

## Communication in Small Groups

This handout will address three important topics germane to small group communication. First, we **define what a small group is**, then we cover **types of small group presentations**, and finally propose a 5 step called **Dewey's Reflective Thinking Method**, for problem-solving in small groups. This information is intended to help you understand the small group communication process more clearly, so as to be able to communicate more effectively in small groups, and to present material effectively as a small group.

First, a small group is defined as a small number (usually between 3 and 20) of people that interacts with each other face to face to achieve a common goal.<sup>1</sup> Because small groups have a common goal, they are interdependent.

As for small group presentations, these can take various forms; the oral report, symposium, and panel discussion.<sup>2</sup> An oral report is a speech presenting findings, conclusions, and decisions of a small group. They can typically be presented by one member of the group who summarizes what the group did and found out. A symposium is a public presentation in which several people present prepared speeches on different aspects of the same topic. If a professor asks you to research different aspects of a topic and to each present some material on that topic, then you are being asked to present in symposium form. Another format is a panel discussion, which is a structured conversation on a given topic among several people in front of an audience. This type of presentation will be quite spontaneous, so skill in catching the main theme of a question or comment, and in designing a clear, relevant response will be needed.

As you prepare for your small group presentations, a rational method of group decision-making or problem-solving will be useful. John Dewey's Reflective Thinking Method is a well known and effective series of steps that logically lead you to a well thought out decision or conclusion. The steps are:

### 1) Define the problem.

This means identifying what the problem is. It may seem obvious to some, and unnecessary to do, but it is surprising how people can differ in their views of what the problem even is.

Example: Defining the problem for a small group presentation would entail looking at the class assignment requirements. What is it that we need to do? What are the criteria that will be used to evaluate us?

### 2) Analyze the problem.

Analyzing the problem involves taking the problem and dividing it into smaller parts and looking at it from various angles.

Example: In order to meet those criteria, what specific ingredients do we need to include? Do we need to use specific visual aids? Do we have to have an introduction/body/conclusion?

### 3) Establish criteria.

Discuss what criteria you as a group are expected to meet, as well as your own specific group members' expectations. Do you want it to be visually pleasing as well as mentally stimulating? Or are your group members focused on doing research and sharing that knowledge with the audience?

### 4) Select several potential alternative solutions.

Discuss among your group members, the various ways that you can achieve the criteria that you are given or criteria that your group has set for the problem, as you conceive it. Don't feel compelled to narrow down to only one alternative, but rather discuss and note several potential alternatives.

### 5) Select the best alternative.

Among the various alternatives that your group has produced, which would be the best one to implement? Some ideas are great "on paper", but realistically would be difficult to implement. Your group should discuss this and get feedback from all members about this and hopefully come to a consensus about which is the best alternative. Voting is one way of deciding on the best alternative, but not the optimal method, as the "minority" could feel uncommitted to the conclusion that the majority agrees with.

Some people state that there should be a sixth step, that of implementing and assessing the selected solution, so that the process can be repeated until the ideal solution is found.

<sup>1</sup>Adler, R. & Rodman, G. (1997). *Understanding Human Communication (6<sup>th</sup> ed.)*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

<sup>2</sup>Lucas, S. (2001) *The Art of Public Speaking (7<sup>th</sup> ed.)*. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.