

Facilitating group digital skills sessions

Small group sessions are a great way to deliver digital literacy programs as they allow participants to learn from and support each other, and encourage social interaction between your participants.

Facilitating discussions and activities is an important skill which encourages everyone in the group to participate. This skill can be applied to a wide range of situations, including training sessions, workshops, meetings and discussions.

Your role as a facilitator is to guide the group to a common goal while still giving them the freedom to explore the topic in their own way.

Energise the group throughout the session

Start your session with introductions and an ice breaker. This helps to get the session off to a good start, and allows participants to get to know each other.

Consider moving participants around the room for each activity, where physically possible. Approaches like "move to sit with people you haven't already worked with" and allowing people to work it out themselves can work well. This introduces some physical activity into the session, acting as a quick energiser immediately prior to the group starting a mental activity. Some groups may be slow to respond to having to move, so if it doesn't go smoothly the first time with a group, consider 'numbering' people '1, 2, 3' so that all the 'number 1s' sit together.

Manage participation

Communication styles of participants may vary, along with their quantity of verbal contributions, but it is important that you give everyone the chance to participate.

Draw out quieter participants by directing a question to them rather than the whole group. Try asking a 'safe / easy' question to give them the confidence to answer.

If you have dominating or very talkative people in the group, consider allocating different members of the group roles to add structure and create engagement. Roles could include timekeeper, note taker, or person to give feedback at the end of the activity. This can subtly take the focus off loud people as well as encouraging others to contribute.

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If an individual is sidetracking or taking over the discussion, consider trying the following techniques:

- Move the focus away from the person. It can be easier for you as the facilitator to step in and ask other people what they think rather than group members doing it themselves.
- Ask that people write down their own ideas in their small groups, then share with their group to form a group approach
- Say that you need to move on but that you'd be happy to chat with them further about any issues or concerns after the session.

Adjust your facilitation style

Forming a team takes time, and members often go through recognisable stages as they change from being a collection of strangers to a united group. Your facilitation style needs to adapt throughout the session to meet the needs of the group as the dynamic changes.

At the beginning of a session, the group are still getting used to being together and may be unsure what's expected of them or what they need to do. Taking a fairly directive style works well here. For example:

- If splitting people into groups, tell them who is in which group rather than asking them to work it out for themselves.
- Offer direct support to anyone struggling.
- Monitor the groups closely to check that everyone understands what they need to do and gets the opportunity to contribute.

As the session progresses, the group will have settled down and be working more effectively. They will be more used to socialising together and peer to peer support is likely to come more naturally. You can take a lighter touch approach, for example:

- When splitting people into groups, tell them to work with people they haven't been in a group with before (then let them work it out themselves).
- Delegate support roles to more confident participants.
- Monitor the group's progress less closely - just check that they understand the task and leave them to it.

Be honest and transparent with the group

It's possible that someone might come up with a new idea for a subject you've covered many times before with other groups.

If someone introduces you to a new way of doing something during the session, show appreciation for them teaching you something you didn't previously know. This will increase their confidence in their own knowledge.

You may also get asked a question you don't know the answer to. It's ok to not know everything. Let them know that you are not sure, and either put in place a plan to find out and get back to them after the session, or suggest a way they could find out the answer themselves through further research or a secondary contact point.

Ensure objectives for each activity are clear

Often, a session will be broken down into smaller, separate activities.

Check that all people attending your session understand what each activity is and what you'd like them to do. Let people know what outcome you're expecting at the end of the activity, such as someone feeding back their ideas to the wider group, or having completed an online learning module. Be prepared to describe each activity in two different ways, to make sure everyone knows what you are trying to achieve together.

Let people know how long they have to complete each activity. If possible, have this information somewhere visible for people to refer back to during the activity.

Give people the opportunity to ask for clarity. If possible, check-in with group members individually once they've started to confirm their understanding. This also allows people to ask questions more discreetly than in front of everyone.