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The Resource Page

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A small group is not a class: understanding group math

Some time ago a local church educator shared with me about an attempt to form a new small group from out of a large Sunday school class. Desiring to provide a more effective and meaningful learning experience for his church, he created a new study group that would use the dialogical learning approach in which the “instructional” teacher role is de-emphasized to favor a learner-centered emphasis. This approach to learning stresses the use of small groups in which participants engage in dialogue of life experiences related to biblical concepts. There was enough hunger for this at that educator’s church to cause a number of people to move out of a large class of about 100 people that used an instructional-lecture approach.

The new small group started out well, with about 12 persons. People were excited about being able to engage in dialogical learning. They reported that the new format made a great difference in how they were learning. Not only were they studying the Bible more in-depth, but they also were able to get to know each other better. They were excited about the deep insights they were able to acquire by sharing their life experiences and connecting them with the biblical text. It wasn’t long before this excitement started attracting others and, soon, the small group grew into a large group of 30. Most people interpreted this as a success. But gradually, some began to notice that their small group had turned into a class — and they were reverting back to one or two leaders lecturing week after week.

One of the most interesting dynamics of small groups is how the numbers of participants who make up the group affect interaction and dialogue and, therefore, how that factor impacts learning. The larger the group, the less opportunity there is for participation, discussion, sharing and dialogue. As the

size of the group increases, more and more members participate less and less. As a result, a few members tend to dominate the discussion. Instead of thinking about the “right” number of participants who make up a good small group, the better question may be: “What is the best number of participants in this group for what I want to accomplish?”

Small study groups can vary from 3-25 persons. Each combination of participants in the group impacts the small group dynamics in different ways. “Group math” is about understanding which small group size is best suited for which learning task. This information will help you make decisions about which groupings to use with certain methods and for certain learning outcomes. If your small group is too large to be effective in accomplishing a certain task, then you can decide to form smaller learning groupings for the purpose of your learning outcome. Remember, bigger is not necessarily better. Consider the implications of the following group sizes:

2 — for intimate sharing and efficient processing of simple concepts or personal experience that does not need to be shared with the larger group as a whole; can be formed within a larger group context as a way to process certain personal sharing or to engage in a simple learning activity

3 — for discussion and dialogue, but has drawbacks and limitations such as a “two-against-one” dynamic developing, where two dominant members can shut out a passive member, or one person in the triad dominates discussion if neither of the other two can manage the group time or learning process

4 — for discussion questions and dialogue; can effectively handle up to five dialogical (higher order discussion) questions in an allotted time period of at least 40 minutes

5 — for processing discussion questions and engaging in dialogue; can effectively handle three to four dialogical questions in an allotted time of at least 45 minutes

9 — for a problem-solving task; can suggest just about every possible solution to a problem without getting stuck; provides sufficient “critical mass” for the members to be assigned or adopt particular group roles for good process

15 — optimum for a small group; can remain intimate and interactive, given enough space and time, with a good teacher-facilitator; can also form smaller units (dyad or triad, or groups of four and five) for more effective discussion followed by debriefing

18 — optimum for a traditional class; allows for dialogical learning through smaller units (dyad, triad, groups of four or five); dialogical discussion possible with a highly skilled leader

25 — ideal for classroom instruction; maximum for a small group, with constant re-groupings into smaller discussion clusters necessary unless two smaller permanent groups are formed

When moving from an instructional classroom approach to those most suited to the small group environment, we may be tempted to move back into the comfort zone of anonymity, passivity and non-participation in the learning process. When that happens, it’s worth remembering that a small group is not a class. And in those times, it’s helpful to go back and do some “group math” and resist the temptation to trade off effective learning for a large class. **BT**

(Portions of this article are excerpted from *How to Be the Best Christian Study Group Leader Ever in the Whole History of the Universe* by Israel Galindo. Copyright © 2006 by Judson Press. Used by permission.)

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