CHAPTER 9
Pedagogical Benefits of MUVE
Small Group Learning Activities

This chapter reviews the pedagogical benefits of MUVE small group learning activities, such as accountability for small group participation, quantification of small group dynamics, and changing dysfunctional group behavior.

This chapter is for you if:

1. You are interested in MUVE small group learning activities.
2. You are planning a MUVE small group learning activity.

Pedagogical Benefits of MUVE Small Group Learning

Many of the pedagogical benefits offered by one-on-one MUVE learning activities also apply to MUVE small group learning. Small group MUVE learning is situated, self-directed, and independent with a high degree of objective self, peer, and group evaluation using activity transcript analysis. In addition, several teaching and learning benefits are specific to MUVE small group learning.

Group Participation Accountability

Transcript analysis of small group learning activities affords a high degree of accountability for members’ contribution to both the team task and group process performance. Using a learning activity analysis matrix and the activity transcript, students can perform self, peer, and group evaluations. These include analysis of skills related to group task achievement as well as individual and teamwork skills. Both activity grades and suggestions for improvement can be based on objective data. This level of objectivity and data-driven feedback is only possible in traditional face-to-face small group activities if they are video recorded, a resource-intensive process that is rarely practical. Even in simulation laboratories with video capability, review of video is not only time-consuming but also cumbersome.
Using transcript analysis to evaluate MUVE learning activities can also assist the course instructor with intervention in small group problems that are difficult to address in face-to-face learning activities. One such problem that creates significant student dissatisfaction in small group work is fair evaluation of the quality and quantity of individual members’ contribution to face-to-face small group assignments. Students often complain of inequality in both quality and quantity of group members’ contributions. Some group members dominate the group while others habitually undercontribute. Still other group members may disrupt or otherwise undermine group productivity. When this kind of inequity in contributions to group work occurs, group performance and morale are both seriously affected.

Unless a face-to-face small group activity is videotaped, there is no way for an instructor to evaluate the quality of each student’s group contributions. It is similarly difficult to identify and address inequality in group participation. In addition, when less formal evaluation methods are used, important prosocial group behaviors such as group leadership, constructive feedback, affirmation, mediation, or conflict resolution may not be identified. Use of transcript analysis in the evaluation process makes this possible.

When a MUVE small group activity transcript is used for self-evaluation, students can easily identify their own under- or overparticipation. Disruptive behavior is obvious. Data provided from activity transcripts are objective and can provide the basis for peer and instructor feedback as well as plans for performance improvement. When students know that transcript analysis is part of every group discussion, they participate more consistently and at a higher level. Thus, one significant pedagogical benefit of MUVE small group learning is the degree to which the volume, quality, and actual work of small group membership can be objectively evaluated. Student accountability becomes the rule, not the exception, and assignment grading is data driven, reflecting actual individual performance.

**Group Dynamics**

When analysis of a MUVE small group discussion transcript is a routine part of a small group learning activity, there is greater accountability for group dynamics. Group phenomena that obstruct effective learning, such as interpersonal conflict, subgrouping, or collusion with underperformance, are easy to identify in the activity transcript. On the basis of the transcript data, behavior can be identified and goals set for student behavior change. The objectivity of this process reduces what can potentially be an emotionally charged problem. A teachable moment occurs when students review the transcript data themselves and the instructor offers theory and content specific to dysfunctional group
dynamics. Students can evaluate their own performance against specific criteria. The instructor can then offer suggestions for performance improvement. The group’s own ongoing self-evaluations become the foundation for continuing improvement and accountability.

Inexperienced small groups often have difficulty identifying causes of group dysfunction. They may lack either knowledge to articulate and problem solve or the interpersonal skills to confront problems in the group. They usually simply report that the group is not working. Individual group members may express dissatisfaction to the instructor or each other. In this case, group work products are often negatively affected. Using transcript evaluation and analysis can help a group identify causes of group dysfunction. This improves not only group satisfaction but also group work products. In addition, the group has an opportunity to learn invaluable lessons about group dynamics and constructive conflict resolution.

In situations in which the group knows perfectly well what is wrong with the group (one person dominates or does all the work, underparticipation is not confronted, or there is disruptive behavior), data from analysis of learning activity transcripts can be used to improve group performance. The group can use transcript data to identify problems, plan for solutions, and evaluate the effectiveness of their plan. Using this evaluation method, the group develops skills for both evaluating and improving team performance. As the transcripts are evaluated over time, the small group has the opportunity to track their group performance improvement. The instructor’s role is to support this performance evaluation and improvement process, as well as to guide students with theory and specific skill guidance.

**Talking Story: Changing Group Behavior**

Leaving class one day, I trailed behind a group of class members leaving our classroom. One of them was obviously blowing off steam. “I just hate small group. It is always the same. I do all the work or it just doesn’t get done.” One of her friends nodded and offered, “Just confront the other people and tell them they have to do their part.” Her friend snorted and answered, “Right, except that doing that and holding their feet to the fire is more work than just doing it myself. At least I know the group will get a high grade if I do most of the work.”

I have heard complaints like this many times before. Occasionally, a group member such as this will meet with me and complain that others are not doing their work. Often, they do not perceive that their own overfunctioning may be related to the underfunctioning of others. Students’ perceptions that making others do their work increases their own work or that leaving the group to
flounder results in a poor grade are hard to dispute. I decided to try an experiment. I changed the planned small group MUVE learning activity. It was to have been optional, but instead I made it mandatory for the whole class. This meant adding MUVE orientation to my class plan and a bit of juggling and finessing, but I thought it would be worth it. I told the members of the class who had not participated in the previous voluntary MUVE activities, “You only have to do it this once.”

The next discussion group included a transcript analysis of the MUVE learning activity. Because the class focus was research, I turned it into a data analysis project. We talked in class prior to the assignment about qualitative and quantitative data and the importance of analyzing both. I offered an illustration of the way that both quantitative and qualitative data could be used to evaluate small group teamwork. Students were assigned a small group discussion in which they discussed a specific ethical topic. After the assignment, each student analyzed both his or her contributions to the group and those for each group participant. Each student received points for frequency and quality of contributions, as well as gems (contributions of particularly high value). Not every group loved it, but every group improved. Patterns of under- and overperformance were clear. Groups were clearly confronted with opportunities to improve team performance. The class learned to hold all team members objectively accountable for team tasks. Overall, small group participation improved once students knew that there was an objective way to evaluate their performance.

**Leadership Development**

MUVE learning offers a unique opportunity for students to practice small group leadership skills, even if leadership is not the focus of the class. MUVE discussion groups, clinical rounds, or other MUVE small group activities give students a chance to practice leadership skills. A MUVE learning activity offers students a way to improve leadership skills through specific feedback from both peers and the course instructor. Courses that focus on leadership development and group leadership responsibilities can be included in learning activity requirements. In other classes, extra credit can be offered for students who volunteer to provide small group leadership. The MUVE learning activity transcript can be used for evaluation of leadership performance, not only in students’ self-evaluations but also through feedback from peers and the course instructor. Such evaluations are based on the performance requirements of the individual MUVE learning activity and can be quantified through the assignment grading rubric.
Grading Equity

Grading of traditional small group activities is often a sore subject for students doing small group projects. In groups in which one or more students underparticipate, the other students have to contribute more work toward the total group grade. This contribution inequity constitutes an unfairness that is difficult for students to confront among themselves and impossible for faculty to confront without specific data. Usually, all students from such a group get the same grade for the group assignment. Everyone involved, including the instructor, is usually aware of the unfairness of this system but lack the data to make it more equitable.

If small group planning meetings are in themselves MUVE activities, transcript data and subsequent work product evaluation can provide the basis for grading that is objective and specific to each group member. Grade the planning sessions! What a novel idea! If the instructor chooses, transcript data can be used to determine individual as well as group grades for group project planning and execution. This can result in significant improvement in students’ attitudes toward small group work. The students who typically do most of the work feel that it is more fair. Students who typically underparticipate are held accountable with objective data. The group planning transcripts can be used to keep a record of students’ assignments, follow-up, and performance. This effectively creates “minutes” of the group meeting, for which group members are held accountable.

Economy and Quality of Learning

Small group MUVE learning activities take less time than face-to-face groups. When small groups meet face-to-face in class, time is lost physically moving from the classroom to the small group meeting location. More time is expended as the group settles down to the task; gets started; moves through socially awkward moments, distractions, and disruptions; and then finally focuses on task completion. Frequently, only half of the allotted time for small group learning is productive, task-focused interaction. If small groups meet in one place (for example, in the classroom), there is little privacy, and the noise of so many people talking at once can interfere with group communication. This is not the case in a MUVE small group activity. In a MUVE learning activity, learning takes place in an undistracting and relatively private environment. Because the students are aware there is a transcript of the activity, the learning activity starts and focuses very quickly. Typically, the meeting objectives are met through a satisfying and enriching process. When students know there is
a transcript of the discussion, they get the work done! When they do not, the
transcript provides clear evidence of this for grading purposes.

MUVE learning activities such as discussion groups can be offered as an
option in lieu of class time. In classes where I do this, the small group discus-
sion portion of the class happens in the last hour of class. Students have the
option of staying for the face-to-face discussion group. Students who choose
the MUVE discussion option leave class as the face-to-face discussions begin,
after scheduling a meeting time for their MUVE discussion group. Group mem-
bers can be at home, in the student lounge, or in the school library. Often, busy
students prefer such discussions to be in the evening, on weekends, or early in
the morning. When surveyed, even students who do not particularly like MUVE
learning agree that such discussion groups are highly convenient, are efficient,
and provide a high-quality learning experience. There is a learning efficiency
and effectiveness offered in this kind of learning that supports good use of the
resources of time and energy for students.

Talking Story: Not for Every Student?

A student in one of my classes was one of those brilliant students who inspires
both their peers and their teachers with the depth and passion of their learn-
ing. I was disappointed when this student chose not to participate in optional
MUVE small groups, choosing the face-to-face option instead. I kept saying,
“Try it! I think you are going to love it.” He consistently answered, “Nursing is
face-to-face and that is how I prefer to learn.” But after hearing his peers rave
about their MUVE groups, he tried one. I still have the lengthy e-mail he sent
me afterward. He discussed at length the differences he saw, the depth of the
learning, the density of the activity, its economy, the energy it generated, what a
good thing it was for nursing, and how much fun it was. He concluded by say-
ing, “I get it now. I totally get what you are doing with the MUVE activities, but
I still prefer learning face-to-face.” MUVE learning, even when its advantages
are appreciated by students, may still not be their preferred way to learn.

General Description of Small Group MUVE
Learning Activities

Introduction and Purpose

Small group MUVE learning activities are diverse and can be used to address
a wide range of performance outcomes. They can be very simple activities or
quite complex. They can be used to focus on specific course content or engage
group process outcomes.
Group process and group dynamics such as collaboration can be evaluated easily using the MUVE transcript. This means that group evaluation skills such as performance evaluation and group processes such as collaboration, problem solving, or conflict management can be easily evaluated. Small group MUVE learning thus has the potential for a higher degree of complexity than solo or one-on-one MUVE learning.

**Target Population**

MUVE small group activities are appropriate for a wide range of learners. They are highly effective for undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral-level students. The number of participants can affect learning effectiveness. For most MUVE small group activities, there should be approximately six participants. Fewer than four can create a less effective group dynamic, as there is more pressure on each participant. With greater than six participants, it can be difficult for all individuals to participate sufficiently.

**Performance Outcomes**

Performance outcomes for small group MUVE learning activities can include demonstration of topical content application, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence abilities, evaluation skills (self, peer, and group evaluation skills), collegial and interdisciplinary relationship skills, clinical skills such as interviewing, development and maintenance of therapeutic relationships, one-on-one teaching, patient counseling, therapeutic communication interventions, and teamwork skills such as task organization, time management, and task prioritization.

**MUVE Setup**

Small group MUVE learning activities require more detailed planning than solo and one-on-one MUVE activities do. It is recommended that novice MUVE instructors begin with relatively simple MUVE activities such as discussion groups, moving to more complex activities after basic instructional MUVE skills are well established.

**Activity Procedures**

The success of a group MUVE learning activity depends on a clear set of procedural steps for the activity. The instructor should outline steps for the activity prior to beginning student orientation to the activity. More complex MUVE
small group activities may involve the addition of more sophisticated instructor MUVE skills. For example, an instructor may choose to manage several avatars at once during a learning activity. In the Second Life® exam described in Chapter 2, the instructor uses four to five different avatars. (“See Tools to Use: How to Manage Two Avatars at One Time” in Chapter 11.)

**Evaluation of Small Group Activities in MUVE**

An evaluation matrix for a small group MUVE learning activity focuses on objectives for the learning activity. These may include course content, communication skills, and team skills. All group participants can be evaluated on one grading matrix. The matrix can include criteria for each individual’s performance as well as group performance outcomes. Summative activity data can also be included on the same matrix. Because MUVE small group activities involve more peers and an entire group to evaluate, both the sophistication and volume of evaluation possible with small group MUVE learning activities are greater than with other MUVE learning forms.

**Portfolio Evaluation**

If portfolio evaluation is used, transcripts for small group MUVE learning activities may be added to the students’ portfolios. Self, peer, and summary instructor evaluations may also be included. This opportunity for 360-degree evaluation using the objective data from the MUVE small group learning activity transcript is unique and valuable. Because small group MUVE learning activities are typically complex, summative and formative evaluation of the instructional activity itself is an important part of the evaluation process. This provides a means for instructors to both track instructional performance improvement and improve the learning activities themselves.

*Reader’s Roadmap: Where Are We?*

This chapter has reviewed and described the pedagogical benefits of small group MUVE learning activities. Chapters 10–12 will present detailed descriptions of basic, advanced, and complex MUVE small group learning activities.