



Tips for a Successful Group Discussion

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There are lots of ways to help groups learn. Lectures are great for summarizing lots of information quickly. Teacher-centered call-and-response sessions help students articulate points that an instructor is trying to get across. Games and activities give participants a hands-on appreciation for a specific task or project. Sometimes, though, you need free, non-hierarchical talk. You want group members to apply their learning, experiences, and wisdom to a common problem. And you don't want them to look to the leader for the answer.

This handout is for those times. The next few pages contain a series of tips, honed over a dozen or so years of leading discussions with all sorts of people. They are aimed at drawing out everyone present, so each participant can contribute her or his expertise. I find that I use some of these in every discussion; others I use only occasionally, when the circumstances warrant. I pass them to you, in the hopes that they will help you create good conversations.

Preparation

1. Gain enough background on the topic, so that you know what issues might come up. The more you know, the better the discussion will be.
 - However: it is not your job to join the discussion; you should use your knowledge to help other people talk.
2. Prepare prompts or questions in advance, to use when you want the group to move from one sub-topic to another.
3. Decide on how you will manage the discussion, what ground-rules you will use, etc.
4. Just before the session, take a private moment to center yourself and recall your plans.

Starting the Session

1. Summarize the discussion topic for the group, giving participants an overview of the things to be covered. Be brief and articulate.
 - You may combine this with the discussion-starting techniques, below. If so, however, you should still summarize the topic at the beginning, giving the group clear direction of the road you expect them to take.
2. Set clear ground rules for the discussion, esp. how you will manage discussion:
 - You may wish to have people raise their hands or catch your eye; then make sure you call on people in approximately the order they did so.
 - If you expect the group to be talkative, you may wish to limit participants to 2 comments until discussion has lagged. This lets quieter people join in.
 - If the group is relatively quiet, say you will call on people in case of silence. This encourages people to speak out.
3. You probably won't need to set rules for polite behavior, but you should have some in mind, in case they are needed.
 - You may wish to encourage people to listen to each other.
 - You may also wish to encourage them not to repeat others' points, unless they have more to add.

4. Ask group to affirm the ground rules. Be explicit, but also be open to their ideas for changes.

Discussion-Starting Techniques to Ensure Involvement

1. Ask participants to prepare topics, questions, responses, etc. in advance. Start the session by having them write these on flipcharts, chalkboard, whiteboard, etc.
 - Ask participants to review all these contributions, then have them star those that they find the most interesting.
 - Start the discussion with those that are most popular.
2. Ask participants to think about the discussion topic for a few minutes and write down their responses.
 - Ask each participant to read and (briefly) elaborate on one of her or his responses.
 - Note the responses on a flipchart/whiteboard.
 - Once everyone has given a response, ask for a second or third response, until all the answers have been noted.
 - Use these responses to guide the discussion.

Encouraging Discussion

1. Make sure that discussion moves forward and includes as many participants as possible.
2. Do not join the discussion, as this makes participants feel that you are taking sides. You can, however, shift topics a bit when the conversation is becoming one-sided or stale:
 - You might say: "It seems to me that we're leaving out (topic X)? Does anyone care to speak to that issue?"
 - Don't, however, use this to short-circuit a flowing discussion; use it when discussion pauses, and the intervention promises to bring out additional views.
3. Ask for clarity, if you think it is needed.
 - "I think you're saying _____. Did I get that right?" Then let the person or persons elaborate.
4. It's always okay to ask what the more silent members of the group are thinking. However, be sure to give them a bit of space to think, so they can respond.
 - "I wonder what some of our more silent participants are thinking right now?" Then allow a moment or two of silence, until one of them volunteers to speak.
5. Sometimes people would like a short pause, in which they can write down their thoughts. Don't make this a full break, as that splits the group.
 - You might say: "Now that we've gotten some issues out in the open, let's take a couple of minutes for everyone to write down what they're thinking on this topic."
 - Then pick up the discussion by calling on one of the more silent members: "_____: you haven't spoken yet. Can you share with us what you just wrote?"

Managing Participants

1. If participants respond at too much length, you can intervene and say "Can you just hit the highlights for us?"
 - You may be able to use silence and looking away to curtail the long speech, but this works better in interviews than in discussion groups.

2. If a participant is too brief, ask her or him to elaborate: "That's really interesting: Can you say a bit more about that?"
 - Verbal encouragements also help:
 - "Um-hum!"
 - Mirroring (repeating) the last portion of a participant's (too-short) phrase, with a rising intonation: "... new elements?" often encourages her/him to expand the thought.
3. If one participant speaks too much or tries to dominate the session, you can:
 - Say "Let's get some others to join in."
 - Call on others, asking what they think about the topic at hand.
4. Avoid personal confrontation. Throw any interpersonal challenges back to the group itself to decide (e.g. "Do others in the group agree that _____?")
5. Use differences of opinion as a topic of discussion; the facilitator should avoid taking sides.

On Group Process

1. Keep track of the whole group.
 - Know who is silent and who is participating.
 - Watch for body language that indicates involvement and non-involvement.
 - Use these clues to call on people to join the discussion, esp. if they have not yet participated. (You can even say "We haven't heard from you, _____; what do you think about this?")
2. You may wish to appoint a Process Observer, to keep track of the group "weather". If you do, call for "weather reports" when you think they are needed:
 - The Process Observer should not participate in the discussion.
 - S/he needs to speak objectively about the group process, phrasing comments so as to encourage more inclusive behavior. E.g.:
 - "Have you noticed that only half of the participants have spoken? I wonder what the others have to say?"
 - "Did you notice that we seem to have run away from that question? We raised the topic and immediately changed it to something else. I wonder what we don't want to face?"

Summing Up / Ending

When the time is about up, you should signal to the group that it needs to wrap up the discussion. This may involve:

1. Summing up what the discussion has uncovered so far.
2. Polling each participant – especially those who have been silent, but the active participants also – for one short point that s/he feels is important for everyone to take away.
3. Thank the participants for their efforts, as well as for their support of your facilitation.
 - If you have used a Process Observer, you may wish to have that person make a couple of take-away comments about the group process, as an aid to future discussions.