Training by Design:
Structuring Groups to Optimize Training Effectiveness

Most of us have come through a traditional education system (classrooms) and we tend to fall into that education mode when conducting training. That structured, lecture format can be effective in communicating content, particularly to individuals who are visual or auditory learners. However, training is different from education. It includes the application of skills as well as knowledge, and demonstrated ability to perform these skills in real situations. To conduct effective training, it's important to match the structure, roles and interactions of the learning group with the training needs. Here are some samples of training group structures:

Large group lecture format (i.e. 40+ participants)
Advantage: This traditional classroom lecture format can be an efficient format for one presenter to communicate information/content to a number of learners.
Disadvantages: The ability for learners to interact with the instructor may be limited to a few questions. It's difficult for the instructor to tailor the delivery to meet individual needs.
Considerations: Each learner needs to hear and see the instructor, materials, specimens and demonstrations. Participatory learners, social learners, kinesthetic learners may not get much out of this style. Comfort (seats, temperature), frequent breaks, lots of visuals are important to avoid boredom for learners since they're largely passive in this situation.

Discussion group format (15-20 participants)
A larger group can be broken down into several small groups to improve the ability of learners to interact with instructors or trainers.
Advantages: It's easier for learners to ask questions, observe demonstrations and visuals. This may be a less intimidating setting for shy learners, so they may be more interactive. Instructors/trainers can be more sensitive to individual needs and respond to these needs more effectively. Individuals have more choices among several scheduled groups.
Disadvantages: Requires more time from instructors/trainers, and requires more hours in the training space. Adds scheduling and tracking challenges.
Considerations: Personal comfort, ability to see and hear the instructor are still important. Shy individuals may be less comfortable in smaller groups (it's harder to hide). This group structure is still focused on teaching content, and has limited effectiveness in building skills.

Hands-on/skill-building group (4-6 participants)
This smaller number of participants can all get involved in closely observing demonstrations and starting to apply skills.
Advantages: All learners can participate and get personal attention. Instructors/trainers can coach each individual. Everyone gets a chance to practice performing skills. Strong appeal for active learners, participatory learners.
Disadvantages: Very labor intensive for instructor/trainer. Can be intimidating to passive or shy learners. Can entail complicated schedule and tracking for multiple groups.
Considerations: This becomes more practical if you enlist the help of several mentors or training assistants to work with multiple small groups. You'll need to establish standards, procedures, success criteria that are easily applied across all groups to ensure consistent quality performance with all learners.

Practice group (3 participants)
This group is composed of one interpreter, one audience member and one observer. Participants can rotate through all three roles. The interpreter practices his/her presentation to the audience member. The observer collects feedback on the interaction and provides that feedback to the interpreter.
Advantages: Lots of opportunities to practice application of skills and get peer feedback. Establishes beneficial role of feedback. Observers learn from detailed observation of skills, criteria for success, looking at levels for effectiveness. This small group work can maximize practice time for the greatest number of learners in a given amount of time. Very little chance that a learner will be able to avoid performing skills and demonstrating competence.
Disadvantages: Instructors/trainers are spread thin, just checking in with various groups. Variability in the quality of results can increase with decreased instructor contact.
Considerations: It's very important to structure the three roles so each is performed effectively. Students must stay on task and they're responsible for their own success in this setting. Make sure feedback process is understood by students so it's used effectively. Providing a written checklist of success criteria or observation guidelines can be helpful.