

Group Dynamics: Tuckman's Stages of Group Development in Small-Group Tutorials

A resource for reflection and discussions during workshops and training

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Introduction

Bruce Tuckman, American psychologist and researcher, is renowned for his five-stage model of group development. The model is widely used in various settings of group functioning to gain insight into the interpersonal dynamics among group members while performing tasks. In 1965, Tuckman outlined four stages of group development (*forming*, *storming*, *norming*, *performing*) based on a literature study. In 1977, he (together with Mary Ann Jensen) added a fifth stage (*adjourning*), which extended the dynamics to include the closure of the group cycle. Table 1 below (Tuckman, 2001:66) summarises the mentioned model according to the two realms of "group structure" and "task activity".

Table 1: Stages of Group Development

	Group Structure The pattern of interpersonal relationships; the way members act and relate to one another.	Task Activity The content of interaction as related to the task at hand.
Forming: orientation, testing and dependence	Testing and dependence	Orientation to the task
Storming: resistance to group influence and task requirements	Intragroup conflict	Emotional response to task demands
Norming: openness to other group members	Ingroup feeling and cohesiveness develop; new standards evolve and new roles are adopted	Open exchange of relevant interpretations; intimate, personal opinions are expressed
Performing: constructive action	Roles become flexible and functional; structural issues have been resolved; structure can support task performance	Interpersonal structure becomes the tool of task activities; group energy is channeled into the task; solutions can emerge
Adjourning: disengagement	Anxiety about separation and termination; sadness; feelings toward leader and group members	Self-evaluation

Convinced of the value of the above model for understanding group dynamics, the theory was included in tutor training sessions in the Humanities Faculty at the University of Pretoria to support tutors in facilitating group processes during small-group tutorial sessions. However, there was a need for a training resource which could guide tutors to be aware of and support students through the different stages. The authors conducted research to gather information from tutors and students in the Faculty of Humanities to determine how the five stages would be evident during small group tutorials in a university setting. Our point of departure was the assumption that students who form part of small group tutorials experience particular forms of group dynamics. Tutor respondents valued the Tuckman model as a potential framework to better understand their students' thinking, feelings and interactions, to offer relevant support and guidance. Acknowledging that the order of these stages is somewhat flexible, Table 2 below summarises experiences and ideas gleaned from the research. These can be used to inform discussions during training on small-group tutoring and other cooperative and collaborative environments.

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Table 2: Five stages of group dynamics during small-group tutorials

How can this stage be described? (What do students and tutors experience, and how do they behave?)	Ideas to facilitate group cohesion (What can tutors do to support students?)
Forming: Orientation, testing and dependence	
- This is a stage of liminality, experienced every now and then. - If tutorials are regularly attended, the phase is experienced less later on. - Students experience a need for contact and connection. - There is excitement and eagerness to participate. - The unknown environment may cause high anxiety levels, nervousness and apprehensiveness (incl. scepticism and frustration). - For some, this may be the first time taking part in group activities (an intimidating, yet positive experience) — needing to participate, be active, and make a good impression. - Students are not familiar with one another (even awkward); unwilling and uncertain to participate. - Some students are shy, scared and highly dependent on the tutor for guidance and direction. - On the other hand, some students are overconfident, posturing and using big words. - Students form connections and gain skills over time, while students joining late still need to find their way to fit into the group. - Students are more reserved and do not offer many personal opinions.	- Where possible, introduce yourself or have yourself introduced to students by lecturers prior to the first session. - Introduce yourself, the subject and the purpose of tutorials properly at the beginning of the first session. - Let students introduce themselves during the first session, or even before (through facilitated activities, using online platforms). - Plan properly and be well-prepared for every session. - Be professional. - Display a welcoming, empathetic, engaging and encouraging attitude towards students to gain trust. - Encourage and ensure good communication. - Have (topic-relevant) icebreaker activities for students to connect and familiarise themselves with the environment and address uneasiness. - Define clear goals, expectations and instructions where relevant. - Bring students' prior knowledge and life experience into the discussion. - Ensure a safe environment and encourage students to ask questions without hesitation or fear. - Engage students with questions and activities, while providing everyone with a fair chance to contribute and participate. - Respond to students' questions and answers, using appropriate questioning and answering techniques. - Allow some time for this stage at every session.

How can this stage be described? (What do students and tutors experience, and how do they behave?)	Ideas to facilitate group cohesion (What can tutors do to support students?)
Storming: Resistance to group influence and task requirements	
- This stage is experienced every now and then. - This phase is less experienced in smaller tutorial groups where personal interaction and debate are more possible. - The factors that lead to this stage include interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict: <u>Interpersonal conflict</u>, caused by: - o competitiveness (e.g. wanting to be seen as participating more than others) - o different work ethics between students - o difficulty in understanding and accepting others' points of view - o unwillingness to take part in group activities. <u>Intrapersonal conflict</u> (a feeling of discomfort/confusion), caused by: - o internal insecurity - o frustration - o difficulty in verbalising clearly - o fear of being belittled. - The above can lead to disinterest and abscondment. - For some students, these feelings may disappear, for some, they persist till the end. - Storming can be exacerbated by diverse factors, such as: - o fatigue - o tutor actions and attitudes (e.g. when forcing contributions from students) - o complex topics/questions requiring critical thinking - o students not attending sessions regularly.	- Remain professional. - Negotiate principles for participation (ground rules) upfront. - Build confidence by linking to prior knowledge. - Maintain some level of routine and structure during tutorials. - Display a positive attitude towards students and their contributions (refraining from words with negative connotations). - Guide students towards more appropriate answers rather than openly disagreeing with contributions. - Be attentive to students with difficulties in understanding and provide additional support. - Remind students of the purpose of tutorials, namely that it is about their own learning and development (and less about disagreement with others). - Create a safe environment: - o Explain the tutorial environment as a learning platform where everyone is free to express their thinking, make mistakes and gain critical feedback. - o Encourage students to participate and be respectful towards one another's opinions. - o Provide help where needed. - Encourage students to take care of themselves (outside the session). - Engage students in opportunities for practice and revision. - Send personal emails to encourage students to participate in all exercises and to explain the consequences of non-attendance. - Ensure a clear Learning Management System (online) design to alleviate confusion.

How can this stage be described? (What do students and tutors experience, and how do they behave?)	Ideas to facilitate group cohesion (What can tutors do to support students?)
Norming: Openness to other group members	
- This stage is experienced during almost all sessions. - This is the most receptive stage, with increased student participation and active engagement. - Students start to feel more comfortable and confident, more willing to accept one another's ideas and work cohesively as a group. - Students begin to see the value of listening and responding to each other's answers. - There is a greater acceptance of differences. - Students try to help one another, and mutual experience is fostered. - Students are more likely to voluntarily submit to working with a person when a leadership role emerges or is being recognised. - Everything is becoming routine. - <i>Flow</i> is experienced. - The majority participate and work within the negotiated rules of engagement. - Some students start their own study groups. - Conflict is managed well. - Students become more enthusiastic and passionate in their discussions, accepting group discussions as a helpful means of approaching challenging questions.	- Request student feedback for an improved tutorial experience. - Listen actively and be open to suggestions from students. - Continue with efforts to keep students comfortable while toning down on excessive praise. - Reaffirm the purpose of the session as a space in which the tutor and students learn from one another. - Encourage discussions and debate for understanding, pitching these at the students' level, with less complexity and jargon. - Keeping it light with (appropriate) trivia and jokes, yet remaining professional. - Get student feedback on possible ideas that can be incorporated. - Create equal opportunities for students to participate and interact with the content and with one another. - Divide students into mini-groups to prepare their discussion points, helping them to practice expressing their ideas and eliminating individual performance pressure. - Provide questions to analyse the topic and improve understanding. - Ensure individual accountability. - Provide guidance where needed. - Request feedback from the group on areas for improvement and elements they enjoyed and that can be capitalised on.

How can this stage be described? (What do students and tutors experience, and how do they behave?)	Ideas to facilitate group cohesion (What can tutors do to support students?)
Performing: Constructive action	
- This stage is experienced during almost all (especially the last few) sessions. - This is an enjoyable stage, with improved motivation and a sense of personal growth. - Students experience greater levels of comfort and confidence. - Regular student attendance allows this stage to occur early on in every session. - There is a continued increase in participation and peer engagement. - Students have already established a connection with everyone in the group. - There is more clarity on what the module is about. - Students better understand and are committed to the module expectations. - Students are more organised and able to focus better. - Students take greater responsibility for accomplishing their goals. - Students support and encourage one another. - It, however, remains a challenge to maintain concentrated performance. Whereas students are eager to participate at the beginning of a module (as it is new and exciting), excitement and participation dwindle after a while as time progresses due to external influences (e.g. preoccupation with other tests and assignments). - Students' unpreparedness makes it difficult to proceed with in-tutorial tasks.	- Continue with proper preparation for sessions. - Keep up the morale and continue to: - o keep it light and professional; - o communicate clear expectations; - o encourage and acknowledge students' contributions; - o ensure equal participation; - o engage with students; - o use questioning and answering strategies appropriately; and - o provide students with feedback on their efforts. - Retain students' attention by making the content interesting and clarifying the material. - Continue to encourage students to be dedicated. - Explore and share new strategies and guidelines suitable for learning and academic success. - Continue to confirm and provide feedback on efforts. - Provide group debates and exercises to challenge students' way of <i>a priori</i> thinking. - Provide additional challenges to high-performing students.

How can this stage be described? (What do students and tutors experience, and how do they behave?)	Ideas to facilitate group cohesion (What can tutors do to support students?)
Adjourning: Disengagement	
- This stage is experienced during almost all (especially the last few) sessions. - There is a realisation that the process is coming to an end. - Students have different experiences: - o positive and negative - o feeling indifferent vs feeling sad - o expressing appreciation vs just leaving - o ranging from experiencing relief that the module is coming to an end, to experiencing anxiety about the upcoming exams, and now being on their own. - Students want to know what is forthcoming. - Goodbyes and well-wishes are shared. - Appreciation is shared both ways (from tutor to students and <i>vice versa</i>).	- Wrap up the main ideas of the module, highlighting how they connect to the overall goal of the sessions. - Request feedback from students. Ask them how they felt about the module and the tutorial format (e.g. by using informal polling or discussion). - Motivate and encourage students. - Highlight that, by completing the module, they have equipped themselves with skills (highlight those skills) that can be used in future modules. - Show appreciation for students' engagement. - Have a small celebration and congratulate students on their contributions and insights. - Explain to the students what to expect for the following session/week (if it is during the semester), or for the next module/semester/year (if it is the very last session of the semester/year). - Ensure students of your continued availability and support. - Conclude with a final email communication, if relevant.

References:

Tuckman, B.W. 1965. Developmental Sequences in Small Groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 63(6): 384–399.

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