

# Oral Communication Resources

## Class Discussion

### Responsibilities of Facilitators

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Facilitators are discussion participants. They need to do all of the above. In addition, a facilitator needs to have a sense of where the discussion needs to go. They serve as guides. They help keep the group on track. They help the group focus on the critical issues, help the group make connections among diverse ideas (often by asking the group to do so), push the group to deeper analysis, and try to provide access to the floor for all participants. In addition to the responsibilities there for all participants, the facilitator will also:

#### **Guide the group**

- Ask participants to identify critical issues for clarification and evaluation
- Guide the group to set priorities: have the group decide what they want to spend the most time discussing, with justification

#### **Focus on analysis of the points of view of positions expressed**

- Attend to whether those holding different points of view have access to the floor
- Insist that group members listen and fully understand the reasons given before evaluating them

#### **Allow all a chance to be heard while maintaining focus**

- Try to identify the relevant questions that need to be addressed so that you can guide the discussion back to them.
- Act as gatekeeper: make sure all have a chance at the floor; ask those who have not said very much what they are thinking; ask those who have dominated the discussion to provide space for others
- Listen to others' ideas
- Don't take on the mantle of "expert" who knows all the answers.

*Use the next suggestions with caution. If the moderator paraphrases or summaries too often, the participants may come to depend upon the moderator to provide the "real meaning" in the discussion.*

- Paraphrase areas of agreement and disagreement

- Offer summaries of discussion progress

### **Bring up the need to evaluate different positions if no one else does**

- It can be helpful to summarize the positions or arguments expressed during discussion, with reasons given. Even better, ask someone else to do it.
- Bring up the need to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments made, if no one else has done so.
- Work with the group to identify the criteria you all are using or should be using as the basis for evaluating the ideas, issues, concepts, and perspectives being explored

### **Create a climate where participants feel safe enough to say what they think, to explore controversial positions and to experience critical questions**

- Support every person's right to his or her own opinion
- Resist the temptation to fill in all the quiet spots: don't fear silence
- Ask others what they think
- Respect others: assume others have reasons for thinking as they do. You may not agree with those reasons, but that does not mean they are of no value or that you cannot learn by exploring them.
- Insist that others show respect for discussion participants. If discussants act disrespectfully, tell them to stop doing whatever it is that they are doing. (see *Guidelines to Facilitate Effective Discussions*)

### **Do a self-evaluation of your role in the discussion**

- Look honestly and carefully at your own preparation and your own participation communication behavior
- What made it easier for you to participate?
- What made it more difficult?
- How did you contribute to the progression of the discussion?
- How did you hinder the progression of the discussion?
- If you could do this discussion again, what would you *like* to do differently? What *would* you do differently? If those two things are not the same, what contributes to the difference?
- Set goals for yourself. What do you need to do to be a better discussion facilitator? How will you do those things?