Small Group Feedback And Coaching:
How To Prepare for and Facilitate A Small Group

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I. How To Prepare: Establishing Your Objectives/Goals In Advance Of The Session

A. **Establish the learning objectives before you enter the workshop session.**

Before you begin to coach or give feedback, you must decide what you are trying to achieve with the person you are coaching. This cannot be a general goal such as "teach him how to cross-examine." It must include specific skills or techniques. For example, it might be to "facilitate the performance of the techniques of effective cross-examination, such as: (a) use of chapters, (b) use of leading questions, (c) use of one-fact questions, (d) looping.

Many small group facilitators fail because they assume that their job is simply to listen to a student's performance and then critique that performance. For coaching and critique to be successful though, the facilitator must decide in advance what he or she wants the student to get out of the breakout session. But . . . .

B. **It is equally important that you listen carefully to both what a student or students might see as their needs and to the beginning of the student's performance and adjust your goal to what you are discovering about that student's skill level and needs.** For example, you might ask a student if there are parts of cross-examination he or she finds difficult and would like to work on. Or you may begin with the goal of coaching a student on how to impeach with a prior inconsistent statement, but if it becomes obvious that the student does not know how to ask a leading question, you will have to adjust your goals with that student accordingly.

C. You are likely to have multiple goals or objectives for a particular breakout session.

For example, a single session may have both of these goals: "to teach her to design chapters for a cross-examination," and "to teach her to create leading, one fact questions for each chapter." However, if you have more than one objective, you must be sure of the following:

1. That each goal is related to elements of the skill or topic that is the subject of the breakout.

2. That the goals are consistent with each other and, where called for, build upon one another.
3. That the goals are all specific and performance based.
4. That you have enough time to achieve all of the objectives.
5. That you have few enough goals so that the student is not overwhelmed by the volume of material he is faced with. As a general rule four or five objectives is a good number for one breakout session.

D. **A useful tool for preparing your objectives** is to write them out in this format: "At the end of this session, the participant will be able to (Fill in the specific skill you want them to be able to perform that they could not do before the session). For example: "At the end of this session, the participant will be able impeach with a prior inconsistent statement using the R-A-C (Recommit, Accredit, Contrast) method."

E. **Make sure your objectives are realistic**

1. Are they consistent with what you know about the skill level of your students?
2. Do you have enough time to accomplish them?
   WARNING: If you don't have enough time to accomplish all your goals, it is always better to cut back on the number of goals rather than trying to cram them all into insufficient time.
3. Are you overwhelming the student with too much information?

F. **Other preparation tasks**

1. In any bring-your-own case skills workshop, familiarize yourself with the participants' case summaries.
2. In any advocacy skills workshop, know the participants' theories of the case or sentencing.
3. Once you are far enough into a program to have a sense of the group dynamics, the participants' personalities, and their strengths and weaknesses, consider before each breakout:
   a. What techniques or exercises might help improve the group dynamics if needed.
   b. What techniques or exercises might be suitable, given an individual's learning needs and personality, in facilitating his or her learning and comfortably stretching their skills.
   c. Which participants may, because of their strengths and personalities, be able to help one or more other participants by demonstrating a skill or by some other method.
   d. Whether a participant's chosen objectives are off target and how to tactfully and respectfully redirect them to objectives that will better facilitate improvement of their skills.

II. General Principles For Small Group Facilitation

A. **Create a safe environment**

It's not about you as the facilitator. It's about the participants and improving their skills. Consequently, "That was terrible, let me show you how to do it" is a completely unproductive way of giving feedback. All comments, by faculty and students, should be respectful and constructive, not insulting. People must feel free to make mistakes; this will allow them to stretch their skills, and mistakes can be incredibly valuable learning experiences. This means everyone must know that they will not be embarrassed or attacked if they do something poorly. Disagreements about strategy or tactics are fine. They should be talked out. But disrespectful behavior should not be tolerated, and as facilitator, the rest of the group will be looking to you to address it should it take place.

Start the first session by making clear that the atmosphere should be one in which people feel safe to experiment and try new things: (a) All comments should be respectful and constructive; (b) No comments should be personal; (c) What happens and what is said is confidential; the only possible use of it might be by faculty (without attribution) in determining how to improve the workshop; (d) Feedback may come not just from the facilitators, but also other students, though limits may be placed on the number of comments due to time constraints; and (e) Nobody will go to jail as a result of the workshop exercises, so it is a good time to stretch. Another ground rule that is helpful in promoting group cohesion is for the group to understand that they are all there to help each other improve, and anyone might be asked to comment or perform at any time; it is a group effort – when one person is "up," everyone is up.

B. **Personalities and individual styles are largely irrelevant.**

Our goal should not be to get a participant to change his or her personality (that is impossible) or style, but to get the participant to develop skills within the context of his or her personality or style. Note, however, that an assessment of personalities can be helpful in determining how to approach a participant and what types of exercises or techniques to use in addressing his or her learning needs. See, for example, section D 4.

C. **Each performance should include having the student do a targeted re-performance.**

Performance, then Critique, then Re-performance is an excellent way of structuring the session for each student. Time constraints usually make it impossible to have the student re-do his or her entire performance. It is very productive, though, to target a limited part of the performance the student can improve, focus your feedback on that issue, and then finish the session by having the student re-perform that piece. The reason this works so well is that virtually everyone improves on their re-performance, and when participants see themselves improving they are more likely to buy into the entire learning process we are using.

D. **Try to make sure each student gets equal time to perform**

It is human nature to spend more time on the first student or two who performs, and then, finding ourselves a little behind in time, spend less time on the last few performers. There are several ways to prevent this:

1. Make sure you calculate in advance how much time should be allotted for each performance. Then have someone serve as timekeeper to warn you when time is almost done for a performance.

2. Start with a different student at each session. That way no one feels they are constantly going last and getting shorted on time.

3. If a student is overly modest (or trying to hide) and insists, "My case is only a misdemeanor, so why not let me go last," assure them that all of the cases are important to the client, and everyone is getting equal time. Then make sure you follow through.

III. Facilitating The Small Group Session

A. Creating A Safe Environment

Lead by example. If your students see that you are respectful, they will be respectful. Never insult a participant. Never be dismissive or scornful of a student's concerns or opinions. If a person gives a bad performance or says something dumb, there are polite, respectful ways of addressing it. *See, Section II.A above.*

B. Starting the Breakout Sessions

1. **Start the FIRST breakout session** with a small group by having everyone introduce themselves and tell the group something about themselves in 2 minutes or less. When it is your turn (it can be helpful for the facilitator to go first to model what is expected), introduce yourself and tell them something that has nothing to do with your work life (there are any number of ice breakers that can be used, and some will be identified at the faculty meeting).

2. **If the small group session follows a large group plenary session on the same subject, begin the small group by asking the students if they have any questions or concerns about the material covered in the large group session.** This will save considerable time and clear up misunderstandings that would otherwise interfere with student performances in the small group. Be sure not to allow this discussion to take up too much seminar time, but also be sure to answer any concerns the students may have about what they are supposed to be doing in the workshop.

C. Starting Individual Student Performances

1. **Before each student performs, establish a context and/or standards for the critique that will follow. In any type of advocacy skills workshop, the context**

and/or standards will nearly always be one or more of the following: (a) the theory of the case; (b) the specific goal or goals of the skill being performed: and (c) the learning objectives for the specific breakout session. So, you might:

a. Use the student's theory of defense or story to form the context. Do this by reminding the student of his or her theory of defense and asking "How does the performance (direct, cross, opening, etc.) you are about to do advance your theory of defense or story?" Or . . .

b. Start by asking the student, "What are you trying to accomplish with the performance (e.g., cross, direct, closing) you are about to do?" Or . . .

c. Have the student explain which of the techniques learned in the large group session he or she intends to use in the small group session performance.

d. Have the participant identify areas of the skill he or she has difficulty with and would like to work on.

The main purpose of starting the session this way is that if the student has stated in advance what she wants to accomplish with her performance, she is more likely to accept criticism that is based on what she herself has defined as important.

A second reason to start this way is that if the student states a purpose for his performance that is not productive, you can immediately help the student adjust it to a more useful goal. If you must adjust a student's aim, it is far more productive to help the student make the change on his own, rather than imposing a new goal on him by fiat. For example: Rather than saying, "It doesn't seem like a very smart idea to use your cross to beat up a woman whose whole family died," you might ask the student, "What problems can you foresee if you beat her up like that?," "How does beating her up fit within your theory of defense?" "Is it essential to your theory?" "Can you think of a way to avoid those problems?" Drawing on the opinions of other participants in the group can also be a very useful way of getting the student on the right path.

2. **What if the student refuses to accept the context?** There are two effective techniques for dealing with this:

a. Let the student do the performance the wrong way. When it becomes obvious that things are going off the rails, interrupt, get the opinion of the rest of the group, and then have him try it the right way. Or . . .

b. Ask the student to try it the way you are suggesting, and assure him that if he doesn't think it works, he can try it the other way.

D. **Coaching Decisions During the Breakout Session**

1. **When should the facilitator interrupt a student's performance?**

Interruptions should be used judiciously. Examples of times when they are appropriate are:

1. When the student is completely off target and shows no sign of recovering (e.g., is not at all directed at advancing his or her theory of the case).
2. When the student makes a very obvious mistake or keeps making the same mistake over and over (e.g., repeatedly does not ask leading questions on cross).
3. When the student is lost and floundering (e.g., it is obvious that the person has no goal for, say, cross-examining a particular witness, or is doing nothing to achieve a stated goal).

Whenever you interrupt a performance your aim should be to help the student correct the immediate problem he or she is having, and get back to the performance as soon as possible. Your feedback at that time should be very performance based and limited to the problem at hand, not something that the student messed up ten minutes ago. Most important, do not end the session with the interruption. Make sure the student has a chance to renew the performance and get it right. The targeted re-performance, in which the student is directed to re-do just a piece of the performance he was having trouble with, is a good way to accomplish this. Do not interrupt so frequently that it is impossible to determine whether the performer's exercise is directed at their case theory or story, or the goal of the exercise.

2. **When should the facilitator demonstrate "the correct way" to do something?**

Sparingly. Demonstrations can be a very good thing in a large group/plenary setting. But they are much less productive in a small group where the purpose is for the students to perform. The biggest danger is that demonstrations give participants the impression that you think they are incapable of doing the task so the teacher must take over. A second danger of doing a demonstration is that once you have finished, student performances may all imitate yours.

An alternative to doing a faculty demonstration is to ask the rest of the group how they think the performance could be done, and then have one of them do a piece of it. That way the students learn from each other and don't get the feeling that they are incapable of doing it right. If the second student does a better job, let him go on for a short while and then have the first student take it from there.

A second alternative to doing a demonstration is to have the entire group do it in seriatim fashion - for example, if you are doing a cross-examination problem and the student performing is having trouble fashioning a coherent set of questions, you can have each

member of the group ask one question directed at a specific topic, continuing until the group has constructed a good line of inquiry.

If you feel it is essential to do a demonstration, the following rules should help:

1. Keep it very short
2. Make sure it is very specific to the problem you are trying to solve.
3. Make sure it is something the students will believe they are capable of replicating. The goal is not to show you are the best in the room at the particular skill. So if you are teaching a group of beginners, do a demonstration of a simple technique – say one fact questions on cross – rather than a more sophisticated one, say looping on cross.
4. Quickly get back to the student performing.

3. **When should the facilitator use war stories?**

Rarely, if ever. And only under the following circumstances:

1. The story makes a very precise and clear point that you can't figure out to make in another way.
2. It is very short.
3. It is true.
4. It is not repetitive.
5. It is not meant to glorify you. That means stories of good exploits by others, which you attribute to others, are better than stories about you.

4. Guidance on Factors to Consider and Techniques to Use in Coaching/Facilitation

1. See section IF and numbers IIID, 1 through 3 above.
2. Use coaching techniques or exercises appropriate for the skill at issue, e.g.:
    a. If a participant consistently uses interviewing techniques such as a lack of eye contact, vocabulary that is not understandable, and poor body language, consider asking them to imagine they are interviewing a friend about what happened over a beer in a bar.
    b. If a participant consistently fails to ask one-fact questions on cross of a witness in his or her case, leave the case and have him or her do the "You're So Cold" exercise, in which he or she must make one fact statements (questions) that demonstrate that you are cold, such as: "It is 3:00 a.m." "It is 28 degrees outside." "You are buck naked." "You are barefoot." "You are standing in snow."
3. See the list of other possible techniques attached, which is not meant to be exhaustive but is provided as examples.
4. Use techniques or exercises suitable for the skill level and personality of the participant. For example, if a person has a very formal personality and

they are conveying their client's story in drab and formal language, you might ask them, if they have children, to tell the story as if they were telling it to their children and want them to experience the sounds, sights and smells of the event – to use descriptive and evocative language.

E. Giving Feedback During or at the End of a Performance

In addition to creating a safe environment by encouraging experimentation and speaking and behaving respectfully, the following are also aspects of effective feedback:

1. **Feedback is a dialogue and discussion, not a lecture**. The more interactive it is, the more likely the student will be to accept feedback, and the more successful the feedback will be. Feedback should include positive aspects of a performance; in fact, the student is often more receptive to comments on the need for improvement if he or she has first received positive feedback. It must, however, also include an honest, but tactful, discussion of specific areas to improve or work on.

2. **Feedback must focus on the specific things the student did or did not do in a performance.** A general critique ("that was pretty good") is almost worthless. Feedback must explicitly direct the student to the things in his or her performance that should be improved, and should leave the student knowing what he or she can do to improve it (e.g., after a cross-examination exercise, "at times you did not use leading questions.")

3. **Students can learn from their own insights and other students.** Students are often quite self aware and it can be helpful to begin by asking the performer how she thinks she did; when someone has identified an area for improvement him or herself, they are more receptive to feedback about it. Invite other students to participate in the feedback. You can always re-direct the conversation if they are wrong. You can always have the last word. But most of the time they will make productive suggestions that you can build on, (**Note:** Every student need not provide feedback on every performance as time is limited.)

4. **Giving feedback to the student who performs well**

1. Let the student know that she did a good job.
2. Point to specific things he did or said that worked (e.g., after an exercise on cross-examination: "You used chapters," "You used leading questions throughout," and "You asked one-fact questions."
3. Ask the rest of the group what they thought worked about the performance.
4. Often you can use that student to make a point for the others. Ask the student questions such as "Why did you do it that way?," or "Why did you choose to start with that point," or "What other options did you consider, and why did you choose this one?" The answers will often make a point that the other students can learn from.
5. If possible, make a suggestion as to how the student can take the next step in improving her performance.

5. **Giving feedback to the student who performs poorly**

1. Don't personalize the critique.
2. Refer to the context you established before the performance – what did the student say she was trying to achieve?; how did he say the performance would advance his theory of defense? Ask the student how the performance did or did not achieve that goal.
3. On rare occasions, a performance will be such a mess that it is hard to figure out where to start. Or there was so much wrong with the performance that we run the risk of overwhelming the student with too much feedback. A good way of dealing with this situation is to allow the student to define the proper areas for critique. You can always ask, "What do you think gave you trouble?" "Why do you think that was a problem." Most students who do poorly are very aware that they did not succeed, and are relieved to be able to define the areas they had difficulty with. This avoids embarrassment, and carves out an area where the participant says he is willing to accept feedback.
4. Choose just two or three points to make with your feedback. Any more will lose the student. In the short time we have in workshops, most people are not capable of absorbing too much information or instruction. Select what is important for critique and leave the rest for another time.
5. Make sure that your critique finishes by having the student re-perform a small part of the performance. They always improve the second time around, and come away more accepting of the feedback because they saw, at least in that little context, that the technique works.

Selected Small Group Coaching/Facilitation Techniques

Beer with a Friend (interviewing, jury selection): Use a tone, body language, eye contact, and language as you would when talking with a friend over a beer.

Fairy Tale Time (particularly for opening and closing): This can take one of two forms: (a) Have the participant give the opening or closing to their 9 year old child; or (b) Have them give an opening or closing for "The Three Little Pigs."

Red Light, Green Light (for opening, closing, interviewing): Red light means stay where you are and give more detail, green light means GO – Move On.

See Me, Feel Me (for a number of skills practices): If a participant is having trouble expressing a scene, or a mood, or the feelings a witness or client might have had, do a physical reenactment or a psychological reenactment. This can be done (a) with the performing participant or another one alone – ***Imaging with Words and Images***: If the participant is not effectively using evocative language consistent with his or her theory, have him or her close their eyes and describe the scene in detail with sense descriptions that are vivid – purple the color of Barney; the smell of burning flesh; the sound of grinding, crunching, screeching metal;

or (b) with any number of group members reenacting the scene from a physical and/or psychological perspective.

Sweet Little Somethings (for direct, cross, interviewing): If the participant is having trouble with sequencing and/or wording of questions, and traditional explanatory feedback didn't work, instead of demonstrating, whisper the questions into his or her ear and after they've asked five or six, have them repeat them without the whispering assistance.

Tagged In (for almost any skill practice): Participants can learn from each other; sometimes, if one makes a suggestion about how the performing participant might do something – "tag them in" – that is, have them get up and do it rather than say it.

You're so Cold (for cross): If a participant or multiple ones are having problems limiting themselves to one fact per question, have them cross you on the fact that you are cold, one fact per question, e.g.: It is 28 degrees outside? You are outside? You are wearing a short-sleeved tee shirt? You have no coat on? You have no sweater on? You are wearing shorts? You are wearing flip flops?