

Oral Communication Resources

Class Discussion

Responsibilities of Participants

A discussion will not work unless all participants take responsibility for its progression. All participants, not just the facilitator, are responsible to do the following.

Identify and explore critical issues

- What are the most important elements that need discussion time? For example, are there issues that must be clarified before meaningful discussion can take place? Is it most important to evaluate the issues under discussion?
- How does the material relate to other knowledge or other issues?

Analyze the points of view or positions expressed

- All participants must take responsibility to ask for different points of view, to ask for clarification if needed, to ask for reasons behind the opinions expressed by others.
- All participants must be willing to give reasons for the opinions expressed.
- All participants need to be willing to explore the reasons that are given (their own and others) in order to gain understanding.

Hear others

- "Listen" is commonly identified as an important "skill" for discussion, and it is. But listening is not enough. You also have to "hear" what others say. To do that reserve judgment until you fully understand what the ideas and arguments actually are that are posed by others.
- If you don't understand, take the risk to say that you don't. There are probably others that feel the same way.
- If you aren't sure you understand the position someone else has taken, paraphrase it and ask if that is what is meant.
- Try to find the connection for remarks that seem tangential or irrelevant, and if you can't find it, ask.

Evaluate different positions

- 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
- All members of a discussion need, at some point, to explore the strengths and weaknesses of positions and reasons under discussion

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

- Talk with each other; it is not necessary to go through the facilitator
- Encourage others to participate by asking them what they think. Ask for the opinions, evaluations, and reasons of others.
- Provide an opening for quiet members to speak.
- Practice respect for your colleagues:
 - ✓ Don't attack others for the ideas they hold
 - ✓ Don't act as though the point brought up by another is irrelevant
 - ✓ Don't roll your eyes
 - ✓ Don't talk to your neighbor while someone else is talking

Assume others have good 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.

Remember that a "safe" climate may not necessarily be a "comfortable" climate. Growth usually means experiencing discomfort. Talk with your colleagues about the difference between "discomfort" and "dangerous," and what moves a climate from one to the other.

Do a self-evaluation of your role in the discussion

- Look carefully at your own 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 discussant? How will you do those things?