

Small-Group Information for Program Managers

When you hear the term *small-group instruction*, perhaps you find yourself wondering, “How would small-group instruction benefit our program, our tutors, and—most important—our students? How do small groups help students who haven’t been able to learn well in a classroom setting? Are the benefits worth the extra work it takes to design a new way of delivering instruction?”

ProLiteracy America believes that the answer to the last question is a resounding “Yes!”—and that even students who receive their primary instruction through one-to-one tutoring are helped by participating in some form of group work.

The benefits to students can be many. Among them are reduced feelings of isolation, access to a peer-based support system, an increased sense of belonging to a community, and a growing feeling of ownership of the learning process. All these benefits tend to result in greater enthusiasm for learning and increased retention rates.

We at ProLiteracy America are convinced that small-group instruction can have benefits for literacy and ESL students alike. However, we understand that every literacy program is different. Each program has to carefully consider whether small-group instruction will fit its particular needs.

We hope that the attached information will help you in your decision-making process. You’ll find information about small-group instruction that is of special interest to program managers and to staff and volunteers who support students and instructors, including:

- questions program staff need to ask themselves when deciding whether or not to offer small-group instruction
- descriptions of the four types of small-group learning that a program might offer: primary instruction, supplemental instruction, special-topic classes, and project-based groups
- interviews with tutors and students who are enthusiastic about small groups and able to discuss both the advantages and the disadvantages

Communities of Learners: Each One Teaches Others

A Definition

Small-group instruction goes by many names, each carrying its own nuances. *Collaborative learning*, *cooperative learning*, *participatory learning*, and *project-based learning* are just a few of the terms associated with small-group learning. For the purposes of its plans, ProLiteracy has defined small-group instruction to mean a group of two to about five learners. The learners see themselves as part of the group. They share a common purpose and make decisions together about the group’s goals.

Varied Purposes

Small-group instruction can take many shapes and serve many purposes. A one-size-fits-all approach to small-group instruction doesn't serve the diverse needs of basic literacy and ESL learners, nor does it serve the differing capacities of programs sponsoring the instruction.

Most small groups have one of the following as a main goal:

- to provide primary instruction
- to supplement primary instruction (e.g., conversation groups, writing workshops, grammar or spelling classes)
- to explore special topics (e.g., math, citizenship, job readiness, health)
- to complete a project (e.g., organizing a student conference, publishing a book of student writings, getting out the vote)

Reasons to Try It

Small-group instruction offers several advantages for programs, volunteers, and learners. For example, it can create a "community of learners," where the pressures, opportunities, and responsibilities of teaching and learning are shared. It provides an alternative for students and tutors who don't want the isolation of one-to-one tutoring. In the face of growing literacy and ESL demands, it maximizes program resources, including volunteers, staff, and time. It can prepare students to go on to adult basic education classes and GED classes. For ESL learners in particular, it provides English practice with a variety of people and a ready-made lab for cultural discussions and real-world interactions. (See the "Small-Group Learning Possibilities" piece for more details.)

Meeting the Challenges

ProLiteracy recognizes that small-group instruction may add new twists to the familiar challenges of volunteer-based literacy work: managing groups, training volunteers, orienting students, keeping records, and assessing progress. ProLiteracy's efforts to support small-group instruction will attempt to address these areas.

ProLiteracy will also be offering small-group instruction workshops for program managers, trainers, and tutors at national, regional, and state conferences. Future issues of LitScape will also provide articles to help ProLiteracy affiliates learn more about the possibilities of small-group instruction.

ProLiteracy America Recommends:

For All Students

- Make small-group and one-to-one learning opportunities available to students through primary instruction, supplemental instruction, special topics, and/or project-based learning.
- Encourage students to participate in one or more types of small-group learning.
- Train small-group tutors in appropriate small-group instructional techniques, materials, and assessment procedures.

☑ For ESL Students in Particular

- Place ESL learners in small groups for their primary instruction whenever possible.
- When it's necessary to place ESL learners with one-to-one tutors, offer other programming opportunities for ESL students to come together in groups (e.g., conversation clubs, citizenship preparation classes, or groups to plan programwide special events), and encourage students to participate.

Small-Group Learning Possibilities

Small-group learning can take many forms. It can be the way students learn all the time or part of the time. It can be the format for comprehensive basic literacy or English as a second language curricula. It can deliver smaller chunks of learning in supplementary classes, themes, or projects. Listed below are ideas for small-group learning that programs have used effectively.

Primary Instruction Groups

Regular, comprehensive, ongoing instruction is organized around reading, writing, and/or English-language development; e.g.,

- biweekly or daily ESL groups
- biweekly or daily basic literacy groups

Supplemental Groups

Instruction is organized around targeted skill development in an area related to the primary instruction; e.g.,

- grammar
- spelling
- phonics
- writing
- English conversation
- math
- pleasure reading
- public speaking

Special Topic Groups

Instruction is organized around the exploration of topics or themes of particular interest, generally for a fixed period of time; e.g.,

- managing finances
- math for home improvement
- local history
- gathering oral histories
- getting a commercial driver's license
- health
- cooking
- first aid
- starting your own business
- voting
- understanding welfare reform and your rights
- career exploration
- how local government works

Project-Based Groups

Instruction is organized around producing a product or seeing an event from planning through evaluation; e.g.,

- making story quilts
- publishing student writings
- planning, implementing, and evaluating a family, student, or community event
- taking a field trip
- renovating a room or building
- making a video or children's book
- developing a readers' theater group or literacy theater group
- celebrating International Women's Day (March 8) or International Literacy Day (September 8)
- creating a job portfolio
- publishing a community resource book
- maintaining a student bulletin board
- planning a student strand in a conference

Thinking About Small-Group Instruction: A Starting Point

How can your program move toward implementing small-group instruction? As you consider the possibility of adding small groups to your instructional offerings, here are some important things to think about.

Preliminary Questions

1. What are the benefits of small-group instruction for:
 - our program?
 - our students?
 - our tutors and trainers?
2. In what areas would small-group instruction be the best "fit" for our program?
 - ESL?
 - literacy?
 - math?
 - other areas?
3. Is any change in our mission statement required?
4. Does this instructional change have the proper "buy-in" from:
 - students?
 - tutors?
 - trainers?
 - staff?
 - board members?
5. Will offering small-group instruction present any public relations issues? (Many programs promote individual instruction as a unique benefit.)

Questions About Instruction

1. How will small-group instruction help to:
 - provide primary instruction?
 - supplement one-to-one instruction (e.g., conversation groups or writing workshops)?
 - provide instruction on special topics (e.g., health, citizenship, or study circles)?
 - enable students to work together to complete a project?
2. How long will the groups last? Will we offer:
 - a four-week writing workshop?
 - a six-week project?
 - a 12-week semester?
3. Who will teach our groups?
 - paid staff?
 - volunteers?
4. How will students enter and exit groups so that group members can have a sense of group identity and learn effectively together over time?
 - through open entry and exit?
 - through closed entry and exit?

Getting Ready

1. In what areas will training be required for instructors?
 - group process?
 - facilitation skills?
2. What materials are best for the type(s) of small-group instruction we select?
3. Will we need to adapt materials?
4. What location(s) will we use?
5. Will students need any orientation to or training about learning in small groups?

Processes

1. How do we decide which students should be assigned to small groups?
2. How will we match students to particular groups (e.g., by skill levels, geographic location, or interests)?
3. How do we address such logistical issues as:
 - scheduling?
 - availability of materials and equipment at instruction sites?
4. In a small-group primary instructional setting, how will we provide for students who have specific individual needs from time to time (e.g., an ESL student who can keep up with the class conversationally but needs extra help with reading and writing, or a student who has specific work-related goals)?
 - arrange for concurrent one-to-one sessions as needed?
 - pull student temporarily from group and provide one-to-one instruction?
5. Will we assess student progress in our groups? If so:
 - which types of groups will we assess?
 - how will we assess them?
6. What methods will we use to manage the groups?
 - reporting of attendance and instruction?
 - supervision?
 - recording student progress?

Basic Advice for Moving Forward

Important steps you can take when considering changes to instructional offerings include: conducting focus groups of students, volunteers, and board members; reviewing your mission statement; and talking with—or, better yet, visiting—a program with experience in areas you’re considering.

As with any new effort, it helps to start small. Begin with the area that seems the most natural fit for your program. Evaluate as you move ahead, and don’t be afraid to make changes if things aren’t going well. Keeping in contact with someone who has experience with small-group instruction can be very helpful as well.

Small Groups: Open or Closed Entry and Exit?

A primary issue to address in implementing small-group instruction is whether it's best for your program to have open or closed student entry and exit. Should your program allow students to come into and leave a group at various times (open entry and exit), or should it keep group membership stable throughout a cycle of instruction (closed entry and exit)?

Each approach has its advantages and disadvantages. A description of how other programs have resolved this question is given below. Learning what other programs have done, and why, may be helpful as your program considers open and closed student entry and exit.

The Nashua Adult Learning Center in Nashua, N.H., uses open entry and exit for basic education groups. Diana Owen, GED counselor at the center, explains that a deciding factor in choosing this policy was a desire to have new students begin instruction as soon as possible. Owen said putting students on waiting lists often means they won't come when instruction is available. "We want to accommodate them when *they're* ready to start," she says.

In the Nashua program, new students enter groups only once a week rather than every day. This limitation helps teachers maintain some sense of continuity. For example, they can at least develop weekly lesson plans.

Within groups that have open entry and exit, some individualized instruction is necessary. The Nashua program offers individualized instruction through use of workbooks, computers, writing, and projects. Group instruction is often organized around clusters of students' needed skills. The center also uses some smaller subgroups based on students' needs.

Owen recognizes that this approach can bring challenges for instructors. "Open entry is harder on the teacher," she says. "Teachers need to be extremely flexible."

The Pasadena ESL Program of the San Gabriel Valley Literacy Council in Pasadena, Calif., offers a citizenship class with closed entry and exit. This class has specific content that prepares English as a second language students to take the written citizenship exam.

"People popping in isn't good. There's just enough time scheduled to cover the content," says Joanne Costantini, director of the program. Students attend one-hour classes twice a week for an eight-week period. Instruction moves ahead regardless of the number of students in attendance.

Project: LEARN in Cleveland, Ohio, offers two closed-entry groups: a pre-GED class and a group called Student Orientation for Success (SOS). SOS runs on a 10- to 12-week cycle and helps reduce the program's waiting list. That's because students can choose the group if they don't want to wait for a tutor. SOS offers basic instruction and an orientation to the overall program.

Barbara Watson, associate director of Project: LEARN, says that after much discussion, SOS planners decided on closed entry. Their rationale was that SOS was a new effort, and they wanted to get a good handle on its effectiveness. Also, they previously had tried an open entry student book club and found that the continual entry of new students disrupted the core group. Some of the students disliked the backtracking that was necessary to get new students caught up with the rest of the group. The teacher also preferred closed entry.

Policy Advantages and Disadvantages

Open Entry and Exit

This policy has logistical advantages. It allows programs the flexibility to assign new students to a group at the students' convenience. This is helpful when programs use small groups to reduce waiting lists or take on students whose regular tutors become unavailable for any length of time.

A disadvantage of the policy is that new students can disrupt a group. Also, the policy demands a great deal of flexibility and creativity from teachers and tutors. It requires individualized instruction to avoid a constant struggle to get new students caught up with the rest of group, and it can be problematic in content-heavy instruction. Open entry is less problematic when students are at higher levels.

Closed Entry and Exit

This policy has several advantages. It offers a chance for the group to develop a strong identity. Students can build relationships that have a positive effect on learning. The policy presents limited organizational challenges for teachers and tutors. It allows a wide variety of instructional options, including group projects and curricula with a lot of specific content.

A disadvantage is that group size dwindles when members leave and can't be replaced. Some programs practice flexibility by allowing students to join the group during the first week or two of a new cycle.