



# A phenomenological research study: Perspectives of student learning through small group work between undergraduate nursing students and educators

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Small group work is an effective teaching–learning approach in nursing education to enhance students' learning in theoretical knowledge and skill development. Despite its potential advantageous effects on learning, little is known about its actual effects on students' learning from students' and educators' perspectives. **Objectives:** To understand students' learning through small group work from the perspectives of students and educators.

**Design:** A qualitative study with focus group interviews was carried out.

**Methods:** Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were performed with 13 undergraduate nursing students and 10 educators.

**Results:** Four main themes, “initiative learning”, “empowerment of interactive group dynamics”, “factors for creating effective learning environment”, and “barriers influencing students' learning”, were derived regarding students' learning in small group work based on the perspectives of the participants. The results showed the importance of learning attitudes of students in individual and group learning. Factors for creating an effective learning environment, including preference for forming groups, effective group size, and adequacy of discussion, facilitate students' learning with the enhancement of learning engagement in small group work. The identified barriers, such as “excessive group work”, “conflicts”, and “passive team members” can reduce students' motivation and enjoyment of learning.

**Conclusion:** Small group work is recognized as an effective teaching method for knowledge enhancement and skill development in nursing education. All identified themes are important to understand the initiatives of students and group learning, factors influencing an effective learning environment, and barriers hindering students' learning. Nurse educators should pay more attention to the factors that influence an effective learning environment and reduce students' commitment and group dynamics. Moreover, students may need further support to reduce barriers that impede students' learning motivation and enjoyment.

## 1. Introduction

Small group work is an innovative teaching–learning method that is increasingly applied in current modern curricula that require students' active learning and collaborative attributes in various educational settings. This method embraces a change in teaching mode from teacher-centered approach to student-centered learning approach (Mennenga and Smyer, 2010; Mills and Alexander, 2013; Sanasuttipun et al., 2009). Evidence showed that small group work provides an opportunity for students to not only apply their learned knowledge and skills but also broaden their learning through peer interactions and collaborations (Chiriac, 2014; Mennenga and Smyer, 2010; Sanasuttipun et al., 2009). With the growing utilization of small group work, there comes

the need for better understanding of students' learning and the important areas to facilitate students' engagement. Small group learning is crucial to nursing education because students can get immersed in collaborative activities and make contributions to work in a group (Gagnon and Roberge, 2012).

During nursing education, nursing students can learn theoretical knowledge and practical skills in the classroom and laboratories. Afterward, they are required to integrate the learned knowledge and skills to provide quality and competent care for patients. To maintain the quality of clinical care and to reach optimal patient outcomes, nurses need to work with other healthcare professionals (Bimray et al., 2013; D'Souza et al., 2014). Small group work embraces a lot of advantages on knowledge enhancement and skill development, including

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fostering personal and professional achievements (Tyler, 2014). Although small group work is increasingly employed as an effective teaching–learning pedagogy in nursing curricula, little is known about students' learning through small group work between students and educators. The results of this study can help increase nurse educators' awareness to facilitate students' learning through an effective small group learning approach and appropriate management of barriers.

## 2. Background Literature

Small group work refers to a teaching–learning method consisting of both collaborative and cooperative learning to acquire new materials, to review materials, and to achieve a common goal (Jackson et al., 2014; Kouros and Abrami, 2006). Small group work is well-recognized as a favorable teaching–learning approach that enhances students' learning through active involvement (Hillyard et al., 2012). This teaching–learning approach acts as an incentive for learning while students are working in a team toward an achievable goal with the instructions provided (Mabrouk, 2007). Small group learning fosters deep learning with multiple collaborative skills and defined learning objectives. This approach increases group dynamics and improves learning motivation. It also optimizes theoretical knowledge, skill development, and social interactions (Chiriac, 2014; Copp, 2002; Hillyard et al., 2012). Moreover, it helps students create and engage in a learning environment to enhance individual and group developments, such as self-directed learning and team interactions respectively. Certainly, this approach has been widely used in higher education and professional training (Drees et al., 2007). However, speaking of effective group size, there are discrepancies of student numbers in a group and there is no consensus on an appropriate group size for students' learning yet.

Small group work embraces advantages in developing both in-depth theoretical knowledge and essential skills as students need to gather related information independently and interact with their groupmates to achieve the goal (Chiriac, 2014; Noohi et al., 2013). Students reflect their learning, analyze, evaluate, and synthesize learned concepts, gather and integrate relevant knowledge to foster their personal development (Clark et al., 2008; D'Souza et al., 2014; Feingold et al., 2008). Thus, small group work encourages students' active individual commitment and provides for a student-centered learning environment, leading to better group interdependence to complete a group project.

Not limited to individual development, small group work can develop inventive learning through mutual interactions, diversity of experiences, shared learning opportunities (D'Souza et al., 2014); the whole group is benefited. It also facilitates knowledge enhancement and retention as well as the development of various skills. Many previous quantitative studies reported better skill training, and theoretical knowledge retention and application through small group learning (Burdett, 2007; Chiriac, 2014; Clark et al., 2008; Sanasuttipun et al., 2009; Shaw et al., 2015). Core higher-level skills include communication, critical thinking, leadership, problem-solving, management, and collaborative skills (Burdett, 2007; Chiriac, 2014; Edmunds and Brown, 2010). Nurses are professionals and work as a part of a multi-disciplinary team. Nursing students need to learn to collaborate and communicate with other healthcare teams for better patient outcomes (Bimray et al., 2013; D'Souza et al., 2014). Thus, small group work provides a positive learning environment for students to establish collaborative attributes and maximize students' learning capacity (Mueller-Joseph and Nappo-Dattoma, 2013) and better preparation for clinical practices (Austria et al., 2013). However, knowledge is still inadequate to understand the areas that facilitate students' learning in small group work. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify areas that facilitate students' learning through small group work from students' and educators' perspectives. The results can help increase nurse educators' awareness to facilitate students' learning effectively through a small group learning approach and appropriate management of barriers.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Design

A qualitative design with focus group interview was carried out. This study design allows participants to share their personal experience during the discussion. Further clarification and explanation can be made using this research approach to enrich the content of the topic.

### 3.2. Participants

Participants (nursing students and educators) were purposively selected by invitation from different cohorts of undergraduate nursing students at a professional educational institution. They were recruited when they were involved in small group teaching approach.

### 3.3. Data Collection

A semi-structured face-to-face focus group interview with 3–4 students or educators was conducted. Interviews with open-ended questions were carried out to invite participants to express experiences freely in small group learning/teaching from students and educators. The interviews lasted about 45 to 90 min and were digital audio-recorded. Data collection was stopped when data saturation had been reached.

### 3.4. Ethical Considerations

Approval was sought from the research ethics committee of the study educational institute. Participants were requested to sign an informed consent once they had agreed to participate in the study. They were assured that all data related to their personal information were kept strictly confidential and anonymous.

### 3.5. Data Analysis

In this study, Colaizzi's method was used for data analysis (Colaizzi, 1978) because it provides a rich description of the essential structure of the phenomenon (Forrest, 1989). First, each interview was digitally audio-recorded. Each participant's verbatim statements were transcribed, read, and reread to obtain significant statements. Meanings were formulated afterward and sorted into categories or clusters of themes. Then, the findings were integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. Data analysis was conducted independently by the principal researcher and the research assistant to ensure rigor and trustworthiness. All discrepancies were discussed by the two researchers until a consensus was reached.

## 4. Results and Discussion

All students were nursing students from year two to five and all educators were registered nurses with teaching experience from 2 to 30 years. Small group work is an innovative teaching–learning method that is increasingly applied in modern curricula that require students' active learning and collaborative attributes (Chiriac, 2014; Edmunds and Brown, 2010). Thirteen students and ten educators were interviewed. Most of the students preferred learning additional knowledge and skills they could not be obtained in traditional study formats.

*Student 6: I prefer group work. Group work and presentation facilitate communication among groupmates. We can learn from our classmates, such as their personalities, through communicating with them. Through working in a group, we know what teamwork is and how it works. Therefore, it is similar to working in the clinical practicum.*

*Student 12: I think group learning is more effective and I can learn a lot. For example, if a group works on a topic, we search for information*

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