

### Thoughts and Suggestions for Student-Led Discussions

#### **TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE THE NEXT DISCUSSION:**

- What makes a good and effective discussion?
- What prevents a discussion from being effective?
- What can you do to ensure an effective discussion?

#### **GOALS OF DISCUSSION**

The goal of discussion in this course are the following:

- (1) *To analyze a specific idea/concept/research result for improved understanding*
- (2) *To develop the skills needed for effective participation in discussions*

The most useful discussions are those that have a clear direction and goal and have a procedure to meet that goal. Having students go through this process as a group is an effective way to more fully explore material than doing so on your own. You will see that others have different perspectives on a given article than you have. The discussion of these multiple perspectives and the discussion of them results in a more complete analysis than an analysis done by just one person – even the instructor. **HOWEVER**, this process must be effectively *facilitated* by someone, it does not just *happen* automatically, and rarely will!

In this class, at the beginning of each discussion period, the class as a whole will establish the goals of the discussion for that period (in other words - the topics to be discussed). The identification of these goals will be facilitated by the facilitator, but it will NOT be chosen by the facilitator – the class will decide.

The content of the discussions will be up to you, the participants of the discussion. Typically, discussions are focused on critically evaluating published articles. Unfortunately, most people interpret 'critically' to mean 'negative'. However, to critically evaluate something, you must also identify the positive aspects as well. In other words, what is GOOD about a particular study/article, in addition to what is BAD about it. It is much easier to find fault with a particular study than it is to identify what is good with it. So, this is something that I would like you to pay particular attention to in this class.

#### **DISCUSSION PROTOCOL**

- I. At the beginning of each discussion period, the class will be divided into two smaller groups. Then, the following steps will occur within each smaller group.
- II. Within each group, the students be randomly divided into the three roles. Thus, you will not know ahead of time what role you will play. I will place all student names in a hat and choose the roles before the discussion:
  1. Facilitator (1 student)
  2. Recorder (1 student)
  3. Group Participant (all remaining students and faculty)
- III. The facilitator will lead the class to first identify the main topics to be discussed about the article. Typically, we go around the group and every student contributes a topic they are interested in discussing or they can agree with a topic that has already been stated. Meanwhile, the recorder records each topic on an overhead for use during the discussion.
- IV. Each group will prioritize the topics they would like to discuss, because typically it is hard to cover all topics that are identified. Each group will identify their top three topics to discuss.

- V. Then, the groups will convene as a group and share the two lists. The discussion will then be facilitated by the two facilitators who will share the task of facilitating, and one reporter will be chosen to serve as the reporter for the remainder of the class period.

## RATIONALE

The facilitator ensures that the discussion ‘stays on track’ and has some direction. The recorder records and synthesizes the discussion so that the outcomes of the discussion can be more easily assessed for each class period and so everyone has a record of the discussions. Finally, the group participants provide the bulk of the ideas and points to be discussed, and thus are an integral component of the discussion period. During the discussion period, I reserve the right to ‘step out’ of my role momentarily to discuss the ‘process’ of the discussion if I feel it is necessary. See handout for further details (Soranno, *in press*).

## PREPARATION OF ALL STUDENTS PRIOR TO THE DISCUSSION PERIOD

All students should do the following to prepare:

- a) Prepare by thoroughly reading the article (most likely more than once), and having a solid understanding of the big-picture of the article as well as the details (i.e. I encourage you to fill in one of the ‘reading worksheets’ at a minimum prior to class!).
- b) Because there will be no one who should know substantially more than others about the topic, each student should feel responsible for doing any supplemental reading/searching for components or background of the article that he/she does not understand to share with the group.
- c) Each student should write down 1-2 topics that he/she would like to discuss during the discussion. Some ideas for types of topics to discuss include: delving deeper into a particular research area, exploring the evidence the authors provide for any their conclusions, expanding on an implication of the study, exploring the implications of this particular study for understanding of different disciplinary areas or for how the research could be applied in a variety of different capacities, etc. **NOTE: A suggestion from past student – please be prepared to ‘lead off the discussion’ for the topic that you bring to help get the discussion moving – it helps as you have put a little more thought into it and other students might need to think a bit before diving in.**

## DESCRIPTION OF ROLES

The group participants: The group participants are responsible for most discussion content and should do the following:

- a) Provide 1-2 topics for discussion at the beginning of the discussion period.
- b) Provide insights, questions, answers to posed questions from the facilitator or recorder.
- c) Actively listen to fellow group participants and respond to each others’ comments rather than just bringing his/her own comments to the table.

The recorder: The recorder is a ‘servant to the group’ and is responsible for being the memory of the discussion group and record participants contributions (Rees 1998). The recorder should do the following:

- a) At the beginning of the discussion session, the recorder will write down the discussion topic(s) from each group participant, using the participants’ own words as much as possible. Thereafter, the recorder will ‘cross’ topics off the list on the overhead as they are discussed; and he/she will keep notes on paper to him/herself during the discussion for later distribution to the group.
- b) Although anyone can suggest at any time that a summary of the discussion or a synthesis of ideas is needed, it is the recorder who would write such a summary on an overhead for the group.
- c) At the end of the discussion, the recorder will compile a list of ‘take home messages’ on an overhead that the group participants create. It is helpful for this list to be displayed to the group as they are developing it.
- d) After class, the recorder will transcribe discussion notes and the list of discussion topics to a computer file and distribute to the group within a couple days.
- e) The recorder is encouraged to participate as a participant as well; however, she/he has the added job of keeping some written record of the discussion. In addition, because the reporter often has a good overview of the discussion, he/she should also feel like they can help the facilitator move the discussion along.

The facilitator: The facilitator is also a ‘servant to the group’ (Rees 1998). Facilitation is about seeing what the group needs to move forward and providing guidance and empowering the group; to do so, the facilitator can use any of the following strategies to facilitate the discussion (modified from Rees 1998):

- a) Ask questions: to inspire a response is perhaps the most important strategy of the facilitator. Questions should be open-ended questions, such as ‘what, how, who, why’ type questions that encourages brainstorming and creativity.
- b) Probe in-depth into a comment/idea: encourages more in-depth analysis, such as ‘why did you say that? Or could you be more specific?’
- c) Paraphrase: only for clarification of a comment made by a student, not to evaluate or improve it
- d) Refer back to earlier comments: which ties the discussion to previous student’s contributions
- e) Be comfortable with silence: the facilitator must be willing to wait once a question is posed as people need time to think and frame a response. Thus a facilitator should not step in and answer one’s own question
- f) Give positive reinforcement: this is a way to encourage participation, especially to students who are quieter
- g) Include quieter members: some ways to draw people out are to ask a student directly for their opinion on something that has been brought up, to refer back to comments that quieter people make to draw them out further, or to break the class into smaller groups or pairs that then report to the larger group.
- h) Shift perspective of the discussion: if all students seem to agree, it may be less likely that a single or few students who feel differently would speak up. To get these students to speak up, the facilitator can ask if there ‘might be another viewpoint that could be missing from the discussion’. In addition, the facilitator can ask for the implications of the topic or a big-picture question; or the facilitator can ask for a specific example or for details to enrich the discussion that may be at too broad of a level.
- i) Summarize: Occasional summary is helpful to keep the group focused. The facilitator can briefly summarize what has been said before moving on. Or, better yet, the facilitator can ask for someone else to summarize, but it is important that enough time is provided for students to think before answering.

Approaches the facilitator should consider:

1. Keep the meeting focused on the topic:
  - *point out that the discussion has drifted*
  - *restate the original topic*
2. Clarify and accept communication:
  - *summarize a contribution*
  - *relate ideas*
  - *point out when someone is cutoff*
3. State problem in a constructive way
  - *help clarify discussions/disputes in a non-judgmental way*
4. Suggests a procedure for moving discussion along
  - *point out when it may be useful to move on to the next problem/issue*
  - *suggest a procedure – i.e. ‘break into small groups to brainstorm’*
5. Summarize periodically
6. Behaviors to avoid:
  - *judging or criticizing ideas or feelings*
  - *asserting own ideas too strongly*
  - *making decisions for whole class*
  - *lengthy comments*

Additional suggestions for the reporter: Because the reporter often has a good overview of the discussion, he/she should also feel like they can help the facilitator move the discussion along by using any of the above approaches

Some additional suggestions from past students using this approach:

- *As facilitator and reporter, you SHOULD provide your own opinion at times if you have things to add. In general, you should provide just a little less feedback than you normally would since you will talk by facilitating, but you should add your opinions*

- Recorder and facilitator should sit together so that the facilitator can see the master list
- Recorder can help the facilitator direct some of the discussion since they are summarizing – they have a good 'view' of the discussion

A quote from: ***Discussion: as a way of teaching*** by Brookfield and Preskill, 1999:

*“We love discussion. We think that participating in discussion is its own reward, an experience so intrinsically satisfying that we can’t get along without it. Though we never get it exactly right and though we invariably fall short of our ideals, we enjoy its sheer unpredictability. We luxuriate in its open-endedness, in the feeling that there is always another perspective to be expressed, another understanding to be gained. The sense of multiple and infinite possibilities waiting in the future is the joyful essence of teaching and learning through discussion.”*

## GRADING/EVALUATION

Assessing classroom discussions and student participation in them is notoriously difficult. There are two different aspects of the discussions that I am interesting in evaluating:

- 1) **How well did YOU contribute to the discussion and improve your discussion skills?**
- 2) **How effective was the overall class discussion in reaching the learning goal of a deeper understanding of the material?**

However, assigning a ‘grade’ to how well you contribute to both is not easy and studies have shown that assigning grades to individual students does not necessarily lead to the best discussions. So, you will not be graded on how well you discuss in this class. Rather, you will be evaluated in each of your roles for each discussion period – **by you**. At the end of each class period, you must answer 5 questions that assesses your role in the discussion and the discussion as a whole. You will be ‘graded’ on this written reflection at the end of each discussion period. The goal in this reflection assignment is for you to improve your discussion skills throughout the semester through reflection of your contributions for each period. Your participation (pass/fail) and reflection (graded) of each discussion period will be worth a certain number of points, and thus attendance is mandatory (see below).

When you are evaluating yourself in your written reflection, please keep in mind: Group participants contribute to a good discussion by *participating*, but not to the exclusion of other group participants. SO, whereas you can negatively impact a discussion by NOT speaking up while a group participant, you can also negatively impact a discussion by speaking TOO much because you do not allow other students to effectively participate. Also, if you rate yourself low in your written reflection, that does not necessarily mean I would give you a low ‘grade’ on the reflection assignment – in fact, likely the opposite as long as you can identify how to improve in the future with specific strategies you will use to do so. I expect honest reflection in your answers because that will help you move forward the most.

Specific protocol for the reflection and evaluation assignment:

- 1) You will maintain a ‘Discussion Log’ by answering the following questions after EACH discussion period. You will turn the log in at the end of the semester as a word document, however, I would like to see your entry after each discussion period entered online. To do so, do the following steps:
- 2) Enter your log entry into a MS-word file and save on your computer.
- 3) Then, Logon to the course angel website. There will be a ‘survey’ for you to take for each discussion period. Cut and paste your entry for the day into the text boxes for each question and submit.

**Assigning grades for Discussion: 100 pts total** (30% of total grade for the course)

- Attendance during discussion periods (6-7 periods): pass/fail 30 pts
- Written reflection after discussion period: 70 pts

**Assignment – DISCUSSION REFLECTION LOG**

\*\* Your discussion reflection log entries are due 10am the following morning after class.  
Use as much space as you need to answer the questions effectively.

**DISCUSSION REFLECTION LOG ENTRY**

Name:

Date:

Your role for today:

Discussion paper title:

**CONTENT:**

1. Is there some aspect of the study design, results, conclusions, or concepts for which you gained a deeper understanding of through the class discussion? Was there some aspect of the article that you had not thought of or that you 'learned' about from discussion? In other words, what aspect of the article was clarified or illuminated as a result of the classroom discussion?
  
2. Were there aspects of the discussion that led to more confusion for you compared to when you read the paper alone? Was the confusion resolved through discussion? Please explain.

**DISCUSSION SKILLS**

3. Evaluate your role in today's discussion period, in particular please answer the following two questions: What did you do that was effective at contributing to the discussion? What areas do you need improvement in?
  
4. Can you think of a contribution from another student that stood out in your mind that helped move the discussion along or help the class to move to a deeper understanding of the material? What did the student do? (no need to mention names, just describe what the students did or said).
  
5. Do you have any recommendations to the class as a whole to improve discussions for the next class period?

**RATINGS:**

Please provide a rating for YOUR overall contributions to discussion [1(excellent) – 5 (poor)]:

Please provide a rating for the effectiveness of the class discussion at improving overall understanding and insight of the article: [(1(excellent) - 5(poor))]: