

Teaching Through Leading Discussion

Week 3 Teacher's Notes

Starting a Discussion

Start the discussion like you would any teaching. A lively introduction and a period of up-beat explanation from you to set the stage is essential. Groups come to the time of learning with their minds scattered and preoccupied. Only after the leader has focused attention and stimulated people emotionally can we expect good discussion.

After setting the stage and involving the whole group in the study, present your first discussion question. It should be worded well [see exercise on phrasing questions] and attainable, but not over-simplified, which is boring. Then wait in silence. Resist the urge to answer your own question or to talk to fill the silence. The awkwardness you feel is also felt by the members of the group, and they will usually respond by answering the question.

If nobody answers after a full 10 seconds, you can rephrase the question and ask again. Don't pick on someone to answer (even if he or she is well able to answer) as this may frighten others who imagine you picking on them. Dead air is nearly always sufficient to provoke discussion.

Pacing a Discussion

1. An improperly paced discussion is frustrating and even agonizing to all. The leader is solely responsible for the pace, and must use his or her authority as leader to enforce their will regarding pace.
 - **A rushed pace** leaves everyone feeling frustrated and angry that they aren't getting a chance to share their views, or that people are being cut off before they finish. They may feel disgusted that the subject was only superficially discussed.
 - **A slow pace** leaves people bored and frustrated. Unimportant and uninteresting rabbit trails take up most of the time, or obvious points are repeated *ad nauseum* in different words. People don't feel like they are being challenged or learning anything.
2. Therefore, the leader must constantly monitor the discussion, evaluating whether people are excited and involved (either verbally or non-verbally) or losing interest and whether the content is worth hearing.
3. Generally, if people are interested and engaged, let them talk. But continue to move the subject forward as needed. A teacher who is more focused on covering his outline than on having a deep talk makes a poor discussion leader. Leaders have to be prepared to drop or alter plans if group interest spontaneously leads elsewhere. If the group moves into deep spiritual truth, and feel blessed by building each other up, why must the teacher insist on a certain outline? We should always have more material on hand than will actually be discussed in any event. If the leader often makes people change the

subject, even though they are pursuing it eagerly, people feel "jerked around." High control people have trouble with the spontaneity and unpredictability of group discussion. As Lowman points out,

"Because discussion is much more unpredictable than lecturing, it requires considerable instructor spontaneity, creativity, and tolerance for the unknown." 159

4. Learn to read the situation regarding pace and react appropriately. Listen to feedback on this after meetings. Also, develop sensitivity to the facial and body signals from the group during discussion.

Responding to group comments during discussion

Lowman says, "A useful Classroom discussion, unlike a dormitory bull session, consists of student comments separated by frequent probes and clarifications by the teacher that facilitate involvement and development of thinking by the whole group. Dynamic lecturers captivate a class by the virtuosity of their individual performances. Exemplary discussion leaders accomplish the same end by skillful guidance of the group's collective thinking processes." 159

According to this, leaders are there to lead, not to passively listen.

Also, "Student comments are offered to the instructor in the hope of approval and verification of their academic competence. The quality of the instructor's response potently influences both the student offering the comment and those observing the interchange." 165 When considering response options, remember the following:

As a discussion leader, you need to take your attention off self, off your outline, and onto what people are saying. You need to sparkle in your best personality, exuding friendliness, enthusiasm, intensity, and good humor, all in proper balance.

As the leader, your probes, comments, and summaries will either urge the group on, creating excitement and participation, or will dampen interest like a wet blanket. "All successful discussion leaders direct the group's thinking by following a series of student comments with brief remarks or additional questions that build on students' comments." 166 [see exercise on summarizing] "But if the teacher speaks for more than 15 seconds between comments, it may turn off students' motivation to speak up. Thus, make your summaries very brief, and avoid launching into comments of your own unless you are ready to shift focus or bring discussion to a close." 182

1. Wait for at least two or three comments before changing direction or moving discussion along with another query, or moving back to lecture. On the other hand, students' enthusiasm for responding usually wanes after five or six comments and the instructor must then exert leadership once again. [see Lowman, 182,3]
2. In general, the leader should be very positive in response to any comments from members, but not always. The positive response can be a challenge, especially when people aren't saying what you hoped they would. People wonder whether to risk speaking up, and they decide the question partly based on how the leader responds to others who share. As the group wonders corporately how much to fear the instructor,

response to dumb points is more important than response to obviously brilliant answers. You can usually find something positive to say even in wrong responses. At times, you may elect to withhold positive response, but this is unusual.

3. At times, the leader needs to be provocative. Provocative discussions in which assumptions are questioned require that instructors become highly involved in the group's problem solving as gadflies or devil's advocates, working to keep the group on its toes. "So you're saying that anyone who has a quiet time in the morning is a formalist?"
4. At other times, the need for positive reinforcement collides with the need to advance learning and truth. "A discussion leader who lets students talk on and on with little control or direction will soon lose the group's attention." (165)
5. Responding to statements that are clearly untrue or that take the discussion in a direction other than what you as leader want, present a special challenge to our diplomacy and firmness. [see exercise on responding to wrong answers] Several possible types of response follow. What is being done in each?

"Yes, that's interesting. I wonder how you would respond to someone who used a similar argument to justify infanticide?" "Okay, what do the rest of us think about that?"

"Yeah, what about that?"

"Okay, that's very thought provoking, and there are certainly a lot of people who would agree with that."

"I don't think you're saying all morality is relative to the individual, are you?"

"Okay, that squares with what Jim said. But *why* would a person feel that way?"

"Would you say that's a biblical teaching, or your personal opinion?"

"If I understood you correctly, Janice you are saying that..."

"I realize what you're saying is important in some contexts, but I'd like to finish with the question I raised earlier."

"The only problem I see with that is..."

"Do you think what you are saying is compatible with...?"

"How would you reconcile that with what you said earlier?"

"Okay, great! But I wonder if we really ever addressed the question I raised earlier?"
6. Sometimes people will ask questions of the instructor instead of giving opinion or answers. Lowman points out that students learn most from struggling with a problem or issue, so you should not propose a solution too quickly even if directly asked. The default response should be, "That's a good question. Who has an idea for an answer?" This kind of response turns the locus of expertise back from the leader to the group. In some situations, however, it may be best to answer the question yourself. What kind of

questions do you think might better be handled by the leader rather than turned back to the group?

7. During some spontaneous discussion, members may burst into angry outbursts at other members or at the leader. When directed at the leader, such outbursts present no particular danger to the group, as the leader will no doubt be able to respond appropriately. However, when newer members of the group are the object of attack, the leader must spring into action. Even when older members are attacked, there is some danger that they may retaliate inappropriately. The leader is responsible for mediating such disputes, calling on either party or both for more self-control and understanding. Remember:

The presence of anger is not a bad thing in group interaction

A panicked response from the leader or other members moving to quench the anger may do more harm than the anger itself. You must be perceived as fair and un-defensive in this situation.

You may elect to speak a word of discipline to the angry one. This may depend on the severity of the outburst, whether it has been a repetitive problem, and the spiritual age and accountability of the speaker. Samples might include:

"Well, I think what you're saying may be important for us to discuss, but I hope we can discuss it without losing respect for each other"

"I see this upsets you quite a bit. Why do you think that is?"

Sometimes simply reflect feelings, "You're angry that a group of middle-class whites would presume to know that Blacks think and feel." But follow up with a helpful suggestion.

For an accountable believer, "Why don't you try to restate your question in a spirit of humility and love?"

"Are you upset because..." [speculate on what you think is the cause of their anger]