

Facilitating a Discussion

Facilitating an effective discussion is a valuable skill that enhances both your leadership qualities and your ability to think through material. As a facilitator, you are responsible for ensuring that the discussion is productive and inclusive. Facilitators encourage a productive discussion by ensuring that participants keep to the topic, and by guiding an organized discussion that causes students to think about the subject matter. Facilitators encourage an inclusive discussion by ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to participate, and by providing an atmosphere in which participants feel safe airing a wide variety of perspectives and opinions.

A discussion facilitator is not expected to be an expert; rather, the facilitator is responsible for making sure the discussion progresses in an orderly fashion. The facilitator should be prepared with questions that stimulate thoughtful discussion, and can refer to these as the discussion lags or to bring the discussion back to the topic. Here are some strategies for thinking about how to prepare questions.

Asking Questions:

Develop a set of questions that will help you lead an organized discussion. Ask a variety of types of questions. Think about what it is you are asking with each question.

Order your questions so that you start with simple, concrete questions and progress to complex, abstract questions. Remember that your questions are a guide to help you, not a blueprint for your discussion. If participants raise interesting points that require further examination, the facilitator should encourage participants to continue this discussion (and not automatically return to the prepared questions). This means the facilitator must be familiar with the topic and must be able to “think on his/her feet.”

Types of Questions:

Some types of questions include:

Exploratory or Factual Questions probe basic facts and background knowledge, a good way to start a discussion; e.g., what percentage of Mississippians are employed in resource industries? Where can we go to find out this information?

Diagnostic or Causal Questions ask what motives and causes of a particular phenomenon or event; e.g., what factors produce the greenhouse effect? What leads people to set forest fires?

Connective Questions link concepts that might appear unrelated; e.g. what sort of links exists between the unemployment rate and outdoor recreation? How do changing energy prices affect the severity of air pollution?

Hypothetical Questions ask what outcomes will result if conditions are changed; e.g. suppose there was an accident causing a nuclear power plant to leak large amounts of radiation, would the price of coal and oil stay the same?

Relational or Comparative Questions ask to compare issues to each other or to a common standard; e.g. what are the advantages of clearcutting as opposed to selective harvests? Will government regulation or best management practices produce a more efficient use of fisheries?

Challenge or Critical Questions examine assumptions, conclusions and interpretations; e.g. why are economists unlikely to support community-based management initiatives? Does this author's evidence support his claims?

Action Questions call for actions or conclusions; e.g. what should the Forest Service do in response to environmentalists concerns? How can you encourage recycling in your community?

Extension Questions expand the discussion, e.g. how does this comment relate to what we have previously said?

Priority and Evaluative Questions seek to identify the most important issue or ask for a value judgment; e.g. what is the most important factor in determining where to site waste repositories? Do you believe clearcutting is an acceptable practice?

Summary Questions elicit syntheses; e.g., what important lessons have we learned from this reading?

Strategies for Effective Questioning:

Some things to remember when leading a discussion:

- Ask only one question at a time. Keep your questions brief and clear.
- Ask open-ended questions, not “yes/no” questions. Focus on questions that elicit an argument or an explanation (i.e., “why” and “how” questions).
- Ask questions that do not have a single correct answer. You are stimulating a discussion, not testing the class.
- Ask focused questions. Broad questions can lead the discussion in too many different directions.
- Avoid asking leading questions. Phrase questions in a neutral way, so that a variety of views or sides can be raised and discussed.
- After you ask a question, give students a chance to think about the question and respond. Wait silently, and eventually someone will speak.
- Seek consensus on correct responses. After one student provides an answer, ask others if they agree, or which parts of the response they agree with.
- Ask follow-up and probing questions. Once a point has been raised, ask questions that encourage students to explore various aspects of that point.
- Be inclusive. Involve as many students as possible in the discussion, and encourage opposing or contrary viewpoints.
- Encourage student-to-student interaction. Avoid a situation where the facilitator asks a question, a student answers, the facilitator asks another question, another student answers, etc. Try to encourage students to talk to each other, and respond directly to points that fellow students raise. Save your questions for when there is a lull in the discussion, or to focus or direct the discussion.

Sources:

Barbara Gross Davis. 1993. *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Wilbert J. McKeachie. 1994. *Teaching Tips*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Co.