

DISCUSSION

The discussion format facilitates small group discussions that are intended to advance, enhance, or share information about your research. A discussion session will have one or two conveners who gather and welcome the attendees; share significant information in a conversational style; encourage and allow time for all attendees to participate in the discussion; and ensure that all leave with ideas and resources that inform subsequent research and/or practice. This is not appropriate venue for formal paper presentations or for topics that would engage large groups of people.

Discussion proposals should contain as many of the following as are applicable, preferably in this order:

- (1) objectives or purposes of the proposed discussion;
- (2) perspectives or theoretical/conceptual frameworks that will guide the discussion;
- (3) data, evidence, or resources related to the discussion topic;
- (4) conclusions and implications;
- (5) strategies to facilitate participation in the discussion;
- (6) significance of the topic.

Discussion sessions can be evaluated on:

- (1) the significance of the topic, issue, or problem to the field of education;
- (2) clarity of objectives and intended outcomes of the session;
- (3) potential for stimulating scholarly discussion;
- (4) originality;
- (5) methods planned to engage participants.

Source: <http://www.ashe.ws/?page=348>

TIPS FOR LEADING DISCUSSIONS

by Felisa Tibbitts, <http://www.hrea.org/pubs/tips-discussion.html>

Establishing the Tone

There are two predictable times when how a group is handled will be fundamental for affecting the quality and tone of the discussion. The first such time is at the very start of the discussion. The most important thing is to establish that everyone has a right to speak, and that they are, in fact, expected to contribute. This will only work, of course, if group members feel that they can trust one another, and that their ideas will be welcomed.

Here are some hints for how to start.

- If possible, have people sit in a circle, or at least facing one another. If you are in a setting where this is not possible (for example, a classroom where the seats are bolted to the floor), then the facilitator of the discussion can lend an inclusive element by walking among the members when he or she is speaking.
- If group members do not know each other, then 'introduction' exercises might be used. Members of the group can introduce themselves, or members can be asked to interview another person and then 'present' them to the group. Introductions can be more fun if people are asked to share such things as their favorite hobby, the animal they consider themselves most like, and so on.
- The facilitator can de-emphasize his or her own role and emphasizing that of the group members by beginning the discussion with open-ended questions. As participants offer their views, the facilitator can encourage group members to respond to each other (and not to the facilitator) by asking questions like: "What does everyone else think?" or "Is there anyone else who agrees?" "Anyone else who disagrees?" - - These kinds of questions will encourage members of the group to speak with each other, and also reinforce the idea that it is alright if people disagree with one another.
- Sometimes it is a good idea to establish 'ground rules' for discussion. This can be especially important when the group members are children. If the students are old enough, they can even help you establish the ground rules. You could ask them to think about what should be the rules for discussion so that everyone is encouraged to speak. Here are some ideas for some rules:
 1. Everyone should listen respectfully to the other (even if they disagree).
 2. The person who is speaking should not be interrupted.
 3. No more than one person should speak at the same time.
 4. No one's ideas should be made fun of.

5. If you disagree with someone, disagree with their ideas, but don't attack the person.
6. Try to understand the others, as much as you hope they try to understand you.

Facilitating Discussion

- The facilitator can simply go around the circle (or down the rows) and ask everyone to give their comment. This technique is very inclusive, but it can take a long time or get a little boring.
- Group members can break into pairs for discussion. In a debate format, their opposing 'positions' can be assigned. (If you do this, it is interesting to assign positions that are unlike their personal ones.) Also in pairs, the facilitator can ask each of the group members to 'interview' each other; they could then later present their partners' comments to the rest of the group. Using pairs is particularly nice when members of the group do not know each other, since this provides an easy and personal way to become acquainted with at least one person. You can also ask people to work in a sequence of pairs (for example, first the person seated to their left, and then the person seated to their right).
- The large group can be broken into small groups of up to six or eight people; for children, these numbers normally do not exceed four.

Your job during the discussion will be to maintain the flow, to keep the atmosphere respectful and pleasant, to keep the group "on task", and to handle conflicts that may arise. The facilitator should affirm the participation of group members. This can happen by complementing individuals or groups for their effort or creativity, directly encouraging some of the group members to express their ideas, and building on the ideas that are expressed. This encouragement can be expressed through words, facial expressions and body language. It is also important to "listen" to the members of the group in the same way.

Wrapping Up

A session can be ended in many different ways. It is always a good idea to highlight the positive aspects of the discussions and exercises, and to personally thank the participants for their involvement. If you enjoyed the discussion, you should say so!