

Leader-guided Group Discussion

“Discussion can be a waste of time for everyone and as boring as the worst of lectures”

–Joseph Lowman

“What all the great teachers appear to have in common is love of their subject, an obvious satisfaction in arousing this love in their students, and an ability to convince them that what they are being taught is deadly serious.”

- J. Epstein. *Masters: Portraits of Great Teachers*. New York: Basic Books, 1981, p. xii.

Group Discussion Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths	Weaknesses

Definition

For our purposes,

- Discussion will refer to **leader-guided or moderated group discussion**. This will usually follow a pattern where the leader **teaches partly by lecture, or at least offers an introduction and conclusion**.
- Guided discussion may involve some peer-to-peer interaction, but most of the interaction will be from learners to the leader or the group in general.
- **The leader offers a short summary and comment** to most, or all, sharing.

Technique

Introduction:

Some discussions seem to drag in fits and awkward silences, creating tension in the group that further inhibits discussion. Other discussions seem to thrive in eager sharing, with people actually competing to get their point in. Why is this?

The most likely reason for such difference is the introduction. In our introduction, we touch on the skills of public speaking, or homiletics. The leader must stimulate and excite the group about the subject under consideration. During the first part of the meeting, the burden is completely on the leader to:

Raise the group's consciousness of the issues: Defining what the issues are, and why they are urgent

Emotionally engage the group with the subject and with the leader

Achieve arousal: People sit up, furrow their brows, smile, laugh, and in other ways show that they have been impacted emotionally, whether excited, disturbed, insulted (be careful with this one), or inspired

When people come into a meeting, they are not ready to discuss anything. Most people come to meetings with cold hearts and empty minds. They do not have any thoughts to share, or any desire to speak. Leaders who try to start out with a discussion question are mistaken.

Achieving such arousal is not necessarily a long project. It could be accomplished in a couple of minutes, although you could spend up to 15 or even 20 minutes, if you feel the need to lay a more complete groundwork. These judgments are based on the subject matter and the audience. Longer introductions have the potential to lay out more elaborate content, but may exhaust the audience attention-span.

To become adept at this part, consider taking a class in homiletics.

The instructor will normally introduce “**probes**” or questions intended to prod members toward a particular line of thought.

Probes → questions intended to prod members toward a particular line of thought

An important distinction:

However, **discussion is not recitation.**

Recitation is when the instructor give students an opportunity to clarify content or the instructor asks questions requiring specific knowledge of study content, frequently from assigned readings (like the teacher in “The Paper Chase”). We are not suggesting such recitation is wrong or harmful, only that such is not what we are studying in this class.

Examples of recitation:

- “What are the means of growth?”
- “What the 3 things that John tells us the world consists of in the book of 1 John?”
- “What is sanctification?”
- These are some of the examples of recitation.
- This is more of a thing for cell-group. But it should be used sparingly. Why?
- Because it leaves no room for discussion. One answer is given and then the question is over. This is not what we are talking about.

Asking good questions is a majority of the battle in discussion.

- Nothing will kill a discussion faster than a bad or unclear question.
- Let’s admit, most of our discussion questions are planned in a haphazard manner.

What then, are these questions, or probes, that elicit discussion? Several patterns are successful. Here is a partial list:

- Set up an apparent contradiction in your introduction, and ask the group how it might be resolved
 - Read a passage like Galatians 3:5-11, Romans 4:1-5, James 2:21-23
 - James seems like a direct refutation of the other 2 passages

- Read Philippians 1:9, 1 Corinthians 8:1
 - Why does Paul say then in 1 Corinthians that knowledge is bad? Love is the only thing that really edifies.
 - Read 2 Corinthians 13:5 and 1 Corinthians 4:3
 - What does this say about self-examination?
 - These can even be taught with a little bit of devil's advocacy
 - Teaching the antithesis
- Ask them how a particular truth might apply either to life in general, or to specific situations you imagine
 - We are doing a series on Daniel in our home church. We were talking about some facts of the 10-nation alliance that would dominate in the end-times. This would be good to ask for an application
 - You are giving a teaching on serving and then you ask your people how they would handle a younger brother who complains because he is no longer receiving the attention that he once had.
 - Here is one that I use a lot: describe what a church would look like that was completely into knowledge, describe to me what a church would look like that was completely into love, describe what the balance of those 2 would look like.
 - Give them a statement from a third party (either imaginary or an authority) and ask them to react to it
 - You are giving a teaching on the nature of human sexuality out of Genesis. So you give the example, "a homosexual friend of yours approaches you and says, 'What is your opinion of my lifestyle.'"
 - A Roman Catholic friend of yours says, "I think all religions basically say the same thing."
 - A family member of yours says, "I just don't trust the Bible. It seems like it is just so old and full of errors."
 - Ask how someone from x, y, or z perspective would answer a particular question
 - Get them to empathize with someone or something. Great for narrative.

- How do you think the woman at the well felt as Christ began pressing her further and further with the truth?
 - How do you think Paul felt about the fact that in Philippians 2 he says that Timothy is the only one of kindred spirit that he can trust?
 - How do you think Joseph felt in prison as he was making all the right choices but things continued to get worse?
 - How would a typical generation Xer respond to the notion that we believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God and should be followed at all times?
 - Here we serving to draw them in deeper into the passage and make it more personal.
- Set up a real life situation (where principles often don't apply neatly) and ask how the principle might apply in that situation. Ask for exceptions.
 - You have just given a teaching on how to love one another unconditionally. Then you ask about the scenario of a friend who is constantly stabbing you in the back. Should you continue to love that person unconditionally? What does that look like?
 - A friend is trying to decide which job to take and asks you for help. One job moves him out of state and one job is in the current town in which you live. How would you help him figure out where God's will lies?
 - The goal of this pattern is to set up a scenario to which there are different answers or something that would set up controversy.
 - Ask what the difference is between what you just distilled from a text or narrative is different or the same as something else with which they are already familiar
 - Take for instance the passage in Romans 14 on how sometimes it is wrong to eat meat and sometimes it isn't. Is this a passage that confirms that the Bible teaches relativity? Romans 14:1-2,6,10
 - Romans 9:11-18 → Doesn't this completely violate the idea of free will choice
 - Paul talking in 1 Corinthians 9 where he says 'to the Jews I am as a Jew and to the Greeks I am as a Greek.' Doesn't this preach that Christianity is

not exclusive and that there are redeeming parts to all world religions and ways of life?

- Devil's advocacy: challenge a position they all seem to accept axiomatically with some problems
 - Pick a subject that everyone believes and ask them to back it up with Scripture. Ask them what their position is on the rapture. Then ask them to justify it based on what the Bible says. We all believe in a pre-tribulation rapture. Justify that to me from Scripture. Good for cell groups.
 - We take for granted the inspiration and canonicity of the Bible. Yet, I would argue that probably 90% of Americans feel that the Bible is not the inspired word of God. Could each of us construct an argument to back the inspiration of the Bible? How would you answer the question, would Paul come back into our churches and be surprised that we were treating his books as something that they were not?
 - What essential doctrines do you need to believe in order to be saved? Justify them from Scripture. Do you need to believe in Hell? Do you need to believe in absolute truth? Do you need to believe in the inerrancy of Scripture? Do you need to be baptized?
- Discovery: What do you think is this passage really saying?
 - 1 Corinthians 12:3 – Does anyone see any problems with this passage?
 - This can get tricky because there is usually one right answer. There is a gray line between this sort of a question and recitation.
- Personal experience: Who wants to share an experience where this truth has made a difference?
 - This is a nice question because this is something that everyone can do. You don't have to have lots of background Bible knowledge.
 - We are giving a teaching on serving. Ask someone to share an example of how they served and were edified by it.
 - Be sure to include questions like this that don't require a lot of knowledge or courage so that younger brothers and sisters can share.

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."

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 of 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: a discussion 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 not 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.

Finishing Touches

1. Before God, what part of the plan really fires you with passion? Have you worked with this enough to develop a burden for your points? How are you going to let that passion fly?

2. Check your questions with someone who understands discussion. Have you accidentally included questions that are boring, hard to understand, or are recitation?

3. Are you familiar enough with your passage and subject to be flexible and relatively note-free? You can't engage people in discussion if you are looking at your notes all the time.

4. Have you prayed by yourself and with your group members that the Holy Spirit will energize the church for sharing?

5. Consider an audience plant: If you know someone in your group who has experience in the area you are discussing, why not call that person and say, "We're going to be discussing this area, and I wonder if you'd be willing to share about that time you..."

6. Consider audience preparation: Most home churches have an email group set up. Why not send out a message to the people before your meeting: "We're going to be studying such and so, and these are some questions to think about for discussion..."

Exercise #1

In Class—take a few minutes to jot some possible responses for each.

“Phrasing questions so that students have little to lose by speaking removes much of the anxiety that students have about responding to requests for discussion.” [Lowman, 176] Take each of the following requests for objective “correct” answers and rephrase them a couple of ways so they are invitations to discussion.

1. What’s the right thing to do when you hear someone has told a lie about you?
2. Does the Bible say that we should be attending rock concerts or not?
3. What is the Bible's explanation for why bad things happen to good people?
4. How do you discover the will of God for your life?
5. What are the five means of growth and where does it name them in Scripture?
6. What is the definition of “God’s glory?”