

Effective whole class discussions

H. Ernst and K. Colthorpe, School of Biomedical Sciences, University of Queensland, St Lucia, Qld, Australia.

Large undergraduate physiology courses at the University of Queensland consist primarily of lectures and laboratory classes. First year students may also participate in voluntary Peer Embedded Group Study (PEGS) sessions, but limited formal contact hours in 2nd and 3rd year courses often prevent tutorials from being offered. Analysis of student responses in summative assessment suggests that students have difficulties with assessment tasks that require analysis and synthesis. Without tutorials students seem to lack opportunities to apply physiological concepts and to interact with their peers and staff, which results in poor knowledge construction and poor learning outcomes. Students' desire for a tutorial-style learning environment is also evident in formal student evaluations. To increase interaction and feedback in 2nd and 3rd year physiology courses we introduced large-class tutorials, "lectorials", that challenge students to engage with the course content. These highly interactive "lectorials" are held for the whole class after a series of about 5 lectures, present no new material to the students, but use clinically-orientated problems that cover the previous lecture series. Prompting questions are used to start whole class discussions. These discussions usually lead to a variety of responses and additional questions from the students, allowing other students to provide further input until a consensus is reached. Students seem to value this new learning environment, demonstrated by high attendance rates, positive formal student evaluation and informal staff and student feedback. "Lectorials" offer students a chance to test their understanding and to rank themselves within their peer group. They also promote interactivity, provide immediate feedback to staff and students and contribute to improved learning outcomes.