

Essays on Teaching Excellence

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Facilitating Group Discussions: Understanding Group Development and Dynamics

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Facilitating discussions requires the ability to engage different perspectives and skills in response to the needs of the group. How well a group works together depends upon the dynamics among participants and the ability of the facilitator to gauge and respond to these dynamics. An effective facilitator works to create an inclusive learning environment while being prepared to set boundaries and rules when necessary. Yet, even experienced facilitators can be confronted with situations or individuals that prevent the group from functioning. Such situations are even more daunting for new faculty and graduate student Teaching Assistants (TAs) who are new to leading groups.

What reflective practices can prepare facilitators and participants for productive group discussions? This essay describes an approach which combines multiple resources with an explanation on how one teaching center used them to foster self-awareness among facilitators and the students in their discussion groups. At Brown University's Sheridan Center, we used self-assessment of individual behavior, together with participatory observation of these behaviors through Forum Theatre. Our aim was to engage would-be facilitators in understanding group dynamics and some of the challenging behaviors that participants bring to the group.

Stage I: Individual behaviors and perspectives

Facilitators can prepare themselves and the members of their discussion groups to develop awareness of: i) their own perspectives and/or biases and ii) degrees of constructive and destructive behaviors they may manifest. Understanding individual behaviors and recognizing their consequences for group dynamics can help identify ways to dissipate or alleviate destructive behavior while supporting constructive behaviors. While personal dynamics are indeed related to the backgrounds of the participants, facilitators can foster self-awareness of participants' behaviors to encourage reflective dialogue. At the same time, the facilitator should be attuned to his/her own behaviors and experiences. This integrative reflective process promotes a metacognitive approach.

Graduate students participating in a Teaching Consultant Program were asked to share their own experiences related to facilitating discussions or leading small groups. The most frequently cited challenges for facilitators were:

- Getting quiet or reluctant students to participate
- Dealing with hostile students
- Responding to unexpected situations
- Students who talk too much and dominate the discussion
- Students who talk a lot but digress from the discussion topic

These challenges are familiar to us all, and we have probably experienced them in various situations. Brunt divides group behaviors into two categories: constructive behaviors and destructive behaviors (Brunt 1993). According to him, individual behaviors that are constructive include:

- *Cooperating*: Is interested in the views and perspectives of other group members and is willing to adapt for the good of the group.
- *Clarifying*: Makes issues clear for the group by listening, summarizing and focusing discussions.
- *Inspiring*: Enlivens the group, encourages participation and progress.
- *Harmonizing*: Encourages group cohesion and collaboration.
- *Risk taking*: Is willing to risk possible personal loss or embarrassment for

the group or project success.

- *Process Checking*: Questions the group on process issues such as agenda, time frames, discussions topics, decision methods, use of information, etc.

Individual behaviors that are destructive to groups include:

- *Dominating*: Takes much of meeting time expressing self-views and opinions. Tries to take control by use of power, time, etc.
- *Rushing*: Encourages the group to move on before task is complete. Gets “tired” of listening to others and working as a group.
- *Withdrawing*: Removes self from discussions or decision-making. Refuses to participate.
- *Discounting*: Disregards or minimizes group or individual ideas or suggestions. Severe discounting behavior includes insults, which are often in the form of jokes.
- *Digressing*: Rambles, tells stories, and takes group away from primary purpose.
- *Blocking*: Impedes group progress by obstructing all ideas and suggestions. “That will never work because...”

Stage II: Behavior along a continuum

While identifying and addressing these behaviors can help guide discussion, research has shown that individual differences are not the most influential indicator of the quality of participation in course learning. Rather, the educational context, or ‘learning environment’, plays a key role in determining active participation (Caspi Chajut, Saporta, & Beyrth-Marom, 2006). Active participants in the online ‘environment’ may be quite reticent in face to face settings (Asterhan & Eisenmann, 2009; see also Isaacs, 2009). Dominant personalities in class discussions might play a leadership role in online discussions. Drawing on this work, I have replaced the two polarities for group behavior, with a *continuum* of behaviors. This more nuanced continuum combines a wider range of learning behavior from multiple learning environments. This larger behavioral map provides us with a richer way of thinking about group behavior in the face-to-face setting and also provides a map for guiding behaviors toward those that have positive effects on the group discussion.

The Teaching Consultant facilitators considered their own constructive and/or destructive responses to group discussion

situations. This raised greater self- reflection amongst the group. The facilitators were also encouraged to have their students engage in the same exercise to promote self-reflection, which prompted participants to consider how they might modulate their behaviors and interactions in groups. The behaviors in the “transition zone” defined by the dotted lines above provides opportunity for pause, and helps participants consider how certain behaviors can be constructive in one context, but less so in another. The Group Behavior Continuum can promote dialogic progression to foster continual reflection and process-oriented critical analysis by both facilitators and participants.

Stage III: Forum Theatre

In considering how to improve group discussion dynamics we have discovered an alternative to the more conventional approaches of having each person work in isolation on his/her own improvement, or conducting a discussion about group discussions. This alternative is provided by role playing and behavioral critique made possible by Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre (Boal, 1979). Using this method, facilitators have the chance to experientially encounter the challenging behaviors they identified earlier, and participants act out and act upon group discussion scenarios. The scenarios were based on discussion situations they had experienced or anticipated experiencing. Participants also consider various behaviors in relation to the Group Behavior Continuum, and how they might best facilitate group dynamics through this approach.

Forum Theatre is an interactive form of theatre developed by Brazilian theatre director, Augusto Boal to empower the audiences of his plays. Today, it is used by various groups to encourage audience interaction and explore different options for addressing a problem. Members of the audience become “*spect-actors*” who have the chance to replace the actors on stage and act out possible solutions. Spect-actors can intervene during the play by yelling “freeze!” and take the place of an actor on stage to alter the course of the situation. The remaining actors continue to improvise the reactions of their characters in response to each new intervention, thus experientially providing an analysis of the real possibilities of applying these suggestions in real life.

Teaching Consultant “actors” assumed the roles of students

exhibiting “destructive” behaviors and the remaining Teaching Consultant audience observed a dramatization of a discussion unfold. Following the observation of a brief scenario once without interruption, the dramatization was repeated and this time, audience spect-actors (the other TCs) participated by “freezing” the action and replacing actors at various points in the scene to try to improve a specific situation or intervene to alleviate actors’ destructive behaviors or support constructive behavior.

Participants in this exercise were struck by new insights revealed when acting out the very behaviors they found challenging or intimidating. This was particularly transformative for those who identified themselves as “dominant” participants, when they took on the role of a “shy, recalcitrant” student. The use of Forum Theatre in this situation creates opportunities for facilitators to acquire new lenses for analyzing the dynamics of the participants in their groups. Observing, and being part of the dynamics of discussions that are subject to the behaviors and contexts that might influence this behavior provides an experiential understanding of facilitation and participation. This enables us to think of creating more inclusive environments rather than focusing on trying to change behaviors.

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