Facilitating Effective Group Discussions: Tips

Effective facilitation of a discussion involves the recognition and employment of different perspectives and different skills to create an inclusive environment. In order to do so, it is important to consider the features of effective discussions, and conditions that promote small group interaction and engagement. Discussion is a powerful mechanism for active learning; a well-facilitated discussion allows the participant to explore new ideas while recognizing and valuing the contributions of others.

Roles of Discussion Leaders *(adapted from Handelsman et al. 2006)*

1. Create an inclusive environment
Opportunities for reflection:
*   What do the participants bring to the group? ("Characteristics that may give you a unique perspective")
    *   Self-awareness: What do I bring to the group? What surprises or challenges me?
        What behaviors am I most familiar or comfortable with?
        What behaviors challenge me?

Dos and Don'ts:
Do:
*   Allow participants to introduce themselves – you can even set up an ice breaker to have pairs of students introduce each other.
*   Be clear up front about expectations and intentions amongst participants and the facilitator.
*   Use inclusive language.
*   Ask for clarification if unclear about a participant's intent or question.
*   Treat participants with respect and consideration.
*   Develop an awareness for barriers for learning (cultural; social; experiential, etc).
*   Provide sufficient time and space for participants to gather their thoughts and contribute to discussions.
*   Provide opportunities for participants to pair-share.

Don't:
*   Use certain conventions or language that will exclude certain groups from understanding the context of the discussion, or make them feel uncomfortable.
*   Assume participants all have the same expectations when the group first convenes.
*   Over-generalize behavior or have stereotypical expectations of participants (tokenism).
*   Use (or allow others to use) disrespectful language or tone, or disrespectful non-verbal communication.
*   Convey a sense of self-importance or superiority.
*   Allow only the dominant or more verbal participants to take over the conversation.
*   Discourage alternate views or counter-arguments.
*   Try to be someone else- be yourself.

2. Keep discussions constructive and positive
*   Make the discussion functional by clarifying the goals of each session to the group.
*   Establish ground rules:
–   Share personal experiences rather than make general statements about groups of people (stereotyping).
–   Ask dominant participants to allow others to speak.
–   Give all participants a voice- at the start highlight the value of a diversity of perspectives as an essential part of the process.

– Request that if participants challenge others' ideas, they back it up with evidence, appropriate experiences, and/or appropriate logic.
- Try to keep the group on task without rushing them.
- If the group starts to veer in the direction of negativity and/or pointless venting, ask them how they would like to address this.
- Step back when a group is functional/functioning – help participants become independent learners; take control of their learning.

3. Encouraging participants
Encouraging participation can be accomplished by:
- Writing participants' comments on the whiteboard.
- Asking follow-up questions, and paraphrasing the comments for everyone to ponder. A combination of initiating and probing questions can be an effective approach to bring out participants' ideas further.
- Asking the contributor for further clarification and/or elaboration.
- Re-visiting past contributions and incorporating them into subsequent discussions.
- Encouraging others to add their reactions or ideas to build on someone's comment.
- Not being afraid to admit your own ignorance or confusion if you don't know something – invite others to provide resources, and use the opportunity to discuss with the group how one might go about researching the issue.
- Discomfort and silence are ok, but balance with a clearly stated context and purpose.

Potential Problems in Discussions (adapted from: Center for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning Handbook, accessed July 2008 at www.cirtl.net/Diversity/Resources/)

Maintaining discussions often means dealing as smoothly as possible with the problems that arise. Here are some common problems with suggestions for how to deal with them.

The participant who talks too much:
A way to approach the dominant participant and pull in non-participants is to redirect the discussion to another person or another topic. Alternatively, you may wish to reframe their comments, making them viable additions to the discussion. Facilitators might also ask one or more members of the group to act as observers for a few sessions, reporting back their observations to the group. Perhaps assigning the avid talker to the observer role would help the person develop sensitivity. Another approach is to break down the group into still smaller task groups.

The member who will not talk:
A way to approach non-participants is to provide opportunities for smaller group discussions or pair-share discussions. Smaller groups may help put some students at ease. A second strategy is to ask opinion questions occasionally (e.g., "How do you feel about this?"). This may encourage participation by reducing participants' fear of answering incorrectly. Another strategy is to have participants write out their answers to a question. Having the words written out may make it easier for a shy or fearful person to speak up.

The discussion that turns into an argument:
In good discussions, conflicts will sometimes arise. If such conflicts are left ambiguous, they may cause continuing trouble. Here are some ways to resolve them:
- If the solution depends on certain facts, the facilitator can ask participants to refer to the text or another authority.
- If there is an experimentally verified answer, the facilitator can use the opportunity to review the method by which the answer could be determined.
- If the question is one of values, the facilitator may use the occasion to help participants become aware of the values involved.
- The facilitator can list both sides of the argument on the board.

- The facilitator can take a strong position as moderator, preventing participants from interrupting each other or speaking simultaneously. She or he can lay ground rules for discussion, such as asking participants to focus conflict on ideas rather than people and to resist being judgmental.

Unclear or hesitant comments:
The facilitator can encourage participants making unclear contributions to give examples and factual evidence of their points. The facilitator can also restate points for verification or rejection by the participants, or give enthusiastic nonverbal cues and patience.

The discussion that goes off track:
Some facilitators keep discussions on track by listing the questions or issues they want to cover on the board or summarizing the discussion on the board as it proceeds. Stopping and asking a participant to summarize where the discussion is at the point it appears to go off track may also help.

The student who attacks the facilitator:
When participants argue for the sake of argument, facilitators will usually lose if they take the bait. Participants or students who attack often want attention, so simply giving them some recognition while firmly moving on often takes care of the problem. If participants are simply trying to embarrass the facilitator, they may seek to make him or her defensive with such comments as, "How do you really know that...?" or "You're not really saying that...?" Such questions can be handled by playing boomerang. The facilitator might say, "What I'm saying is..., but now I'd like you to share your perspective." Turning the question back to the questioner forces him or her to take responsibility for his or her opinion. Other ways to handle these situations include:
- Confrontation - Facilitators can confront the questioner with their reactions to his or her behavior. "I'm uncomfortable with the imprecision of your questions. What I really hear you saying is..."
- Active listening - Facilitators can paraphrase the message they heard and check out the accuracy of their assumptions before responding.
- Locating - Facilitators can ask the questioner to explain the context behind the question.
- Reframing - The focus can be on clarifying the assumptions behind the person's argument and then inviting her or him to see alternative possibilities.
- Deferring - Often, the best strategy is to invite participants to come up after the session and arrange for a time to talk about the disagreement further, and then move the discussion on to another topic.

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