Discussions

Discussions require careful planning and facilitation. The format of the discussion and ability to facilitate the conversation determine their effectiveness. Information on a variety of discussion formats and facilitation strategies can be found below or accessed as PDF resources.

Discussion Formats

There are many formats for discussions. Some formats work better in larger or smaller groups. Consider the objective of your discussion as well as the size of your group before choosing a format. If you are new to facilitating discussions, you may also want to choose a lower-risk format like the think-pair-share before using some of the more intensive formats like the fish bowl. What follows are brief descriptions of some common discussion formats.

**Brainstorming**

Brainstorming is a method of discussion in which all members of a group contribute ideas. Brainstorming can take a number of formats, including: the group generating ideas/responses to a question or prompt; individually responding to a question or topic and then sharing responses and consolidating them; participants anonymously responding to the question and the facilitator collecting and sharing the ideas.

**Queststorming or Quescussion**

This process involves brainstorming the questions, rather than trying to come up with immediate answers or solutions. This technique is relatively low risk because there is no need for solutions. It can also work if not all of the participants have done the homework.

**Luck of the Draw**

Prior to the discussion, the facilitator puts key concepts or questions into a hat and invites each participant to take one at random. Each participant then has a few minutes to consider a response. The facilitator then asks for volunteers or does a roundtable to hear responses to the key concepts or questions. There may be repeats, which is a great way to reinforce ideas and build on contributions.

**Snowball**

Participants write a question on a scrap piece of paper, crumple the paper and throw their paper ball across the room. Participants then pick up someone else's paper, open it and respond to the question. Or participants write responses to questions on a piece of paper, crumple and throw the responses at the facilitator who then gets “snowballed” with responses.

**Think-Pair-Share**

Invite participants to take a moment to “think” about a posted question. Participants then “pair” up with the person sitting next to them. Finally these pairs “share” their responses with a larger group (either the whole class or a group of 4, 8, 10…)

**Case Studies**

Either in small groups or as the large class, provide participants with a real world problem or situation (either a text summary or video) and have them discuss responses to the problem or situation.

**Debate**

Discuss a controversial topic by holding a class debate. Either assign teams or allow participants to choose a side. Give the sides time to prepare arguments for and against the topic/question and then invite the sides to debate one another.
Post-it!
Require participants to come to class with a prepared question for the assigned reading/lecture material. Have each participant “post” the question by writing the question on the whiteboard/chalkboard. Then participants should respond in writing to a question posted on the board (not their own) before having a large group discussion about the posted questions.

Expert Panel
Either designate ahead of time, or nominate in class, a few participants to sit on the “expert panel” related to the assigned reading or lecture materials. These participants will speak for a few minutes about the topic before answering questions from the “audience” (the rest of the class).

Guided Reading
Provide participants with a few questions to “guide” them as they read the assigned reading. You may require participants to prepare written responses to these questions before you discuss these questions in class, or you may simply discuss.

Pass it Forward
Ask participants to write a question on a scrap piece of paper. The participants then pass this piece of paper to the person sitting next to them or in front of them. Once the participants have a new piece of paper, they provide a response to the question. After responding the participants, pass the question a few more times. The papers are then returned to the original asker who now has two or three responses!

Fishbowl
Like watching fish inside a fishbowl, in the “fishbowl” exercise a small group of participants are physically moved to the centre of the classroom where they discuss a question or solve a problem. The participants on the outside watch the discussion inside the fishbowl and can either shout out additional ideas and questions or write responses to what the inner group discusses.

Discussion Facilitation
The following facilitation techniques can be used when facilitating any discussion.

Clarification
When a participant offers a response that is either unclear or incorrect, you can use clarification as a technique to elicit more information about what the participant meant or how they arrived at the (incorrect) response. You can ask questions like:

- Could you elaborate on that point?
- Can you clarify by what you mean by…?

Return to Evidence
Sometimes during a discussion, participants may stray from the key ideas in your objective for the discussion or may be too influenced by opinion. You can use return to evidence as a way of focusing the discussion. Invite participants to make reference to readings or lectures. Try:

- Which part of the text led you to that view or conclusion?
- How could we relate this idea to what we discussed earlier?
- That’s interesting, but we need to return to our objective for this discussion.

Summarizing
You can use summarizing for a few reasons in a discussion including to introduce the discussion topic, to focus the conversation, to check understanding of an individual or the group, to give assurance, as a springboard for deeper discussion or to close the discussion. Try:

- So what I’ve heard so far is…
- During this discussion we have talked about…
Reflecting Back
Similar to summarizing, reflecting back checks that you accurately hear, understand and recall an individual participant’s point of view. You can check perceptions by asking questions like:
- What I hear you saying is…
- If what I’ve heard is correct, you’re saying…

Redirection
If you notice some participants are not participating, or some are participating too eagerly, you can use redirection to solicit responses from all participants. Try:
- Can you summarize your idea in one sentence? (dominating participant)
- Please give a one-word response to the reading. I’ll call on you in turn – you can “pass” if you don’t have a word.

Gatekeeping
Part of your role as the instructor is to monitor who speaks and to widen participation. You can gatekeep by: setting up group norms about participation; scanning the group for non-verbal cues that someone wants to speak; inviting participation through non-verbal cues (like eye-contact and hand motions); seating quiet people across from talkative people or by seating the group in a circle; and, using activity structure to build from small to large groups.

Listening
Make sure you can hear the participant and ask them to repeat if their voice is quiet or you couldn't hear. Attend to what the participant says and avoid thinking about how you might respond or interrupt. Be sure that you also avoid selective listening, when you listen only to bright participants or only to what you want to hear. Attempt to remember what you heard so that you can summarize or redirect.

Information Relating
You can use discussions as a way to encourage participants to relate new information or ideas to something they already know. Invite participants to generate these connections themselves by asking questions like:
- How might this theory apply outside of farming?
- What is the relationship between this idea and what we discussed last time?

Note-Taking
Discussions have a spontaneous aspect, so the content is not usually linear. Participants may become confused. An important facilitation technique is to unscramble the ideas and issues. You can use note-taking as a way to monitor and summarize the discussion. Try:
- What are the issues or questions being discussed?
- How are these issues/ideas connected?

Responding to Feelings
Feelings can impact the tone and success of a discussion. Part of your role is to monitor the emotions of a group and respond as appropriate. Acknowledge feelings and discuss feelings, if appropriate. Encourage participants to use phrases that start with “I” when giving opinions and when you respond to feelings. Try:
- I noticed you were quiet in today’s discussion.
- When we discuss morality in this text, I feel upset because I do not agree with the position in the article.

Giving Feedback
If you hold regular discussions in your class, make sure to provide participants with feedback on their participation. How might they improve? What are their strengths in the discussion? Similarly, invite your participants to provide you feedback with your discussion facilitation. Try a one-minute paper by asking your participants to tell you the most effective and least effective part of how you facilitate discussions.

Further Reading
For more information and examples, see Bligh, D. (1999). What’s the Point in Discussion? Exeter: Intellect.