills acquired and to identify areas where this topic gives an opportunity to practise skills where the student is less confident. Reflective diary of research activity for Topic 3.

16 *Workshop*:

Writing university-style essays. Feedback from the recent examinations; examples of good essay technique, recognising pitfalls, writing good introductions and conclusions.

17 *Workshop*:

Critical thinking; thinking through ideas, when do you think? how might you improve your thinking? what does the university expect of you?

19 *Tutorial*:

'Topic 3' - with diary of research / preparation process.

22 *Tutorial*:

'Topic 4' - with Powerpoint display.

19-23 *Practicals*:

Three one-hour practicals; further word processing including tables and equations in reports, incorporating EXCEL, MINITAB and Powerpoint output in WORD6 documents.

23 *Tutorial*:

End of session meeting; may be used to complete tutorial reports.

The form and timing of assessment is:

- two essays based on material from two topic tutorials 40%
- four presentations of study topics 20%
- computer word-processing practicals/workshops 40%.

Tutorial topics: Students select from a menu of topics each of which has roughly a three-page briefing. This includes a one-page topic summary, suggested research areas, possible presentation themes, suggestions for group or solo work (some topics lend themselves to a debate format, for example), and suggested essay titles.

The large workshops are awkward to teach. In the first few weeks there is inevitably a group asking why they are not doing straight geography. Some sessions seem obscure at first. Some students vote with their feet and only stay to the workshop if there is an assessed worksheet as part of the session. Others get very involved and

really do attempt to change their reading style, start to focus on personal issues like writing styles or thinking processes, and take the time-management ideas seriously. There is considerable support from mature students for this module since it addresses a number of areas where they feel vulnerable.

The Presentations video gets rapt audience attention and clearly impacts on students' confidence levels and approach to talking to groups. Much of the information in the Discussion handout is commonsense and good manners, but it raises students' confidence levels by making them aware of different forms of discussion - debate, focus groups, brainstorming, role-play exercises, oppositional and consensual discussion, and the different roles of discussants and chairpersons in these situations. It reminds them of some of the stock phrases, 'while I agree with Jim in principle, I also think...', 'that is a good point and ...'. There is nothing very advanced here, more like 'ask the easy question to get the group talking', and 'if worried, get the tutorial group together over a coffee and have a quick discussion, and develop an action plan'. The session also aims to ensure that the students are aware that they have a responsibility to keep a discussion going, to ensure everyone gets an opportunity to be heard, and there is good listening going on.

The sessions on essays, note taking and revision have understandable appeal. The session on critical thinking is less obviously accessible. Students feel more reluctance about identifying where they could think more efficiently. Teaching needs to be a mix of serious and light-hearted sections to keep up group morale.

The Practicals have variable student response, depending on past skills. In 1994 the World Wide Web practical was new and exciting, and students found locating material difficult and challenging. By 1996 this practical was clearly unnecessary, very few students had not already visited a web site, and the majority were happily surfing. Consequently in 1997 the WWW information was delivered as a handout so that those who needed guidance on using the Internet had a full guide. In 1997 BIDS, e-mail and attachments to e-mail seem to cause more problems and we force the group to prove they can do these tasks through the practicals. Revisiting WORD6 skills late in the year is beneficial, if only to point out that there are other things they can do. The equations editor is awkward and practice here is valuable, as are constructing and shading tables, and including Excel and other objects in documents. In previous years a computer c.v. exercise was included, but this has now been moved to Year 2 where it has more relevance. The c.v. session was replaced by Powerpoint in 1997, where everyone had to create six slides to illustrate their Topic 4 presentation. This was the most fun and from the feedback students thought this was the most rewarding session. It had the bonus of showing all the postgraduates how to make Powerpoint slides and all tutors were given demonstrations of Powerpoint in action.

Postgraduates enjoy these sessions, new postgraduates are asked to demonstrate the practicals thereby improving their own skills and awareness of the university resources. It has been my practice to ask either the teaching assistant taking the practical classes or a postgraduate to write the handouts for these sessions, and also to undertake annual pre-practical checks to ensure any changes to the university

systems are incorporated. This helps to keep the language in the documents student-friendly and accessible.

Probably the factor that gives this module the most ‘street cred.’ is postgraduates saying ‘why didn’t we have this at university?' and ‘this is really useful, I can use this for ...’ Postgraduates need supportive briefings and they get clear guidelines from the core teaching staff as to what is intended and required. When undergraduates see the postgraduates taking sessions seriously they begin to think that there is something in it. Certainly with over 160 students in the workshops, the use of focus groups led by postgraduates helps the level of interaction. In the first sessions the postgraduates feed back the main points which helps get over student shyness at speaking.

**Integrating Workshops into Lecture Courses**

When the course was modularized the decision was taken that all lecture-based modules in the School of Geography at Leeds would be academically independent, and therefore all tutorial-style support work would be embedded within individual modules. This allows elective students to take 1-4 modules (10-40 credits) of geography without feeling at a disadvantage compared with single-honours students taking 80 or more credits in geography. In some departments sessions of this type would be called seminars. This title was not chosen because a seminar implies a particular type of exercise; staff wanted to include a much wider range of activities in these sessions. We sought to blur the conventional distinctions between tutorials, seminars and workshops, and the latter term is the one we shall use here.

The objective of workshops is to give students the opportunity to interact with relevant materials and to talk about the topics. Workshops provide opportunities for students to ask questions, chase up areas of misunderstanding and to feel more involved as learners. Most sessions involve some form of feed back. Undergraduates commonly prepare overhead transparencies to summarise group discussion and elect a reporter. Presentation and other skills are taught elsewhere in the geography curriculum, encouraging good practice and self-confidence (Kneale, 1995)

**Practicalities**

The normal pattern for integration is to hold a workshop session for every 3 to 5 lecture classes. A first-year module with 300 students will be broken down into 12 workshops held in the same week as the lecture they replace. The staff-student ratio is roughly 30:1, while in Year 2 we aim for 20:1 or 25:1. The member of staff leading the module takes one workshop, the others are led by postgraduates and teaching assistants. Timetabling is difficult; each week there is a different combination of modules having workshops. Space is mostly found in the Schools' physical geography laboratories. Students sign up for workshops at a time that fits with their other commitments.

**Training Postgraduates**

This is vital. You cannot expect a student who graduated in July to take a class in October without plenty of support. All postgraduates attend workshops in the department on teaching and managing small groups. They are expected to attend relevant University courses, such as 'Presentation Skills', Teaching in Laboratories' and 'Small-Group Teaching'. They are expected to attend the lectures for the module in the first year as part of their preparation. Postgraduates are normally assigned to the same module in the next two years, so they build on previous experience. Students' work is marked by postgraduates to guidelines provided by staff. Postgraduates are not asked to generate the teaching materials; this is the responsibility of the staff who fully brief the tutors. Where possible, classes are timetabled so that a new postgraduate can attend a workshop run earlier in the week by a more experienced student before tackling his/her own group. Postgraduates are paid the hourly teaching rate for demonstrating and half that rate for time spent on preparation and marking.

**Types of Workshop Teaching**

**Pre-Workshop work?**

In the first year of the new scheme the general format was for work to be done during the hour of the workshop. At the end of the year student and staff feedback suggested that this was not very effective. The students arrived 'cold' to the material and took time to get involved. What is now more common is for the workshop handout to be distributed one or two weeks in advance so that the students come to the sessions with some background preparation. In Year 1 the

work is not usually assessed as part of the module, whereas in Year 2 a workshop may count 10 per cent towards a module's final mark.

**Workshop Styles**

There are a wide range of activities in these sessions; this Section describes a few of the formats.

1 Pre-workshop handout with 4-6 questions to be answered in advance of the class, and 3-4 topics for discussion in class. Work might involve chasing up some library information and other sources as well as reviewing lecture notes. In a human geography session they might be asked to 'consider your own personal views on ...' or 'outline three different views that may be taken on this issue'. At the workshop the answers are collected in at the start of the class, assessed and returned later. This ensures that everyone does something in advance, and those who do not, can be picked up and warned about their non-contribution. The workshop would normally split into discussion groups of 4-6 people, each pooling views, ideas and opinions and preparing OHT summaries as a basis for presentation to the whole class in the second half of the session.

2 Use the first 20 minutes to answer 3 or 4 short-answer questions under examination conditions. Then distribute model answers to everyone and ask them to self-assess their own answers or do this working in pairs. Usually a chatty

session, it does not count for the module, so stress is low and learning is often high. Good towards the end of a semester to review understanding of key points.

3 A file, folder or handout of a variety of materials, background literature, tables of data, and a set of questions to answer is distributed in advance. The workshop is used to allow students to discuss ideas and issues in small groups. The answers to the questions must be handed in, individually, a couple of days later. Variations on this theme include joint answers (between two students) which halves the marking, or from a small group which reduces marking further.

4 Role-play versions of 3 (above) require students in pairs or larger groups to discuss an issue from different, specified, viewpoints and then write this up from their own angle with critical evaluation.

5 Workshops with no staff or postgraduates. In Year 2 some exercises are set to be done in the students' own time and handed in by a given date for assessment. There is no lecture in the week of the workshop, but a demonstrator will be assigned as a reference point for anyone who is stuck. Typical exercises in this format might involve simple computer modelling or asking students to apply first-year statistical tests - probably forgotten the week after the first-year practical - to real data and to interpret the results. The exercise also reminds a student of MINITAB or EXCEL skills. The responses are marked by postgraduates to clear guidelines.

6 An individual or group could be asked to undertake a search in the library or via BIDS, CD-ROM or Global Book Bank in order to report on the availability of literature and data for a specified topic. This is good training for dissertation work. The bonus is that the students then read some of the material. This work may be undertaken independently or the results may be discussed in a workshop.

7 'White space' handout approach. This technique is perhaps more often used within a lecture session to break up the note-taking activity but is also effective in small-group work. Essentially there is a structured handout with gaps to fill in as the session progresses. These can be short answers to questions, flow charts to complete, or equations and graphs to sort out and apply.

8 Student assessment. Checking on the level of understanding so far can be achieved via traditional tests, but the speed of response with classes of over 200 students makes the marking unattractive. Multiple-choice questions (MCQ) monitored by computer-marked cards give feedback to students within 24 hours. This is a labour-saving and economical way of letting both staff and students assess what is known at any point in a module. The application of this methodology in a Year 1 module on soils and weather is described by Hogg (1997). While this type of test does take time to set up, if the MCQ papers are collected after the test, then they can be used the next year with minimal additional time input.

9 Pre-examination revision workshops. It is normal practice to use the last session of the module as a revision workshop. Typical formats involve discussing past questions, creating outline answers and analysing model answers. The stress of

examinations within the next two weeks makes these sessions popular and it gives students the opportunity to ask specific questions. While postgraduates will not always know the answers to more specialised questions, they certainly know someone who does and can route an answer to that student quickly.

## 5 ACTION PLAN

You have read this Guide; you have explored some of the thumbnail sketches on the Geography Discipline Network's database. What are you going to do now? Here is a framework that may help you.

1) Which three specific ideas in this Guide and on the database **(http://www.chelt.ac.uk/gdn)** have interested you most? For each one, identify *how* it might improve your current teaching and *where* you could use it. What changes of detail would be needed to fit it into your other teaching? *When* could you start to try it out - this session, perhaps?

2) Are there any changes which your department should be instituting so as to make better use of small-group teaching? What are these changes? Who else in the department might support them? Would it be helpful if you wrote a paper on this for the next staff meeting?

Good luck!

## 6 REFERENCES AND GUIDE TO OTHER SOURCES

There are several publications which, although over 20 years old, still provide sound advice on how to teach and learn in small groups.

ABERCROMBIE, M. L. J. (1971) *Aims and Techniques of Group Teaching*, (London, Society for Research in Higher Education).

COCKBURN, B. & ROSS, A. (1977a) *Participatory Discussion,* Teaching in Higher Education Series: 4, (Lancaster, The University).

COCKBURN, B. & ROSS, A. (1977b) *Patterns and Procedures*, Teaching in Higher Education Series: 6, (Lancaster, The University).

RUDDUCK, J. (1974) *Small Group Teaching and Learning*, (Norwich, University of East Anglia).

More recent publications expand on the ideas in the earlier works in the context of current teaching conditions in higher education (e.g. higher staff-student ratios) and often provide specific examples of how to implement general ideas.

BAUME, D. & BAUME, C. (1996) *Learning to Teach: Running Tutorials and Seminars*, (Oxford, The Oxford Centre for Staff Development).

BERTOLA, P. & MURPHY, E. (1994) *Tutoring at University: a Beginner's Practical Guide,* (Bentley, WA, Paradigm Books).

BROWN, S. (1996) The art of teaching in small groups, *The New Academic*, 5(3&4), p. 3.

BROWN, G. & ATKINS, M. (1988) *Effective Teaching in Higher Education*, (London, Methuen).

BRYSON, J. R. (1997) Breaking through the A level effect: a first-year tutorial in student self-reflection. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 21(2), pp.163-170.

DEACON, R. (1994) More effective seminars, *The New Academic*, 3(2), p. 6

FORSTER, F., HOUNSELL, D. & THOMSON, S. (Eds), (1995) *Tutoring and Demonstrating; a Handbook*, (Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh, Centre for Teaching, Learning and Assessment).

GIBBS, G. (1992a) *Discussion with More Students*, (Bristol, Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council).

GIBBS, G. (1992b) The seminar, *The New Academic*, 1(3), pp. 4-5.

GOLD, J. *et al*. (1991) *Teaching geography in higher education: a manual of good practice, (*Oxford, Blackwell).

GRIFFITHS, S. & PARTINGTON, P. (1992) Enabling Active Learning in Small Groups, Module 5, *Effective Learning and Teaching in HE*, (Sheffield, Universities and Colleges Staff Development Agency).

HABESHAW, S., HABESHAW, T. & GIBBS, G. (1984) *53 Interesting Things to Do in Your Seminars and Tutorials*, (Bristol, Technical and Educational Services).

HABESHAW, S., HABESHAW, T. & GIBBS, G. (1987) *53 Interesting Ways of Helping Your Students to Study*, (Bristol, Technical and Educational Services).

HOGG, J. (1997) Geography students assess their learning using computer-marked tests. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 21, pp.121-126.

KNEALE, P. E. (1995) Encouraging student responsibility for learning through developing skills, profiling and records of achievement, in: A. JENKINS & A.

WARD (Eds) *Developing Skill Based Curricula: Case studies of Good Practice in Geography*, pp.121-132 (Birmingham, Staff and Educational Development Association, Paper 89).

KNEALE, P. E.(1997) Maximising play time: time management for geography students. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 21, pp.291-299.

ROWNTREE, D. (1988) *Learn how to Study: a Guide for Students of all Ages*, (London, MacDonald Orbis).

UNWIN, D. (1984) Things I do badly: tutorials. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 8, pp.189-192.

## 7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions to this Guide from:

- Pauline Kneale who provided the case study of the School of Geography at the University of Leeds;
- Mary Smyth who provided details of her training course for social-science tutors at Lancaster University;
- the many geography staff across the UK who contributed their ideas and initiatives on small-group teaching to the Geography Discipline Network's resource database on the Internet.