

Flipped Module

Title of Module: Facilitating Discussions

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Video 1: Preparing for a Discussion

In this module, you will learn how to prepare and facilitate a successful discussion, such as a group or class discussion. As you will see, leading a meaningful and focused discussion is not easy, because it requires certain knowledge and skills, as well as planning ahead.

Let's start by talking about how you should prepare for facilitating a discussion.

Planning in Advance

The first step involves setting a plan and a timeline, as well as carefully reviewing the assignment instructions and any materials (like grading rubrics or other handouts) provided by your instructor. Depending on the type and scope of the discussion you will be leading, you should take a few days to prepare for it.

Studying the Materials

Next, you should carefully study the materials you will be in charge of discussing. For example, your instructor may ask you to lead a discussion on an assigned course reading. In this case, you should read the text a few times and familiarize yourself with the author's key claims and ideas. Of course, you don't have to memorize the whole text, but you should nonetheless become a kind of an expert on it and be able to answer your classmates' questions about it. This may mean that you bring detailed notes with you to the discussion or bring a copy of the text with important passages that are highlighted and easy to find if necessary. If any concepts

or passages in the text are confusing or unclear to you, make sure to reach out to your instructor for clarification. In some cases, it may also be helpful to do some additional research on the topic, the text itself, or its author.

Assigning Roles

If you will be co-facilitating a discussion with one or more other students, set up a meeting with your group members early on to set goals and a timeline. Moreover, try to make the most of everyone's strengths and assign roles based on these strengths. For example: Is one of your group members particularly good at time management? If so, ask them to monitor the groups' progress and help keep everyone on track. Is one of your group members particularly artistic or trained in design? Perhaps they could help make the group's handouts, slides, or other materials more visually attractive. Even though in any collaborative project all group members are expected to participate equally, this doesn't mean that your roles all have to be the same, so consider drawing on each other's strengths and special skills! If you are working in a group, you should also plan in detail how you will manage the class discussion. Who is going to introduce everyone in the group? Who will ask the first question? Who will be responsible for monitoring participation and making sure that the whole class is engaged? Again, consider assigning roles to different group members in advance.

Video 2: Formulating Discussion Questions

The next step in planning a discussion is formulating effective discussion questions in advance. This step is absolutely essential, because good discussion questions take time to develop and revise.

Comprehension Questions

First, let's talk about what discussion questions are supposed to achieve. Generally, if you are to facilitate a discussion about a text or a topic, the questions should help your classmates gain a deeper understanding of it and critically reflect on it. To help deepen your classmates' understanding of a text, ask yourself the following questions: In your own reading of the text, were any points or passages abstract or hard to follow? Were any key terms not well defined? Were there any implied or indirect references to ideas that may not be immediately obvious to your classmates, such as references to historical events, allusions to other literary works, and so on? If so, try to design questions that will address and clarify these likely points of confusion. Questions that aim to check comprehension of a topic are called **knowledge or comprehension questions**. Here are a few examples of comprehension questions:

- 1) When was the text originally published?
- 2) Summarize the text. What is the author's thesis and what evidence does she use to support it?
- 3) Give an example of pathos in the text. What effect does pathos have on the audience?

Critical Thinking Questions

Comprehension questions can be a good starting point for a discussion, but these questions on their own will not prompt a meaningful discussion, so they should always be paired with questions that ask your classmates to critically reflect on, evaluate, or respond to a given text or topic. These types of questions are called **critical thinking questions or open questions**. There are different types of critical thinking questions, but here are a few examples:

Type of question	Explanation	Examples
Analysis	Requires application of principles in new settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are some potential counter-arguments or objections to the author's claims? • How might the author's personal background have influenced her position on this issue? • Why did the author rely on pathos? What effect does this stylistic choice have on the audience?
Application	Requires application of knowledge (use of rules, facts, principles)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would a biologist interpret these findings? What findings or arguments would they likely object to, and why? • How does this study follow or violate the rules of ethical research design? • What strategies listed by the author are applicable to your own life?
Evaluation	Requires making a judgement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you agree with the author's conclusion? Why or why not? • What was the most interesting or convincing argument made by the author? • What do you think about the author's actions? Were they justified or not?
Synthesis	Requires combining ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would Author A respond to Author B's thesis? Compare and contrast the two authors' arguments. • What overall conclusion can you draw about this topic after reading several texts on it? • How, if at all, do you think the claims would change if the author wrote this piece during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Adapted from: <https://carleton.ca/edc/wp-content/uploads/Effective-Questions-for-Leading-Discussions.pdf>

Using a Variety of Questions

A successful discussion generally includes a variety of questions, rather than just one type of question. A common mistake made by inexperienced discussion leaders is to rely too heavily on comprehension questions or on evaluation questions. Asking too many comprehension or factual questions will make the discussion seem more like a summary of the text than a discussion, while asking too many opinion-based questions will lead others to focus too much on their own opinions and personal experiences, thus discouraging a meaningful and in-depth analysis and reflection on of the given text or topic.

Video 3: Tips for Designing Discussion Questions

In addition to using a variety of discussion questions that include both comprehension and critical thinking questions, it's also important to follow some general principles in developing discussion questions and avoid certain common pitfalls.

Common Pitfalls

First, let's overview a few common pitfalls that we should avoid when formulating discussion questions:

- 1) **Do NOT ask many factual or yes-or-no questions**, such as "Does the author use outside research?" or try to use them in conjunction with other types of questions.
- 2) **Do NOT ask questions that are too open, broad, or abstract**, like "What did you think about the reading?" or "How can globalization be achieved?"
- 3) **Do NOT ask questions that are too long, complex, or otherwise hard to follow**, such as: "Why did the author rely on pathos and make so many references to her own upbringing and use other personal examples as well narrate the events using the present tense but switch to the past in the last paragraph?"

Strategies to Avoid Pitfalls

Finally, here are a few good strategies to follow when formulating discussion questions:

- 1) **Develop questions in groups.** Facilitating a discussion is like taking others on a journey and guiding them along the way. This means that for each main question, you should try to add a few potential follow-up questions that build on the main question or connect this question to other important concepts. You can use these questions to keep the discussion going and examine various aspects of the same issue.
- 2) **Rely on textual evidence.** Develop questions that are rooted in the text or texts you are discussing. For example, explain what specifically in the text made you think of this question or provide a relevant quote from the text that can help others understand your question. Similarly, encourage your classmates to cite examples and evidence from the source text, and not rely solely on their personal experiences or opinions.
- 3) **Make connections to the course.** Ask questions that explicitly connect the current reading or topic to the theme of the class or to previous course readings. For example, ask your classmates to draw a connection between different authors' arguments or stylistic choices, find a point of contention between authors, or ask students to compare and contrast different authors' perspectives on a given issue.

Examples of Effective Questions

Here are a few examples of effective discussion questions that follow the guidelines we just overviewed:

Main question(s): Why does Bogost come to the conclusion that "higher education was never about education"? If going to college is not about getting an education, then what is the real purpose of a university degree, according to Bogost? Were you convinced by his arguments?

Potential follow-up questions: Which sentence in the article best summarizes Bogost's thesis? What evidence does Bogost cite in support of his thesis? What are some potential counter-arguments or counter-evidence to his claims? Do you think his claims are true for higher education outside of the U.S.? Does getting a college degree mean something different in other countries?

Video 4: Leading a Discussion

In this video, we will overview some tips and strategies for facilitating meaningful and engaging discussions.

Starting a Discussion

First, let's talk about how you should start a discussion. Generally, whenever speaking in front of an audience—such as leading a discussion or giving a presentation—you should start by briefly introducing yourself and explaining your goals or outlining the different parts of the discussion or presentation. Additionally, consider engaging your audience or participants in a short warm-up activity or ice breaker, such as a free-writing activity, a survey, a game, etc. Be creative! This interactive activity can be more on the fun side, but it should be clearly connected to the topic of the discussion. Once the activity is over, you should briefly explain to the participants how it connects to your topic. This is sometimes called a debriefing.

Before asking your first question, it's also good to share the written questions with the participants. Your instructor may even ask you to prepare a short handout that lists the discussion questions, as well as provides a brief overview of the text, such as important claims, interesting quotes, or even some visual aids.

Guidelines for Facilitating a Discussion

Finally, it's time to start asking questions! As you do so, keep in mind the following guidelines, which will help you and your classmates make the most out of the discussion:

- Remember that you are not a presenter, but a discussion facilitator. This means that **your role is to encourage others** to share their observations and points of views. Of course, you can share your own ideas during the discussion, but make sure to give others plenty of opportunities to share their own thoughts.
- Building on the first point, **do not dominate the discussion** and DO get comfortable with silence, because others may need some time to think before they can answer a question. It can be stressful when no one is speaking up, but try not to rush the participants and give them enough time to offer their contributions.
- That said, **if no one is speaking up after a long while**, it may be up to you to help them. Perhaps your question wasn't clear, so it may be helpful to rephrase it or explain what prompted you to ask this question. Another strategy is to offer your own answer or reflection to encourage others. Finally, you can simply call on a specific person—this can be scary if you've never done it before, but sometimes it's necessary to keep the conversation going.
- When facilitating a discussion, it's also important to try to **include the whole class**. Make sure that multiple individuals have a chance to speak, so don't call on the same people or allow the same volunteer to speak too often. To ensure full participation, you should keep track of who has spoken and who hasn't. If you are co-facilitating a discussion with a partner, one of you should be responsible for monitoring participation. If you are on Zoom, use the Gallery View to see who has raised their hand and remember to monitor the chat.
- Additionally, you should also **spend some time engaging with the questions**. Once a question was answered by one participant, don't just move on to another question. Instead, ask follow-up questions. For example, you can ask the same person to elaborate on their answer, explain their reasoning, or give an example. You can also guide the participants to consider the same question but from a different angle or perspective, to think of counter-arguments or potential objections to a statement, or to

make connections between the issue and their own lives. Ideally, you should prepare a set of questions in advance, so that during the discussion you can choose from a list of potential follow-up questions.

- Another great strategy is to **get the participants talking to one another**. That is, once a participant has answered your question, you can ask this student to pick another person to answer the same question or to think of a counter-argument to what the first person has said. Sometimes, you might also divide the participants into small groups and ask them to discuss a question among themselves before sharing their ideas with the rest of the class.
- Finally, **ensure that the participants stay focused** on the text or topic you are discussing, and encourage them to refer back to the source texts and to cite evidence and examples from it in their own answers. Of course, sometimes it may be necessary and even insightful to shift the discussion in a new direction, but if the conversation is not productive or if someone keeps dominating it, you may have to gently interrupt and steer the group back to the main topic.

Now you know how to prepare for a discussion, how to formulate engaging questions, and how to facilitate a discussion. Make sure to carefully review the materials in this module when planning a discussion and remember that, just like any other skill, the more experience and practice you get with leading discussions, the better you will get at it!

Other Videos (these could be of use to some instructors):

How to Lead a Class Discussion

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kp6Bt3PyNVs>

Sentence starters for Group Discussion | Group Discussion Tips | TalentSprint

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JuBAXrPGiXg>

How To Deliver Good Class Discussion Questions (Good Example)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8FRyLPhU1E>

SME Confederate Flag Debate

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQxM_EK5aiM

List of References:

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