

Noisy classrooms, interested students, active learning

Ravi Shankar

The majority of the classes in my medical school are quiet and orderly with tables and benches arranged with military precision. I also expend a lot of effort to ensure student discipline in my theory classes. With a class of around 75 students, allowing students the freedom to debate and discuss issues can lead to chaos. However, I adopt a different approach during the problem-based learning sessions. Our Pharmacology practical sessions have a student-strength of around 37 and I also conduct a voluntary Medical Humanities (MH) module with average student strength of around 15 students. During these sessions, students can and are allowed much more freedom and independence.

I extensively use small group learning during the sessions. The small groups usually consist of 7 or 8 students each. The small groups consist of students of different nationalities and of both genders. There is a great deal of diversity in the student body.

Clinical problems, case scenarios, role plays and primary literature are used during the Pharmacology learning sessions while excerpts from the literature and art, case scenarios, role plays and debates are used during the MH module. They first get acquainted with the problem, case scenario, literature excerpt etc. Then they analyze the problem from different perspectives and try to identify the main issues involved. They try to work out a solution through problem solving.

During case scenarios and role plays, students in a group identify the main issue of the scenario and also other important subsidiary issues. The group then works

on and debates on the role play which has to be acted out to reflect the main issues involved and possible solutions. The setting of the role play, the actors, and methods of making the role play interesting and innovative are discussed. The role plays generally are in tune with the social and economic realities of Nepal and South Asia. The time allotted for enacting the role play is usually five minutes. After a group presents the 'solution' to a problem or enacts a role play then it is opened to the 'house' for debate and discussion.

The traditional arrangement of desks and chairs in neat rows does not serve the purpose of encouraging group work. The students nearly always rearrange the furniture and the group usually sits in a semicircle or circle to facilitate easy working, brain storming and exchange of information. I and my colleagues always encourage this! The discussion, arguments and debates make for a noisy session. There is a lot of movement within a group and also between groups to discuss and test out new ideas. All this makes for a noisy and lively session!

One of our challenges as facilitators is to ensure that the students are lively and engaging. Creativity needs to be encouraged while maintaining discipline and promoting purposeful and goal-directed activity. Initially, certain students occasionally abused the greater freedom afforded by this method of learning. However, gradually students became aware of the limits imposed and the necessity of self-discipline and self-regulation.

Freedom and creativity are combined with a sense of purposeful, goal-directed activity making the sessions effective. Thus the class room is noisy, the setting is informal but the students are working and learning and also enjoying themselves in the process!

Correspondence:

Dr. P. Ravi Shankar, Manipal College of Medical Sciences, P.O.Box 155, Deep Heights, Pokhara, Nepal.

Phone: 00977-61-440600

Fax: 00977-61-440260.

E-mail: ravi.dr.shankar@gmail.com