Small group selection

MOST PARTICIPATORY TECHNIQUES REQUIRE SMALL GROUPS. Deciding how these groups will be formed should not be an afterthought. This chapter explains why it's a good idea to guide group selection, lays out selection criteria, and describes various ways to perform effective group selection.

Why you should facilitate small group selection

Here are two reasons why you should use a thoughtful process to form small groups.

First, leaving it up to participants to choose their other group members tends to lessen learning. When allowed the choice, we naturally tend to create groups with people we already know. Though having friends or colleagues in your group is comforting, it can limit open sharing and resulting learning, especially about intimate or controversial issues. Psychologically it is often easier to share with strangers who we may well never meet again, as we are spared any future consequences or repercussions arising from what we say.

Second, one of the principal advantages of small group work is the opportunity and ease of making new, useful connections with others. The practice, common in some cultures, of requiring an introduction by a third party before meeting and conversing with someone still has force in today's meetings. A group selection process essentially acts as a third party, giving people who do not yet know each other a formal introduction by assigning them to the same group and then guiding them into activity together.

Goals for small group selection

Before dividing people into small groups you need to be clear on the reasons for forming them. Those reasons determine the selection strategy. Here are the most common objectives.

Have people meet and connect with new people

It takes time for two people to meet and start to get to know each other through conversation. Add a third person, and this process takes two to three times longer. Why so much longer? Because two people need only *one* conversation, but three people need *three* pairs of conversations, less some time saved because some of what one person says to another in the trio might contribute to connection with the third group member. Four people need six conversations, five people ten, ten people 45, and so on.

Dividing participants into small groups helps to ensure that everyone will connect with a minimum number of others for a chosen quantity of time and/or process. By selecting the group size used, we can control the level and amount of person-to-person interaction that's appropriate for the participation technique we've chosen.

Performing activities that require groups of a certain size

Many of the techniques described in this book require group sizes in a specific range, either because the technique itself demands it, or due to the time constraints of the associated session or event. For example: opening roundtables (Chapter 32) become unwieldy and tiring with more than 60 participants, pair share in a fixed seating auditorium would not work with more than two people per group, and affinity grouping with 500 people would take too long to be effective.

Growing communities of practice

Educational theorist Etienne Wenger coined the term *communities of practice*, defined as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." Events are usually designed to meet the needs of communities of practice. To *grow* communities of practice during a session or event, members need opportunities to interact among themselves in ways that deepen their connection around their common interests.

Unfortunately, in large groups, interaction loses coherence. Either one person is talking while everyone else listens and conversation disappears, or multiple side conversations spring up in the same physical space, which is potentially distracting and dispiriting for everyone present.

The larger the group the harder it becomes to hold a genuine conversation. Typically a few people monopolize opportunities to speak, and the rest listen or tune out.

If you wish to support the communities of practice at your event, restrict large groups to broadcast-style activities where they're appropriate, such as lectures and presentations. The rest of the time, use small group activities that allow meaningful connections to increase and strengthen.

Obtain a wide variety of perspectives

A common goal for small group selection is to create groups of mixed experience, abilities, and viewpoints (aka *heterogeneous* groups). Mixed groups enable novices to interact with experts, those who

have just entered a profession or field with gray-haired veterans, vendors with potential clients, academics with practitioners, and those of different political and social stripes with each other. If we want to foster new learning, catalyze original viewpoints, share restricted knowledge and experience, we need to create heterogeneous groups in which the differences encourage the kinds of creation, worldview growth, and learning that we want.

Allow similar participants to work together

Sometimes it's appropriate to create groups in which members share similar experience and/or abilities (aka *homogeneous* groups). In training situations, for example, you may wish to group novices and those with prior experience separately so they can work on a given task with others who are at a similar level. The novice groups can then practice without being embarrassed or intimidated by the superior skills of those who have performed the task before.

Another example when homogeneous groups are useful is when both industry practitioners and suppliers of products and services attend the same conference. You may wish to keep these two groups separate during small group work so that the practitioners feel free to discuss information about suppliers or their own circumstances that they would be uncomfortable sharing with the suppliers—and vice versa.

Incidentally, I avoid assigning participants to tables by geographical origin, as at most conferences people prefer meeting those they consider their true peers irrespective of whether they work near each other.

I suggest limiting the use of homogeneous groups. In heterogeneous groups, novices learn from more experienced participants and the latter usually enjoy being helpful to the former. Additionally, novices often contribute effective questions and a fresh viewpoint to even the most jaded practitioner. If it's unclear to you which kind of group would be most effective for your particular circumstances, it's unlikely you'll be disappointed by choosing groups with a variety of experience, abilities, and perspectives.

How large should small groups be?

Some participation techniques such as pair share dictate the size of a small group, but most of the techniques in this book can handle a range of sizes. Often, the desirable group size will be influenced by the time available for the technique. If time is tight, choosing a larger number of smaller groups will allow each member more time to share. On the other hand, larger groups provide a wider range of perspectives and more resources for group and individual problem solving.

In general I'd avoid creating groups of more than eight. There should be enough time for each person in a small group activity to have at least a few minutes to talk and share. General discussions can be larger, but small group intimacy is lost in larger groups.

General considerations when forming groups

Ask for a commitment to stay for the entire small group process

It can be, at the very least, disconcerting if one or more participants leave in the middle of small group process. Session facilitators need to stay alert for such incidents.

To reduce premature participant departure, make it clear that, barring unexpected circumstances, participants are expected to stay for the duration of the small group process. (Be sure to specify how long it will last!) Then give those who can't fully participate time to leave.

Although it's obviously impossible to ensure that everyone will stay throughout the life of a small group, making it clear before group formation begins that the process will suffer if people are planning to leave early will help minimize the disruption that the loss of a member can cause.

Small groups using a common process should be approximately the same size

If you're planning to run the same process with a number of small groups, they should be as close to the same size as possible. (An exception to this is if you're running small general discussion groups on topics with a range of participant interest; even under these circumstances, avoid groups of wildly different sizes—consider splitting popular groups to maintain roughly equal group sizes.) If you don't ensure similar sized groups, those in the larger groups will be short-changed with respect to the quantity of individual participation and attention they get.

In practice, successful small group sizing entails ensuring that each group either contains your target number of people or has, *at the most*, one fewer person.

This can be surprisingly hard to achieve! People tend to disregard directions when creating multiple groups. Typically, they form more groups than are needed and do not actively look for spaces in existing groups. Read the instructions for group formation below to avoid this.

Splitting large numbers of people into small groups takes time; usually more than you'd expect. Be sure to allow for this when estimating your timing for a session.

Performing group selection

Here's how to do heterogeneous (differing abilities/experience) and homogeneous (similar) group selection.

Heterogeneous group selection

The simplest and quickest way to seat more than around a hundred people in a fairly heterogeneous way is to seat them at random, asking them to sit at one of a set of tables with preset chairs or in given

size circles of chairs *with people they don't know*. With fewer than a hundred participants, ask them to count off as you point to them (see below) and then sit with those with the same number. These methods usually work well enough, unless people ignore your request to sit with others they don't know.

To guarantee a heterogeneous mix of participants in each group, first decide on a participant measure that you'll use to define heterogeneity. This is nearly always the number of years of industry/field/topic experience of participants, though you can substitute another measure if it's more appropriate.

Count the number of people present, divide by the number of chairs at each table or in each circle and round up your answer to the nearest whole number.

For example, if there are 53 participants and eight chairs you'll need 6.625 tables, which you round up to seven tables. (In this case, you'll end up with four tables with eight people each and three tables with seven people each.)

It's helpful to have the tables or circles of chairs set up in advance, with a card at each displaying the table/circle number (in the example above, one through seven).

Now have participants line up in a one-dimensional human spectrogram (see Chapter 33) in the order of the measure you've chosen.

Start at one end of the spectrogram, point to each person in turn, and have people count off from one up to the number of tables or circles of chairs needed; that is, the first person says "one," the next, "two," and so on, and in the example above the seventh person says "seven," and then the eighth starts again at "one," and so on. Tell everyone to remember his or her number. When everyone has counted off, ask any who don't recall their number to figure it out by asking their neighbors.

Finally, have participants move to their respective table/circle of chairs.

Homogeneous group selection

To create homogenous groups based on a single measure, like years of experience, use a similar procedure to the one described above. Once the human spectrogram is lined up, simply split the line into groups of the desired size. For example, with 56 participants in seven groups of eight, the first eight people would be in group one, the next eight in group two, and so on.

To create homogeneous groups that are divided by industry/job description/etcetera, first ask the people in each category to move to separate places in the room. Then create the small groups from each category in turn, by asking people to move into equal-sized groups with people they don't know.