

Facilitator Skills

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A variety of skills are needed to effectively organize and conduct a team-based learning (TBL) activity. For a teacher who is accustomed to instructing through conventional lectures, it may take some time to become comfortable with the different role required of a TBL facilitator. In contrast to a lecturer, who synthesizes and delivers expert content, the TBL facilitator guides and encourages students to articulate their understanding of the presented problems. Ultimately, the TBL facilitator shares his or her own views of the applications or problems presented to the students. The opportunity to serve as a content expert contrasts with the role of a problem-based learning facilitator, whose primary responsibility is to serve as a guide for the students in their quest to dissect, research, and solve a complex problem. This chapter will review some of the skills that will help instructors to maximize their effectiveness facilitating a TBL exercise.

While the mechanics of running a TBL exercise are important to master so that the process proceeds smoothly, the most important skill for a facilitator is the ability to help teams verbalize their rationales during the large-group discussions. The sophistication of these rationales is often a function of the stage of development the teams have reached. The scenarios listed below pertain to the “norming” (Tuckman, 1965) stage in which students have achieved cohesion and are working together productively. Also included are some discussion techniques for helping students become comfortable speaking in front of the whole class.

TBL SCENARIOS

“Tell Me About Your Thinking.”

When groups have either revealed their answers by visible display or by completion of an Immediate Feedback-Assessment Technique (IF-AT) form (a group Readiness Assurance Test), they are ready to explain their thinking. The simultaneous reporting of the various teams provides the richest starting point because the display of answers is their first feedback on how their thinking compares with others. A simple and direct strategy is to begin with any group and ask the group members about the

thinking that led them to agree on their answer. Alternatively, the facilitator could ask a team to volunteer to begin the discussion. The instructor should avoid verbal or physical cues that indicate a value judgment on the answer. Facial expression, tonal inflection, or any posture by the instructor that would indicate agreement or disagreement is likely to limit further productive discussion, so the instructor should try to remain as neutral as possible. If the instructor is too positive, any teams that might have offered an alternative rationale might be reluctant to speak in order to avoid embarrassment. This is not as much a problem with IF-AT forms, since the teams will already have been informed whether they got the answer correct. In this case, the discussion can concern lines of reasoning that led them to pick the wrong answer, or it can allow teams a chance to argue for an alternative answer. Be prepared for some surprisingly sophisticated rationales!

It is worth noting that this simple phrase, "Tell me about your thinking," quickly focuses on a team's logic and therefore is a very useful statement for TBL facilitators. A word of caution though—this statement is easy to forget in the heat of the moment when the conversation becomes interesting. Any teacher who is accustomed to lecturing will find out that it takes a great deal of effort to resist offering the expert opinion and continue to ask for the students' line of reasoning. One of the most common errors of novice TBL facilitators is to end discussion too soon to share the answer to the application before sufficient discussion has been elicited. Unfortunately, students will often reinforce a facilitator for doing this by stopping the discussion and waiting for the answer.

"Did Anyone Have a Close Second Choice?"

If every team reveals the same answer, it might discourage you from pursuing the question further under the assumption that all teams thought about the problem the same way. If you persist with an inquiry about their deliberations and the thinking that went into eliminating alternative answers, you can uncover a wealth of analytic thinking that you can reinforce or redirect. Often you will discover that even in a team that chose the dominant choice, there were dissenting opinions. Asking for alternative choices gives voice to the students who might not have had the majority opinion in their teams and provides opportunity for them to articulate their views.

"What Would Make This Answer Correct?"

After you gain experience with the first two scenarios, you might want to look for opportunities to pursue more in-depth analysis of an application. The best answers for these questions are heavily dependent on the data given in the question stem. Since a change in the data given would present a new set of possible explanations, a different answer choice might be preferred. While the examination of alternative patient data does take more time, it maximizes the utility of a given question.

"Here Was My Thinking"

After you are satisfied that a given question has been thoroughly discussed, it is important to provide the students with an explanation of what the answer or answers are supposed to be. A well-defined closure statement for each question is surprisingly important to many students. This is your opportunity to critically analyze the different options and also to explain or reteach areas that may need reinforcement. On occasion, you may want to wait until the end of a series of applications to provide students the final answers, but it is important that you always let them know what the best answers are for the applications so that they can learn from the experience. The emotional energy generated by struggling with an application can substantially augment the learning involved, and sometimes drawing out the experience can further increase the drama and ultimately have an impact on learning.

DISCUSSION TECHNIQUES

The Longest Distance . . .

When a student is speaking to you, the intuitive reaction is to walk closer to the student. However, if you increase the distance between you and the student by walking away, it will draw the student out and assist others who are trying to hear. You may have to walk behind a team that is distant from the speaker. The result is a naturally increased effort on the part of the students to raise their voice so you can hear them. If you position yourself behind the remaining students then, by default, everyone can hear the student who is speaking. This simple technique may feel awkward at first. But remember you are helping the student to speak not only to you but to the student body. TBL works best when the student is speaking to classmates rather than to you, the instructor.

Another way to ensure that the room is quiet and a speaking student is heard is to have any student who is speaking *stand up*. At first, students will resist standing up, but their doing so will guarantee that everyone can hear and that everyone will be quiet! It is probably most effective to make this one of the ground rules for a TBL session: *Stand up* when you have a question or when you are speaking for your team. Also, teams could find a rotational way to ensure that each member carries this task and gets the experience. Unfortunately, health professions students get very little opportunity as students to practice public speaking. This simple approach is one way to help them add this important component to their professional competencies listing.

"Can Anyone Add to This?"

After the first student has responded with a rationale for the group's choice, it is easier for other students to provide additional information. If you ask students from

other groups to contribute further, an intergroup discussion will be more spontaneous. Students are typically less reluctant to offer their group's thinking than to offer their own individual thinking.

"Hide-and-Seek"

If you notice a team (or student) that you want to draw out but who is not responding to the two strategies described above, then you can simply move in closer during the discussion. Moving closer to a team will allow you to naturally alter your focus (and the focus of the student body) to those who might be hiding in the corner.

The different scenarios and techniques described here illustrate some basic differences from a lecture. During a lecture, most of the time is devoted to presenting, organizing, explaining, and illustrating. Lecturing is typically conducted from a speaking platform or stage, and classrooms are not usually conducive to moving among the students. When dialogue does occur, it is usually truncated with affirmation from the teacher followed by further explanation. Even interactive lectures rarely reveal how a student is thinking, except by the way a student phrases a question or by short answers to a lecturer's question. The only way to reveal the cognitive processes of a student is to turn the circumstances around so that the explanation becomes the student's responsibility, not the teacher's. In turning around the responsibilities so that the students provide the explanations, a teacher needs a whole new set of skills in order to maximize the learning experience.

Though the experience of facilitating a TBL activity can be initially daunting for teachers who are accustomed to conventional lectures, over time many former lecturers never want to return to the stage. In many ways TBL facilitation is far more enjoyable than lecturing. One can do the same exercise multiple times, and each experience is different because of the different interpretations of the student. Even the best lecture cannot compete with the level of energy and degree of engagement in a good TBL activity. There is nothing more enjoyable than facilitating students who are on the edge of their seats ready to debate the next application.

REFERENCES

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