

**Guidebook**  
**for Student-Centered**  
**Classroom Discussions**

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# **Guidebook for Student-Centered Classroom Discussions**

**First Edition**

**By Jack Byrd, Jr.**

**Edited by Suzanne Goodney Lea**

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FIRST EDITION

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## Preface

Student discussion has been a teaching strategy from the beginning of the concept of education. In most cases, student discussion has the teacher as the facilitator of the discussion. The teacher asks questions, challenges responses, provides authoritative comments, and manages the discussion.

This guidebook offers suggestions for the use of a student-centered discussion process. In this approach, the teacher is an observer and an evaluator of the discussion rather than being the central figure in the discussion.

The teaching approach presented here has been tested in a number of classrooms. In the summer of 2006, the Interactivity Foundation sponsored a Summer Institute for faculty who were interested in a new approach to their teaching. Then in the spring and summer of 2007, the 10 participants in the Summer Institute used the student-centered discussion approach in at least one course they were teaching. Much of the content of this guidebook has been shaped by the experiences of these faculty experiences.

The Guidebook is divided into a series of short sections which describe how the student-centered approach can be used. The sections go from the overall course design to specific detail on course operations.



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**Section One**  
**An Overview of the Student-Centered  
Discussion Process**

## **1-A**

### **Description of a Student-Centered Discussion**

Many faculty use some form of discussion in their classroom. Typically the teacher in these classes is at the center the discussion. The teacher asks students questions, and students respond. The teacher may direct one student's response to another student, but the teacher is the one who is directing the discussion.

In a student-centered discussion, the students themselves direct the discussion. One student serves as the facilitator of the discussion, but the discussion flows from student to student. In the student-centered discussion approach, the teacher is an observer. The teacher makes notes throughout the discussion to be used in assessing student "performance" in the discussion and to be used as reference material for subsequent presentations.

In the student-centered classroom, teams of 5-8 students form a discussion group. Typically these discussion groups stay together for the entire semester and develop a comfort level with each other.

The atmosphere of the discussion in a student-centered classroom is described as a "sanctuary." Students feel free to express their thoughts without fear. The role of each student in a discussion group is to help other students develop their own ideas. Discussions are not debates and intellectual "showing off" is discouraged. Discussions are a success when each student develops his/her own personal insights about the subject of the discussion.

Course content in the student-centered class is integrated into the class in a variety of formats. In some cases, the teacher first presents the content, and the students then develop their own understanding of the content through the discussions. In other cases, the student-centered discussion serves as the context setter for a later content presentation to be delivered by the teacher. The discussion groups become, in effect, a learning team which explores questions about the content area and develops its own thinking into possibilities.

The role of the teacher in the student-centered classroom is to be a mentor for students—in addition to the more traditional roles taken on by a teacher. The teacher gives the students feedback on their discussions and makes suggestions for improvement. This is done in a face-to-face meeting with support from the observation notes made by the teacher.

Finally, the student-centered discussions have a discussion process they use. Students are trained to be discussion facilitators, and they learn how to become effective discussion participants. The student-centered classroom requires a much higher level of social skills than is typically required in a classroom.

**1-B****A Contrast of Student-Centered and Faculty-Led Discussion**

Learning is an interactive process between the student, the teacher, and the subject matter. Learning is enabled by a teaching approach. A well thought out teaching approach serves to motivate students' desire to learn, empowers students to think about the subject matter on their own, and helps the teacher create a learning environment that is developmentally appropriate. Such a teaching approach enables students and the teacher to take part in the learning process as co-thinkers.

We know from research that the teaching approach has a major impact on what students learn and retain. The learning pyramid shown in [Figure 1](#) (page 6, below) is a useful model for examining how effective different teaching approaches are in contributing to student learning.

The traditional classroom, with its focus on lecturing and reading, produces the lowest level of student learning. This teaching approach has long dominated education, likely since the origin of schools. Recently this basic approach to teaching has been modified in many classrooms to incorporate technology into the presentation of information. Students are essentially shown a computer facilitated audio-visual presentation. This use of technology is often heralded as an educational innovation, yet it essentially retains the model of teaching as the transmission of information. In effect it further reduces students' active engagement with the subject matter. Basically, faculty have reduced their presentations to capsules of information and students remain passive consumers. Preparation for tests may be easier and grades may improve, but learning is generally limited to the recall of the capsules of information. There is very little engagement of the student in the learning process.

When faculty-led classroom discussion is used as a teaching approach, the level of learning would seem to increase, according to the model illustrated by the learning pyramid. But the reality is that many faculty led classroom discussions still occur within a context that sees teaching as the transmission of information – not as a learning process where students are guided through a discovery of essential concepts. Such discussions often occur at a fairly low level of intellectual engagement and fail to attain the higher levels of learning suggested by the learning pyramid. Many classroom discussions resemble the mindless and often angry debates that populate cable TV. They are characterized by a great deal of “telling” or “asserting” but fall short on collaborative exploration. There is little emphasis on developing a practice of listening. In fact, there is little emphasis on establishing a reflective approach to the practice of discussion; it is just something that happens. As a result, there are only limited advances in students' insights about the subject matter, and there are only limited opportunities for students to reap the benefits of many minds working together. Also students don't get the chance to develop critical social skills such as listening,

exploration, cooperation, and helping others think through difficult issues. Since there is only limited use of a process to guide the flow of the discussion, there are only minimal gains in the ongoing development of the course subject matter. Students need some structure in their discussions if they are to use discussion as a way to work through a difficult issue. Without a structure, the discussion tends to be unfocused.

The incorporation of the student-centered discussion process into the classroom has the potential of enhancing the level of student learning about the course content and about the way they and others think about difficult issues. The student-centered environment contrasts with the faculty led discussion environment as shown in the table below:

	<u>Faculty Led Discussions</u>	<u>Student-Centered Discussions</u>
Discussion Interaction	Faculty to Student	Student to Student
Role of Faculty	Control Discussion Flow Serve as Expert	Assess Student Discussion Mentor Students
Content Understanding	Externally Driven by Faculty	Internally Driven by Students
Faculty Role	Content Expert	Student Development Mentor
Student Role	Listening Note Taking	Discussing Developing

With respect to the learning pyramid, student-centered discussions work at the 90% level of learning (focusing on active saying and doing). Classroom discussions become a developmental process of the collaborative exploration of possibilities. In contrast to typical classroom discussions, there is a flow to the discussion. These discussions are more likely to generate real insights rather than crosstalk or debates. The focus on the actual process of discussion, establishing an intentional practice of learning how to facilitate and participate in such collaborative exploration and development, make up the “doing” element at the highest levels of learning.

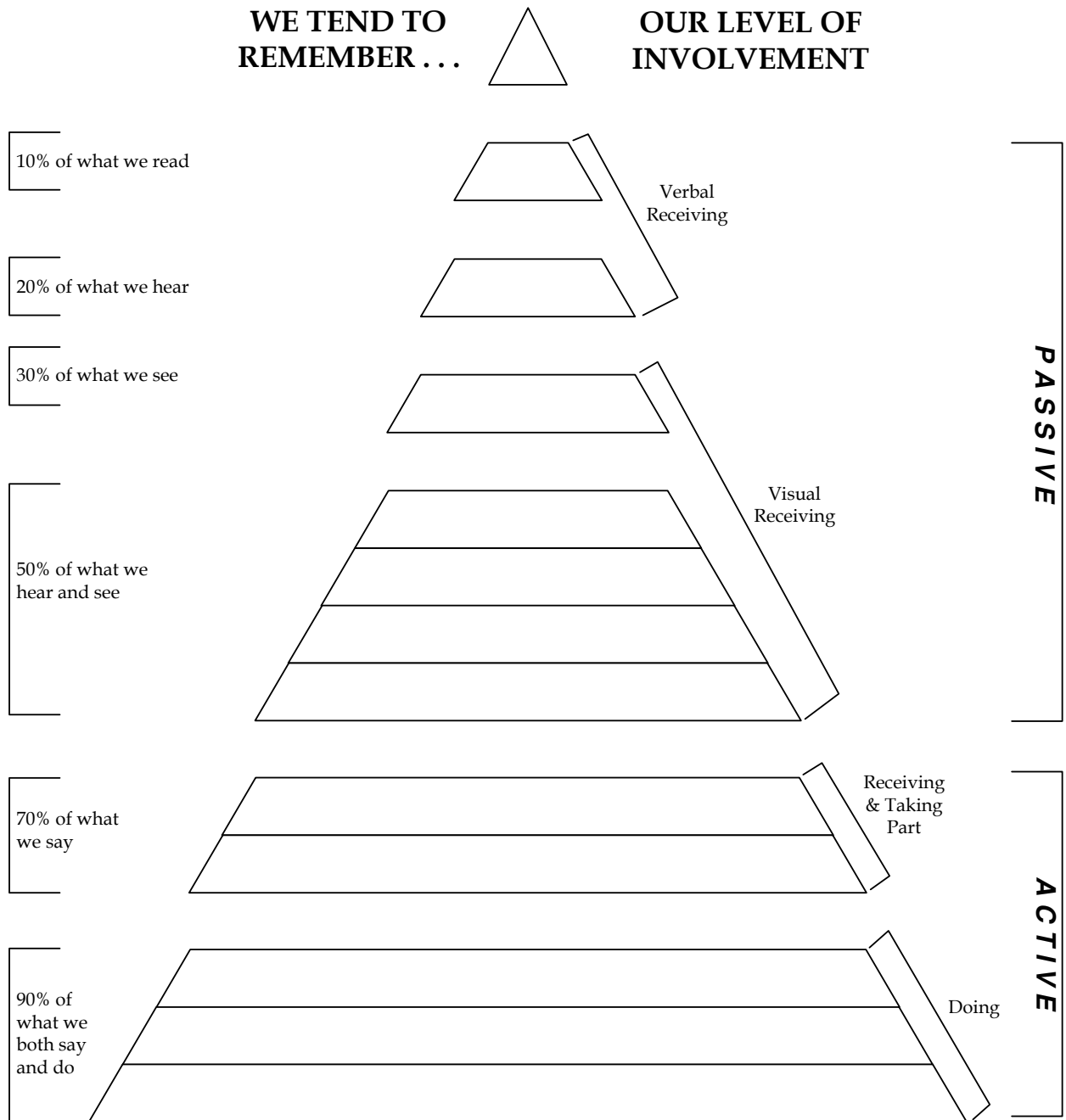
The approach described above has been used in eight different courses in a variety of social science and humanities courses at seven different universities. The following are some of the preliminary results from these courses.

- Faculty have found that the student-centered discussion process is a useful approach for focusing classroom discussion. While all of the participating

faculty have extensive experience in classroom discussion, they have found that the student-centered discussion process has enriched student learning.

- Faculty report that they have seen students who have not been “stars”, in previous classes, suddenly blossom in this classroom environment. The non-threatening, student-centered learning environment has been successful in bringing out the potential that some students have but which may seldom have been revealed within more traditional classrooms.
- Faculty report that content coverage in their classes has not declined. Significantly, in fact, they have experienced a deeper student understanding of the fundamental concepts that form the basis for the course content.
- Faculty report that they are developing a better appreciation for how students learn as they observe the student discussions. They have been surprised that students are more insightful than they had previously thought. In many cases, students discovered for themselves the essential concepts that would normally be presented through the course reading.
- Faculty have had to change their role. Rather than being the expert on the subject matter, they have become the context setter for the discussion. Rather than being a dispenser of grades, they have become developmental mentors. Rather than being presenters of content, they have become facilitators of learning.
- Assessment of student performance has shifted from performance on exams to performance in practice: evaluations based on the discussions with others, the student’s personal reflections, and the student’s personal behavior that encourages others. Such assessments are paradoxically more subjective but more meaningful to a student’s personal development.
- Students have developed a true sense of what it takes to function within a “team.” They have learned about accountability to others. They have accepted responsibility to help each other learn. Students have begun to learn that their performance depends on others and is affected by others.

Figure 1 – The Learning Pyramid





## 1-C

### Student-Centered Discussions in a Generation Y Environment

Students change over the generations. Our current generation of students, termed Generation Y, has been a challenge to faculty. Generation Y students are the students born between 1980 and 1992. The most common lament about Generation Y is that student quality is on the decline.

Jim Westerman of Appalachian State University has made a number of observations about Generation Y students in his article "Motivating Generation Y in the classroom."<sup>1</sup> His observations include the following.

1. "They need involvement and engagement." .... "they want to experience more than passively observe."
2. "They want connections with the world they are living in...."
3. "They want a flexible, fun classroom" ... "Try to enable self-expression and autonomy in the classroom."
4. "They want frequent performance feedback (like weekly quizzes, activities, and presentations in the classroom, and other high-involvement activities."

Student-centered discussions fulfill the needs of Generation Y students as described above. Students are involved and engaged by being at the heart of the discussions. It's difficult for a student to be passive in the student-centered classroom. The discussion topics, if chosen carefully, connect the content of the course with current issues. The classroom environment encourages self-expression but within a process that provides guidance and structure. The teacher serves as a mentor and in this role is providing developmental feedback rather than just a grade.

Student-centered discussions are not built around a "do your own thing" approach that faculty sometimes imagine a student focused classroom to be. Rather there is a structure, a process, and a discipline built into the student-centered discussion course that makes it challenging while supporting the needs of Generation Y students.

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<sup>1</sup> Westerman, Jim, "Motivating Generation Y in the Classroom," POD Network, Vol. 18, No. 5, 2007

## 1-D

### A Typical Day in a Class Using a Student-Centered Discussion Format

The operation of a class using a student-centered discussion approach might function in a manner as outlined below, though there are many possible variations on this theme.

The teacher provides the students with guidance for what they are to accomplish in their discussions that day. Typically this guidance includes:

- The outcome desired from the discussion. Usually the discussion focuses on a specific topic related to the subject matter of the course. Students are working on one project throughout the semester that integrates the content into an issue they are exploring.
- Specific connections they are to make between the content being covered and their discussions.

Students then break-out into discussion groups. These discussion groups have the same members throughout the semester. One of the students serves as a facilitator for that day's discussion, and another student serves as a note taker. The schedules for facilitator and note taker are set in advance.

The teacher moves to a place in the room where he/she can see and hear each of the discussions. The teacher has an assessment form which is used to record notes and to eventually record a grade. Both the facilitator and the team are evaluated.

Students begin their discussions under the leadership of the facilitator. Students use a specific discussion process which gives them guidance on what they need to accomplish. This guidance helps ensure that there is a flow to the discussion and movement from one point to another in the overall development of the issue they are exploring.

At the conclusion of the class, the note taker synthesizes that day's discussion into a working document that will be eventually used in the team's report. This working document is then made available to the team prior to their next discussion.

Following class, the teacher has a quick meeting with each of the facilitators to give them feedback on the leadership they provided their team that day. These feedback discussions resemble more of a coaching session than a grade review.

In most cases, classes using student-centered discussions use the approach described above in approximately one-third of their class sessions. The other class sessions are more conventional content presentation classes.

**1-E****Keys to Effective Student-Centered Discussions**

Student-centered discussions can be an effective learning environment if developed properly. While it doesn't take much effort to get students to discuss issues among themselves, there are a number of critical conditions to be met if these discussions are to be effective.

Perhaps the most critical feature of effective student-centered discussions is a **process** that students can use to conduct their discussions. A process can help students focus their discussions and avoid the tendency to have the discussion become just a rambling conversation. In effect, the process becomes a guide for the discussion.

Student-centered discussions also need a **facilitator**. The role of the facilitator is to help students work through the process and to keep the discussion flowing. The facilitator is a student in the group. The use of a student as a facilitator helps ensure that the discussion will stay student-centered.

Student-centered discussions also need to be conducted in a **sanctuary type of environment**. "Sanctuary" in this context refers to an environment where all students are free to speak without fear. Every student has a responsibility to help every other student think through the issues. There are no debates and no winners or losers. There is a genuine respect for each other's role in the discussion.

Student-centered discussions take **time**. They aren't something that can be simply added to the end of class. To be effective, student-centered discussions need to be conducted for at least 45 minutes each week over the duration of most of a semester. This amount of time gives students the freedom to explore an issue without being hurried. This time allocation also gives students multiple experiences in the various roles in the discussion.

Students need mentoring-based **feedback** on their discussions. The teacher needs to observe the discussion without being intrusive. At the end of the discussion, the teacher needs to give students guidance on what they did well and what can be improved. The feedback needs to be in a format that lets students "find their way" rather than telling them what to do based on some criteria list. Effective "performance" in a discussion must be something that students discover for themselves.

The **discussion topic** selected for the student-centered discussion must be carefully selected. Obviously the topic must be one that builds on the content of the course. The topic must also be structured at a suitable level to lend itself to broad, conceptual discussions rather than to a problem solving discussion. Problem solving discussions tend to degenerate into development of specific details and are not as useful for learning the content of the course.

The **students** themselves are also critical to the success of the student-centered discussions. Student-centered discussions do not require a high level of traditional academic skills such as being able to easily read complex texts or to clearly articulate one's thinking in a public setting. Often students who haven't done well in more conventional classes do well in student-centered discussions. The sanctuary environment and the supportive mentoring can bring out latent talents that are often not developed in traditional classes. Understanding of the subject matter can also be enriched for students who might be frustrated within a traditional classroom environment.

In summary, student-centered discussions require a commitment by the teacher and students to make them a success. The commitment to the success factors described above is not a casual undertaking.

**1-F****Different Uses of Student-Centered Discussions**

Student-centered discussions can be used in different ways in classes depending on the goals of a course. These different approaches are described below.

- A. In this approach, two-thirds of the class time is used for content presentation in the traditional format. One-third of the class time is spent in student discussion. The focus of the discussions is to develop conceptual possibilities for addressing an issue of relevance to the content of the course. The discussions lead to a report prepared by the students that connects what they learned in the class to the conceptual possibilities that came out of their discussions.
- B. In this approach, student discussions at the beginning of a semester or a new section of the course set the context for the content presentation by the teacher. The student discussions are used to develop questions which students would like to explore further. The teacher uses these questions and observations made while observing the discussions as the basis for presenting the content. Content is presented at the time of need. Content is also presented as concepts rather than as answers to the student's questions, perhaps to be explored through further student-centered discussions. Roughly half of the class time is spent in student discussion and half in content presentation. In this model, content presentations are directed in part by the students. While not all of the usual content topics may be covered, the topics that are covered are likely to be much better understood by students.
- C. In this approach, the focus is on the discussions rather than specific content. This approach stresses development of facilitation skills, team work and conceptual thinking. This approach is especially effective for a seminar type of class or for a capstone course.
- D. In this approach, student-centered discussions are used to examine student's understanding of concepts presented in class. The teacher presents the content in the usual fashion. On selected days, the teacher asks students to discuss an issue that illustrates the use of the concepts presented in class and then observes these discussions to better understand students' mastery of the material. The class discussion time can vary in this example from roughly 10 % of the class to 33 % of the class.

## 1-G

### A Typical Semester for a Class Using a Student-Centered Discussion Format

One question that many faculty have about student-centered discussions is how such an approach could be integrated into a course over an entire semester. While there are different ways for using student-centered discussion (See Section 1-F), the semester framework described below works for most class arrangements.

First 20% of the Semester

The concept of student-centered discussions is presented. The teacher does a demonstration of what it takes to facilitate such a discussion. Students learn about facilitation practices through reading (See Facilitation Guidebook-available from the Interactivity Foundation through the website: (<http://www.interactivityfoundation.org/>)). The semester long discussion topic is also presented.

Second 20% of the Semester

Students begin their discussions about the issue they will be exploring. Also the teacher is presenting content material relevant to the course and to the students' discussion topic. Student-centered discussions focus primarily on the exploration and development of issues related to the discussion topic. Typically this consists of the identification of questions they want to explore further.

Third 20% of the Semester

Students begin to identify conceptual possibilities for addressing the issues they have identified. This is the point at which students begin to connect their discussions with the various concepts the teacher is presenting in the lecture portion of the course.

Fourth 20% of the Semester

Students begin to discuss the consequences of the various conceptual possibilities they have identified. They also start the process of selecting, excluding, and blending the conceptual possibilities into a manageable set of contrasting approaches. Students use the content portion of the course to evaluate consequences.

Final 20% of the Semester

Students develop a report which brings together all of their work over the semester. The discipline of putting their conceptual possibilities into words is a major learning experience. They also do a final testing of their conceptual possibilities. In effect this phase of the course is the summation of the learning experience.

Throughout the semester, the student-centered discussions are, in effect, a laboratory for linking the content of the course with an issue which the students are exploring on their own.

## **1-H**

### **The Importance of an Organizing Process in Student-Centered Discussion**

Student-centered discussions run the risk of becoming just a “bull session.” An organizing process is a critical element in student-centered discussions because it gives students guidance on how the discussion should flow. The details of the organizing process will be given in Section 2.

The organizing process helps students manage the flow of their discussion, but it doesn’t constrain the concepts being discussed. Without an organizing process, student discussions will tend to jump from the description of the issue to be discussed to an “answer.” Students need to have guidance on the various phases in any type of analysis.

Typically students will progress through the organizing process over the entire semester. They will learn how to discipline themselves in their discussion so that they don’t jump ahead or jump around from one phase of the process to another. The discipline of using an organized approach to a discussion is a valuable lesson for students (and even faculty). Part of this discipline is learning when the discussion is getting off track and having the ability to bring the discussion back to where it should be focused. This discipline is one of the subtle but essential lessons that come from student-centered discussions.



**1-I****Student Reaction to Student-Centered Discussions**

One might expect that student-centered discussions would work best for the best students. Experience has shown that this isn't necessarily the case. Outlined below are insights from experiences of students in classes that use student-centered discussions.

1. The students that seem to benefit the most from student-centered discussions can be characterized as the "silent middle." These are the students in the middle of the class with respect to prior academic performance. They tend to be silent in class and in some cases are "invisible." They don't stand out for being particularly good or bad.

Why do student-centered discussions seem to work well for these students? The discussion environment (small number of people, respect for everyone's ideas) makes speaking up comfortable. The "silent middle" are nervous about facilitating but they find facilitating to be something they can be good at because there is a process and their role is to manage the flow and not to present. The smaller size discussion also makes the role of each participant that much more meaningful. In effect, they feel their contributions make a difference; whereas, they may not have felt the same about discussions in a larger group.

2. High performers with aggressive social behaviors struggle in student-centered classes. These "aggressive achievers" want to be at the center of attention. They want to "win" discussions by virtue of their superior ideas. They don't like the idea of their performance being influenced by others.
3. High performers with supportive social behaviors do very well in student-centered discussions. These "supportive achievers" tend to do well in everything they do and like to help others do well also. They can assimilate into a group of their peers and elevate the level of the entire group without being aggressive. They understand when to step back and let others take the lead. But they can also step in and help their peers in a difficult moment.
4. Low level performers, who want to do well, find student-centered discussions to be a challenge at first but they gradually are able to make a contribution with help from their peers. These "strugglers" especially benefit from an environment which allows them to use their coping skills to be a contributor. Since student-centered classes make limited use of exams, the strugglers find they can be a success by doing what has gotten them through difficult situations in their personal life. The "strugglers" can also be important contributors in bringing their peers down to earth.

5. Low level performers, who want to get by with minimal effort can cause a real problem in classes using student-centered discussions. These “freeloaders” view discussions as something that they can just go with the group. Often these students will create a problem that their peers will need to handle.
6. Student-centered discussions require some level of academic maturity. Typically student-centered discussions work best in courses taken by juniors, seniors or graduate students.

In general, students value the opportunity to participate in student-centered discussions. Faculty are also much more likely to become more aware of the differences in their students as they observe their discussions.

## 1-J The Concept of Sanctuary

Classroom discussions can often be intimidating for many students. First there is the challenge in speaking up in front of others. Many students are simply not comfortable as speakers. Many students also lack confidence in their ideas or in their grasp of the course material. They are afraid of being ridiculed or being confronted. There is also the issue of the aggressive students. These students tend to consume the discussion time, and less aggressive students have a problem in getting their ideas heard.

A sanctuary environment is one in which students feel comfortable in expressing their ideas and feel that their ideas will be respected by others. A sanctuary environment represents a protected space for sharing and developing ideas in a collaborative manner.

The concept of sanctuary has several key elements.

1. The discussion tone is one of generosity of spirit rather than competition. Think of this as “conversation” rather than “debate.” Each student is expected both to help other students understand the ideas that come up and to help other students clarify their own thinking about these ideas. There is no attempt at “winning” over others.
2. Separate ideas from persons. By dealing with the content of ideas without worrying about who believes in them or who introduced them, the students can be encouraged to work collaboratively, since the onus of personal ownership falls away. This lowers the stakes for participation. Students may speak more freely when they realize they are not the ones on the line; it’s the ideas that will be discussed and evaluated. This can also encourage students to think from new perspectives, to imagine how others might think. Finally, it encourages the collegial development of ideas, the emergence of a vital group spirit, since personal ownership falls by the wayside.
3. Separate the tasks of idea generation and critical evaluation. There should be some time clearly devoted to the unhurried and collaborative production of ideas in a way that is protected from critical review. This lowers the threshold for participation, since the goal is simply to get all the ideas out on the table, not to judge how good they are. It can also encourage bold and innovative thinking. It’s possible that many useful and creative insights are lost simply because they go beyond familiar and conventional ways of looking at things. Such insights are likely to be retained if there is a protected space for idea generation and development that takes place before any critical review.

4. The teacher plays the role of observer and mentor for the discussion process, but is not an active participant in the discussions themselves. This is another way to lower the stakes for student participation. The student doesn't feel the pressure of saying the right thing according to his or her perception of what the teacher might want. It also creates a context for teaching as "letting learn" or discovery rather than simply as "telling." Students are more likely to develop confidence in their ability to discover important aspects of course content when the teacher gives them the space to do this.

Student-centered discussions are not likely to be effective unless a sanctuary environment can be created. But the sanctuary concept isn't as effective as it could be unless the teacher sets the tone for the discussion and reinforces the reasons for structuring the discussion according to the elements described above.

# **Section Two**

## **Organizing Student-Centered Class Discussions**

**2-A****An Organizing Process for Student-Centered Discussions**

One of the difficulties with any classroom discussion is to structure these discussions so there is a flow that achieves the desired learning outcomes. Think of a really creative conversation you may have had. Such conversations don't march forward in a simple logical progression, but neither are they sheer chaos. Establishing such a flow is especially difficult in student-centered discussions where the teacher plays neither the role of a direct participant nor of an all-knowing conductor. An organizing process can be crucial to helping ensure the discussions have a flow and achieve the learning outcome. Outlined below is a suggested process for organizing student-centered discussions. The process is presented here as an overview. The phases here should be seen as organic developments that merge into one another, not as rigidly distinct steps. Subsequent sections will describe each of the phases in the process in more detail.

- Phase 1 Describing (without defining) the various aspects of the discussion topic from multiple perspectives. In this phase, the discussion focuses on developing the background for the topic of the discussion. This is an important time for idea generation separate from critical review. During this phase, students focus on asking what might be important considerations for their explorations of the subject matter. For example, if the students are exploring the subject of societal class structure, the Phase 1 discussions might explore various dimensions or components of class structure.
- Phase 2 Developing these background explorations from Phase 1 into initial general questions that will guide the students' further investigation of the discussion topic. Typically these general questions are qualitative questions rather than quantitative questions. They are questions that don't have one determinate answer, but are open to a number of possible meaningful responses. In the example of societal class structure, students may develop questions such as:
- Why is class structure important?
  - How does class structure change?
- Phase 3 Developing preliminary possible answers to the qualitative questions described in Phase 2. These possible answers are not meant to be "solutions" but rather contrasting thoughts about what could be appropriate responses to the questions that were raised. Any one particular question might generate multiple contrasting responses.
- Phase 4 Shaping the possible answers from Phase 3 into contrasting possibilities for addressing the overall discussion topic. During this phase, the students take their collection of preliminary responses to the questions and develop these into a small number (say, 4-10) of conceptual possibilities for

addressing the discussion topic. This is a time for students to flesh out the preliminary responses from Phase 3 as much as appropriate. For example, one possibility for exploring class structure might focus primarily on responding to the ways that our economic system impacts class structure. Another possibility might focus on how education brings about change in class structure. Each of the conceptual possibilities is a developmental approach for dealing with the issues the students described in Phases 1-3.

- Phase 5 Exploring the consequences of the contrasting conceptual possibilities. In this phase, students think about the real-world implications of the conceptual possibilities developed through Phase 4. Students will essentially be envisioning alternative futures. They might explore the broad social effects of approaching the subject matter in this way. They might ask how our society might respond to each of the conceptual possibilities. Consequences might be approached initially as questions rather than as “predictions”. This should help students to see the consequences from a number of contrasting perspectives without having to settle on any one perspective as definitive. For example, the students might start with a certain understanding of class structure developed through Phase 4, and ask, “What implications for social justice might emerge with this conceptual possibility for thinking about class structure?” Students might discuss their thoughts in response to their consequence questions, but there will be no effort to reach a definitive conclusion.
- Phase 6 Selecting and excluding conceptual possibilities. In this phase, the students use their thinking about the consequences to select or exclude conceptual possibilities from further consideration. The exploration of consequences can help the students to see what a certain conceptual possibility really means, or what it would look like in practice. This may reveal areas that are problematic or unclear. During this phase, students might also decide to blend possibilities or otherwise modify them.
- Phase 7 Describing the conceptual possibilities in a summary report. During this phase, students prepare a straightforward report of their discussions. The report is basically a summary of the conceptual possibilities developed by the students and the thinking associated with the possibility. Assuming that this work will be carried out in a spirit of open exploration, the report does not argue for (or against) any particular possibility. The students don’t need to persuade the reader of the “correct” or “best” answer. They would simply present the array of possibilities for the reader’s consideration.

The organizing process described above takes place over most of an academic semester. Each phase in the process may take one or more class periods (full or partial) to complete. More will be said about the time commitments for such a process in subsequent sections of this guide.

## 2-B Selecting a Discussion Topic

One of the critical decisions that need to be made in a student-centered classroom is the discussion topic. In most cases, the topic selected will be the focus of the student discussions throughout the semester. An inappropriate topic can lead to difficult experiences for students. Outlined below are some guidelines that can be used in selecting a discussion topic.

1. The discussion topic should be one that reinforces the content of the class. While this may seem obvious, the teacher will need to think through the content of the course and how it can be integrated into the discussions intended to last the entire semester.
2. The discussion topic should be one that students can relate to from their own life experiences. This guideline suggests that a broad topic might be narrowed somewhat in scope to make it relevant to students.
3. The topic needs to be one that addresses an issue that can lead to open discussion. Topics should be avoided in cases where students are likely to have entrenched views.
4. The topic should be open to exploratory and conceptual discussion rather than a problem solving discussion. A problem solving topic tends to generate discussions around what others have said rather than lead themselves to discussions of what students think.
5. The scope of the topic should be one that students can develop over the course of a semester. Some topics are simply too large for student discussions.

Student discussions work best when there are no more than 8 students in a discussion group. When there are more than 8 students in class, there will be multiple discussion groups. The question that the teacher needs to resolve is whether there should be multiple discussion topics. Outlined below are some considerations that might be examined as to whether to use multiple discussion topics or the same discussion topic for all student groups.

1. The same discussion topic used by all student groups is likely to lead to different outcomes for each of the student groups. There should be minimal concern about one group “copying” from another group.
2. Multiple discussion topics are more likely to encompass the full range of course content.



3. Multiple discussion topics are less likely to create confusion for the teacher who needs to review the discussions of each group. Multiple discussions on the same topic are often difficult to keep straight.
4. Multiple discussion topics allow students an opportunity to select a topic of most interest of them.
5. Multiple discussion topics increase the risk of selecting a “bad” topic, but the use of multiple topics can also give the teacher more of an opportunity to see how student-centered discussions work.

In general, multiple discussion topics tend to work better than a single topic discussed by multiple groups.

## 2-C

### The Starting Point for the Discussion

Student-centered discussions need to be started well. Typically, the starting point consists of a series of questions which are used to stimulate the students to think about the discussion topic at a conceptual level.

Suppose that the discussion topic is societal class structure. Initial starting-point questions might be –

- What are the cultural, economic, educational, religious, and social dimensions of class structure?
- What are societal influences on class structure?
- Why is class structure important?
- How has the concept of class structure changed in our current international economy?

These questions are designed to stimulate the students to think about the discussion topic at a conceptual level. The questions are, in essence, the catalyst to get the phase 1 discussion going.

Starting point questions should be ones for which there can be multiple perspectives. While there can be many different types of starting point questions, it is often useful to think of starting point questions that deal with –

- The various cultural, economic, social, and other dimensions of the discussion topic.
- The influencing factors on the issue.
- Reflections on changes that have occurred or are likely to occur in society that affect the issue.

While the teacher provides students with these starting point questions, the students should be expected to add to these questions as the discussion unfolds.

## 2- D

### Developing the Context for the Discussion Topic (Phase 1)

The starting point questions can help the students get started in their discussions. Any discussion topic assigned to students will need further development so that students can understand the issues they are going to discuss.

During this discussion phase, students have two objectives:

1. To develop an understanding of the various dimensions of the discussion topic.
2. To place initial bounds on the scope of their discussions.

The first objective is accomplished through an exploration of the starting point questions developed by the teacher. These questions should help students discover for themselves the issue they will be discussing. As the students begin to discuss these questions, they may become overwhelmed by the complexity of the topic.

Once students have “opened up” the discussion topic, they then need to narrow the scope of what they will be focusing on during the semester. They may choose to narrow the scope in one of several ways.

- They can focus on a limited number of dimensions of the discussion topic (e.g., educational and economic/ dimensions of class structure).
- They can delineate certain situations as the focus of their discussion (e.g., access to educational and employment opportunities).
- They can narrow the geographic scope (e.g., class structure in the U.S.).
- They can make assumptions about external factors that can influence their discussion topic (e.g., costs of going to college will continue to increase).

At the conclusion of this phase of the discussion, students should have generated a series of statements about the discussion topic. Basically these statements will form the contextual starting point for subsequent discussions. As with other phases, students can modify this list of statements as the discussions continue.

## 2-E

### Helping Students Develop an Understanding about the Discussion Topic

Students may not have much personal knowledge of the topic area. The challenge that a teacher faces is how the students might obtain the knowledge they need without biasing the discussion process itself.

Context setting is one of the more important ways to help students be successful in their discussion. Students must understand the context for the topic area. Students need to be told that they do not have to use “correct” language or project an air of mastery over specific content in the discussion topic. Students do offer perspectives as ordinary citizens and can contribute valuable insights that might be missed by experts. Students will have different personal styles. Some may be quieter and may need to be explicitly called on, while others will jump right in. Some students may be more verbally articulate than others. Certain kinds of group preparation can “warm up” the discussion. Some suggestions include: having students reflect and write upon intriguing questions before class; or taking 10-15 minutes to free write about the day’s topic before beginning discussion.

Alternatively, there may be certain students who are overeager and dominate the discussion, including offering too much expertise and even attempting to show off. Interactivity and open reflective discussion goes against what some students are trained to do. The teacher needs to communicate to all students that they are here to inquire, not to propound, to engage reflectively, not to “do.”

The teacher should also communicate strongly that confusion and discomfort is a normal and important feature of discussion. Confusion and discomfort may *enhance* inquiry by disrupting conventional thinking. In other words, students *should be* “discomforted.” It is a sign that they are stepping outside their own prior thinking and understanding new perspectives. Student discussions are designed to generate diverse and contrasting possibilities. Conclusive answers and views, especially at the outset of discussion, detract from this aim. Outlined below are some particular steps the teacher can take to help students.

#### **Supporting materials**

In general, outside materials should be furnished with caution because they may introduce bias or imply that certain viewpoints are favored over others. However, if introduced well, outside materials can balance discussion or stimulate interest. A minimum of outside material can be supplied to students, but it should not become the center of the discussion.

Students may often time exhibit an “irresistible urge” to bring in supplemental or supporting materials to support their points of view. The teacher needs to demonstrate why –

- this can be inappropriate since we want the students’ thinking, not what others have said, and
- students need to be critical thinkers and not rely too much on others.

### **Focus Away the Technical Detail**

Students may feel uncomfortable with a complex topic. The teacher can support the discussion by telling the students: “Assume that \_\_\_\_\_ is possible, what would be your concerns?” This frees up thinking, refocuses discussion away from detail and toward possibilities. The point is to move discussion “beyond” current comfort levels without stressing it to the breaking point.

### **Use Anticipatory Case Studies**

The teacher can also describe and provide an example of an “anticipatory case study.” This involves presenting a scenario leading to a dilemma that students can relate to. These tangible case studies can lead to understanding of broader issues.

### **Develop Concept Discovery Exercises**

The notion of “concept discovery” is a useful facilitation device. It involves the development of larger, generalized conceptual distinctions derived from specific examples and issues in the topic area. These distinctions might then lead to possibilities. In discussing genetic technology one possibility could be “no genetic enhancements at all.” But then does this logic extend to all medical enhancements, including hearing aids or glasses? Most would say this goes too far, but where is the dividing line? For one discussion group this led to the conceptual distinction that no genetic intervention should be introduced that would destroy a life or, conversely, enhance a life *beyond the normal*.

### **Relate to the Familiar**

The teacher may be able to develop useful analogs that relate the issues in the discussion area to other topics with which the students are familiar. The familiar example could open up a general discussion that can then be applied to the specific area of concern.

## 2-F

### Exploring the Discussion Topic by Developing Questions about the Topic (Phase 2)

This is the second phase of the student discussion of the semester-long topic. The student facilitator asks the other students to respond to questions, some of which are prepared in advance by the teacher. (See Section 2-B, above)

The student facilitator supports the discussion of the topic area by asking for clarifications and keeping the discussion focused on the prepared questions and those that develop during the discussion. The facilitator will need to ask prompting questions to see if the students would like to pursue a specific train of thought. This process continues until all of the initial questions are discussed.

The outcome of this discussion is a collection of descriptive and developmental statements, which the students have generated in response to the questions initially posed to them. See [Exhibit A](#) (on the next page) for an example of what such a response might look like. The student note-taker will arrange these statements in categories which can be used in subsequent discussions.

It is during this discussion phase that the topic area is further “bounded”. The facilitator (and perhaps the teacher) will help the students work through the scope of the topic area. Such boundaries aren’t intended to be rigid nor will they be initially clear cut. But the boundaries should be useful in helping the students develop a focus on those aspects of the topic area that will be carried forward in future discussions.

Since the student group has had some initial experience of working together at this point, the facilitator should set the tone for the explorations to follow. Some specific actions that help set the tone include:

- Make sure that everyone contributes, even if this means that soliciting comments from those who may appear to be reluctant to speak up.
- Start the development of a “parking lot” list in order to capture various relevant comments that aren’t on target but deserve to be kept for future use rather than merely passed by. (A list of “parking lot” questions should be maintained by the group and regularly reviewed by the group for use in later stages of exploration and development.)
- Deal firmly with behaviors that aren’t reflective of the sanctuary discussion process (e.g., personal attacks, premature negative comments, vigorous argumentative expressions of personal beliefs). The teacher will need to do this.
- Urge each student group to fully explore the discussion topic. This may require some prompting or challenging of the students. Typically, students may feel they have developed fully the discussion topic, when in fact that there is much more exploration and development that could be done.

At the end of each discussion, one student (the note-taker) will be summarizing the discussion and preparing a document which organizes the comments, questions, and issues thus far. The other students will be asked to review these documents to ensure that they are an accurate and useful summary of the ongoing discussion.

### **Exhibit A - Sample of Descriptive Statement**

#### **Starting Question 1:**

**What is retirement? How do Americans describe it?**

Some possibilities and further questions:

- A departure from an active working or business life.
- When you don't need paid employment (though you may work anyway).
- A departure from a specific job or occupation (even if you continue to work).
- A time of rest, which doesn't have to be.

#### **Starting Question 2:**

**How do Americans experience retirement? What does one do after "retiring" from a certain job or activity?**

Some possibilities and further questions:

- Some people continue in the same line of work (perhaps even with the same organization) when "retired".
- Some people engage in activities (paid or unpaid) that are different from what they did when "making a living".
  - ◆ These activities are sometimes what people have always enjoyed most - or always wanted to do.
  - ◆ "Retired" people sometimes work harder than ever (can be very serious about their retirement-era work).
- Some people may not have a very active life.

**Note: This is a sample of a set of descriptive statements. The actual complete set was 7 pages.**

## 2-G

### **Helping Students Develop Discussion Insights that Go Beyond the Obvious**

The generation of discussion insights will have a natural tendency to stall after the most obvious points have been raised. The teacher needs to help the students to new depths of understanding.

Groups of individuals are often asked to generate ideas, or insights. The facilitator in such a case records these responses so that the group can see their growing list of responses.

Later, when these responses are used by the group in subsequent developments, some responses become more useful than others. “Useful” in this case is loosely measured by the quality and extent of the insights that the responses provide for subsequent conceptual discussion. While the concept of usefulness is hard to define or measure, the group can generally agree on the responses that were the most insightful or useful.

Responses are generated over a period of time (typically one to several hours). The usefulness of responses as a function of time typically follows a curve as shown in [Figure 1](#), (page 32).

Typically, the initial responses are insightful. These are the sorts of responses that might be expected in advance. They are insightful, in that they offer a useful basis for future discussion. Many of these insights may have been predicted in advance. (These are shown in Figure 1, during the time period labeled 1.)

After these initial responses are generated, the usefulness of subsequent responses may level off. The students, during this period tend to offer responses that are more variations on the responses already given. Their distinctive insightfulness or usefulness are limited, in that they are “fleshing out” prior responses. (These are shown in Figure 1, during the time period labeled 2.)

Over time, a small number of responses can be found that offer a higher level of insight or usefulness. Typically, though, these responses do not trigger other insightful responses because these responses may also consider a special situation that had not been considered as yet. Because the situation was special, only a few additional responses with new insights are generated at this point. (These are shown in Figure 1 as time period 3.)

As the facilitator continues to challenge the students, there will typically be a group of responses that may offer special insights. Such responses are triggered by one response that seems to offer a unique perspective that the students can build on for other insights. Typically these responses are those that are not expected. However, they may be the responses that offer breakthroughs in thinking. Often the triggering response



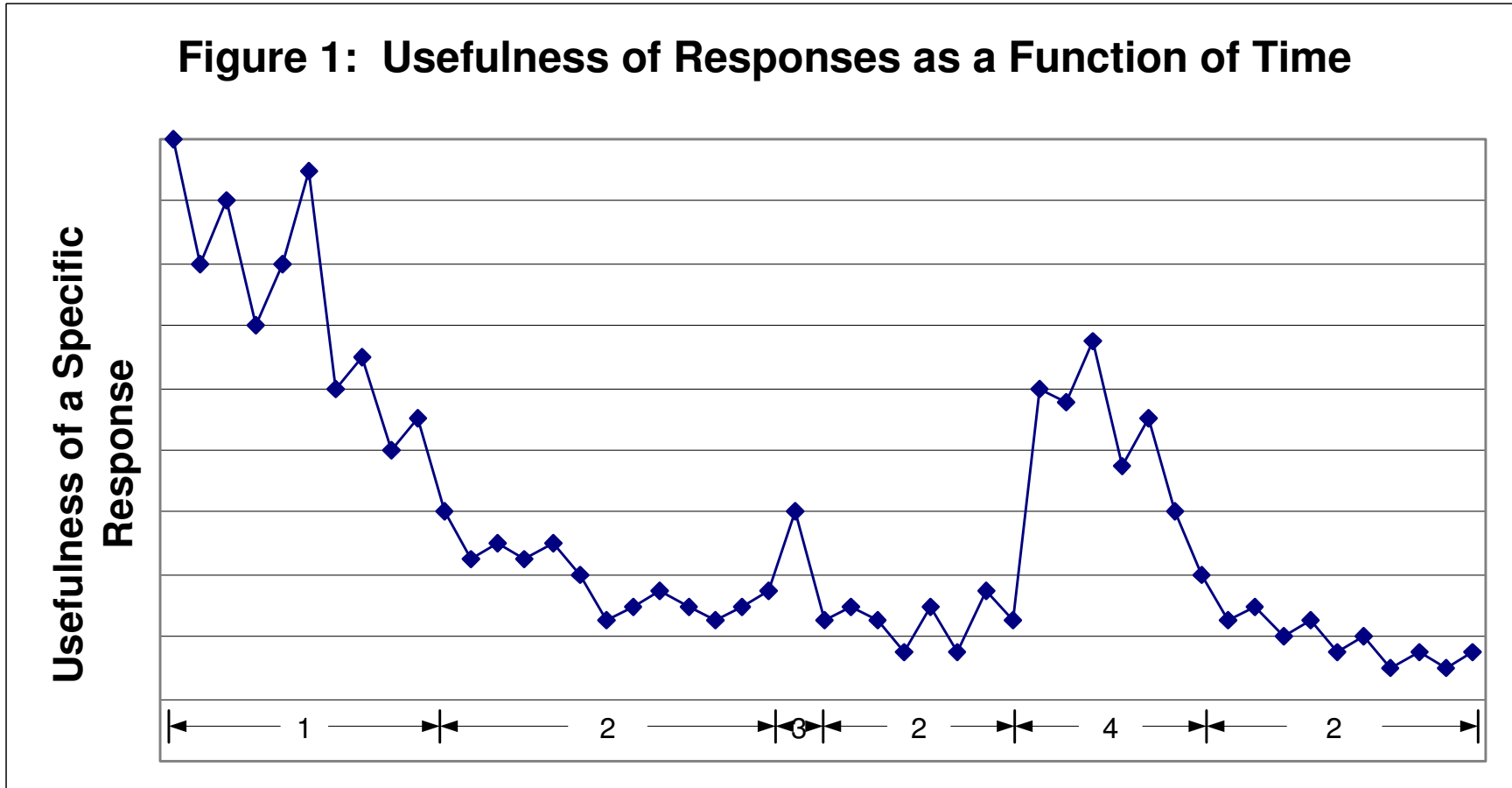
might be one that “jars” the students out of their conventional thinking. Once such a group of responses has been developed, the responses may resume a pattern of lesser usefulness. There may be limited additional useful responses after this time. (This time period is shown in Figure 1 as time period 4.)

The facilitator needs to continue to challenge the group until it provides what is deemed to be a good collection of useful responses. The facilitator may need to utilize various approaches in soliciting these responses. Some approaches that have been found to be successful include:

1. Changing the frame of reference for the question under particular discussion (i.e., ask the group to think of how others would respond to the question or ask how the question might be answered by people in different governmental systems).
2. Suggest specific situations to the student group (i.e., what would be the response if this were the situation?).
3. Challenge the panel directly (i.e., tell the panel that you don’t think they have been bold enough in their thinking).
4. Break up the students into smaller groups and give each smaller group a challenge (i.e., each can develop a useful new set of insights).
5. Describe and explain the distribution curve shown in Figure 1 to the students and tell them that you don’t think they have finished their task.

Students working in groups tend to get in a rut. Their ideas tend to flow from previous ideas. Sometimes they may miss a possibility or a perspective completely, or they may be too timid in their thinking. Often breakthrough ideas may be presented with a cautionary statement (i.e., ...“this may sound crazy but...”). In many cases the breakthrough moment may occur after the group has been away for a while from the topic or changes its approaches to the topic. In some cases, the breakthrough may occur by making relational connections between two rather disparate ideas, systems, or concepts which may already have been under discussion.

**Figure 1 – Usefulness of Responses as a Function of Time**



## 2-H

### **Thinking About Possible Answers to the Questions that are Developed (Phase 3)**

In phase 2, the students began to describe the discussion topic with a series of questions. In phase 3, the questions are further expanded and possible answers are suggested. The desired outcome of phase 3 is a fuller description of the discussion topic.

During phase 3 discussions, the student groups also should begin to examine possible answers for their questions. Such possible answers would most often be in the form of hypothetical or hopeful statements of what the students would like to discuss further. These statements should be captured by the facilitator, as suggestions for future exploration of possibilities.

These preliminary answers in themselves may not yet be fully developed possibilities, since they tend to be focused on specific issues, and not yet sufficiently focused on the broader, more conceptual issues. These preliminary answers, however, can be used in thinking further about future possibilities. See [Exhibit A](#) (on the following page) for an illustration of possible answers for a discussion of privacy rights.

As the students expand on possible answers, they should begin to categorize these responses into groupings useful for further explorations. These groupings can be developed further in several ways (as thought appropriate by the students). The students should not be overly concerned by overlapping groupings or just where a specific question or answer should fall.

The exploration of possible answers involves conceptual thinking about contrasting approaches to the questions. The students must be reminded that they are not to come up with precise or detailed solutions to problems, but rather conceptual answers.

Typically, these conceptual answers are hopeful statements in response to one or more questions. They may be described as “should, or could, or may statements”. The possible answers will almost certainly be contradictory.

Not every question needs to have a corresponding answer. Likewise, one question may generate several possible answers.

### **Exhibit A - Possible Answers in a Discussion of Privacy Rights**

1. Privacy rights should depend upon our 'comfort zones'.
2. We should be able to control how the 'private' information that is collected about us will be used.
3. Privacy rights should be balanced by the 'common good'.
4. Privacy rights need to be constantly redefined, because the 'common good' is being constantly redefined.
5. The boundaries between public and private space are constantly in flux.
6. Not all invasions of privacy are violations of privacy rights.
7. Privacy rights should protect individuals against 'retaliations'.
8. Whether or not surveillance constitutes a violation of privacy rights depends upon the intentions of the watcher.
9. Whether or not surveillance constitutes a violation of privacy rights depends upon how the information gathered will be used.
10. We should be able to expect privacy in our own homes.
11. We should be able to expect privacy on the telephone.
12. The decision to regard an item of information as public or private should be made on a 'need to know' basis.
13. We should maximize an individual's rights to privacy up to the extent that they impede or conflict with the needs/rights/interests of society or another individual.
14. The needs/rights/interests of society have priority over the needs/rights/interests of individuals.
15. The needs/rights/interests of the nation/state have priority over everything else.
16. Privacy rights should show respect for individuals and their differences.
17. Privacy rights should show tolerance for individuals.
18. We should not be forced to disclose information that we want to keep private.
19. There are certain things about us which others do not have the right to ask.
20. People may disagree about their privacy rights.
21. Invasions of privacy must be justified on a 'need to know' basis.
22. Invasions of privacy must be justified on a 'freedom to act' basis.

## 2-I

### Helping Students Develop Possible Answers that are Insightful

Students will tend to focus on the most apparent aspects of a discussion topic when they generate possible answers. Often there are critical issues and insights that don't get discussed. We have become a society that looks for simple cause and effect answers for complex issues. Rarely are issues so simply analyzed.

Students are accustomed to solving problems in their classes or in their lives. They do not naturally think in terms of conceptual questions and possible answers. The teacher will need to be skilled at helping the students shift from their problem solving mode of thinking to a more conceptual, more possibility-oriented mode of thinking.

There are five general approaches a teacher can take to getting students to become more insightful:

- Getting to the Foundations
- Thematic and Schematic Reorganization
- Priming the Pump
- Imagining
- Creative Disruption

***Getting to the Foundations:*** (probing, inquiring, generalizing, drawing out the implicit) Often discussion remains at a fairly obvious and superficial level. This can result in understanding the symptoms and not the fundamental aspects of an issue.

Furthermore, the narrowness of such a discussion can lead to possible answers that are superficial. Insightful discussion needs to get both at the root of a common concern and create a broad, inclusive language and understanding of concern. Some possible approaches to doing this include:

- Explore pre-suppositions and values behind a given example, those that are not immediately evident. Then ask what concepts might determine approaches to more immediate issues.
- Identify a more encompassing issue surrounding and backing the more immediate issue.
- Draw out the implicit; make it explicit. For an immediate issue ask: "What is implicit in that?"
- Generalize from the specific before going back to the more specific. When a student offers a more specific response or individual perspective, ask whether there are larger issues, or larger stakes, or the common good that may be inherent in the proposed perspective.
- Keep asking "why" four or five levels down. ("Why is that the case? When you get a response, then ask again ...Why is *that* the case?") Continue doing this for 4-5 times in total. This helps uncover assumptions.

***Thematic and Schematic Reorganization:*** (reorienting, disassociating, arraying, distinguishing, bounding, connecting) People often think in terms of domains or layouts. We tend to arrange thought on paper (themes) and in our brains (schemas) in terms of domains, and even stereotypes. It may make thinking more efficient and organized in some cases, but it also tends to lock out novel considerations, arrangements, connections, and possibilities (especially contrasting ones). This habit toward “consistency” is especially consequential when one tries to use old themes and schemas to address a new or emerging issue. For discussion to be insightful, students must have the capacity to take apart old themes and schemas and construct new ones. Some ways to do this include:

- Generate a list/array of examples and ask, “How might these ideas/examples/concepts be organized?” “Does this point to a fundamental element/question?”
- Encourage “concept discovery.” When panelists make distinctions (“I would draw the line here.”), ask, “What are the values that make you draw the line *here* and not there?”
- Invite panelists to fashion a concept that explains and organizes examples. What statement or distinction might explain why one class of examples is considered “in-bounds” and another “out-of-bounds.”
- Show students how to develop a conceptual sorting of discussion notes. Help students see underlying themes.
- Avoid definitives (what something “is”) and encourage looking at something in terms of what it represents (what it implies, what it “can” be).

***Priming the Pump:*** (modeling, synthesizing, interacting) Students may *understand* on an intellectual level what is expected of them, but most of us learn to fulfill and exceed expectations by *practicing*. Without directing students thought, students can be shown how to think in new ways of thinking through invitation and demonstration.

- Encourage the identification of “what’s missing.” The facilitator might say, “We haven’t got at this other fundamental question” (and offer such a question). Or, “We have A and B, but are there examples outside of the alphabet altogether?”
- Analogs can be helpful. Offer stories or parables that demonstrate the “living” issues at stake in conceptual questions.
- Use examples from other issues to communicate what is meant by a more “fundamental” question. Show what type of question is desired.

***Imagining:*** (stretching, finding options, diversifying, getting outside the box, anticipating) Stimulating and encouraging students’ imagination is helpful for the richer consideration and anticipation of emerging issues and future consequences. Since every group is influenced by their experience and perspectives, the teacher needs

to devise ways to elicit contrasting perspectives not normally situated in the present thinking of students.

- Set up a scenario in which students can be free from present conditions. Imaginatively discard current parameters and constraints. Start with, “Assume this could happen.”
- Identify under explored or unexplored areas associated with an issue and encourage students to “wander around in this unexplored territory.”
- Imaginative transfer: capture a series of observations about the content of a rather different issue, and ask how a present insight may apply there. This comparison can generate conceptual insights that can be imported back into the discussion topic.

***Creative Disruption:*** (discomforting, perturbing, displacing, switching, flipping) In addition to entrenched themes and schemas, persons tend to dichotomize, or think in terms of “good” vs. “bad,” “positive” vs. “negative,” etc. Such ideas and arrangements can over time attain a kind of certitude in the mind for students that can be at odds with the needs of the discussion. These dichotomies may even create a strong personal attachment to certain views and ways of seeing the world. This, in turn, can lead rather quickly to advocacy, to a tendency to project, exercise, or even impose partial viewpoints as if they were absolute. Ways to avoid such things include:

- Take positive and negative comments and categories and encourage students to switch them. “How can a ‘negative’ be a ‘positive’ and vice versa?”
- Have students take on each others’ perspectives. Invite them to engage in new modes of interacting/thinking. “What do *you* think the most important areas are?”
- Put two disparate questions together, and invite students to think about the link or the connections between them and the implications this may have for other questions.

**2-J****Placing the List of Possible Answers into a Coherent Form**

Students need order and coherence as they make the shift from exploration to consideration of conceptual relationships. This calls for organizing the number of creative answers generated through their discussion to make them useful for further discussion.

At this stage in the discussion, there is a tension that flows in the shift from exploration to consideration of possible answers. There is a need to resist desires for closure. There is also the matter of going “overboard” and permitting the development of unwieldy lists of possible answers.

One way to manage the list of answers is to identify “clusters” that may emerge in developing questions and answers. Clusters are essentially answers which have some coherent grouping. Some ideas for creating clusters are described below.

- Resist the tendency to create artificial headings for “clusters.” Headings may inhibit thinking about the questions and possible answers at the broad, conceptual level.
- As clusters first emerge, it is useful to draw out relationships within and between clusters.
- As the discussion continues, the clusters tend to become smaller in number and more manageable.
- As clusters become more manageable, the facilitator can spur additional creativity by arraying contrasting “clusters” and juxtaposing unlike clusters.



## 2-K

### Shaping Answers into Contrasting Possibilities (Phase 4)

In phase 3 of the discussion, students generated a number of possible answers to their questions. In phase 4, students begin to organize these answers into contrasting possibilities. These contrasting possibilities are broad conceptual organizations of the questions and answers into a limited number of ways of approaching the issue under discussion.

This phase requires considerable creative thinking. It requires the students to think conceptually of possibilities rather than to think about just how to solve an actual problem. Possibilities are often developed by the use of categories. Categories are generally nouns, single words (unaccompanied by a verb) that serve to indicate important aspects of any issue (e.g. “fairness”). Categories are generic and are not “value focused.” For instance, one is *not* making a value judgment about *what* is fair when “fairness” is offered as a category. That is, a category should be understood as being wide-ranging enough to contain many different interpretations, ethical considerations, views, and approaches. “Social change” is another good example of such a category. It does not, however, state what kind of change might be privileged over others.

With intensive conceptual exploration, certain categories, like “choice,” or “distribution,” or “efficiency,” or “diversity” or “equality,” or “responsibility” seem to be applicable in almost every discussion topic. Such categories can serve to support the identification of developing possibilities.

Categories are catalysts and enablers for the development of useful possibilities. Students will need to simplify the number of categories in order to be effective. A dozen or so categories, not 30 or 40, is more useful. Make sure such themes emphasize big picture issues.

If a smaller issue is introduced, it can be elevated to show that it has been covered or falls under another stated theme. Similarly, if a theme appears too limited in language, it can be “converted” to a broader, conceptual word or notion. For example, “testing” in education could be converted to a more general concept of “accountability.”

It is helpful for the students to prepare possible categories in writing before group discussions. This allows for more reflective, more interactive participation. It also serves to reinforce the group value and understanding of interactivity as students find they share common categories independently, and they can generate or refine more categories collectively. Group contributions jog thinking and cascade into more possibilities.

It cannot be overemphasized that categories are only an aid and not a template. Their purpose is to free up thinking and develop comfort with conceptual inquiry. Should categories become determinate in nature, they will have subverted the very purpose they were selected to serve. A relaxed, communicative, interactive approach is best.

Keep students on the broad path. Categories are meant to aid this crucial endeavor. Once the students proceed along too narrow a path, whether it becomes more governmental or more problem-solving in nature, it can take several sessions to dig the group back out and reestablish a useful conceptual approach.

Categories keep discussion on a more conceptual level but also help create a more accessible structure to allow a smoother fashioning of possibilities and to get the students more involved in organizing the concepts themselves (rather than relying on just the facilitator).

The categories are used to generate contrasting conceptual possibilities about the discussion topic. The end result of this phase will be a limited number (typically less than 10) of way of thinking about the discussion topic.

## 2-L

### Keeping the Development of Useful Conceptual Possibilities from Becoming Formulaic

There is a danger that the development of conceptual possibilities can become formulaic. Formulaic in this context might refer to conceptual possibilities that are simply variations of one another or that go from one extreme to another. For example, conceptual possibilities for responsibility for health care might be book-ended by “no public responsibility” to “complete responsibility by the state,” with descriptions of other positions falling only within these extremes. Conceptual possibilities should be much more than different variations of the same basic concept.

Student discussions should explore diverse concepts that yield distinct possibilities. Development of possibilities is part of setting the stage for contrast, but is not the servant of contrast for contrast sake. Contrast is to be brought out by full consideration of possibilities, not by charting polar opposites and labeling the increments between those poles in a linear or quantitative fashion.

Strategies that the teacher might use to help students develop useful possibilities that are not formulaic include:

- Encourage students not to focus on extremes. Extremes may be useful and valid possibilities, but undue focus on extremes can often miss much more useful and interesting possibilities.
- Encourage wide-ranging approaches to thinking about the discussion topic. The teacher may need to “prime the pump” of the students’ thinking by asking thought-provoking questions that are likely to elicit useful possibilities.
- Encourage the students to explore the categories in various combinations to see if these evoke interesting possibilities. Often combinations of seemingly disparate thoughts/concepts can lead to possibilities that would not have been otherwise identified.
- Encourage students to use concepts drawn from other various disciplines for possible application to their discussion topic. Often concepts that have been proven useful in one area can be useful in another area.

In all of these strategies, the teacher will need to encourage students to feel free to explore ideas without fear of rejection. Evaluative statements should be discouraged at this point in the process. This is where the concept of sanctuary proves especially key.

## 2-M

### Exploring the Consequences of the Contrasting Conceptual Possibilities (Phase 5)

In phase 5, students will begin to explore the consequences of the various tentative possibilities they have been developing. Consequences as described here are broad questions of what might happen if a possibility were pursued. The students are not trying to develop predictions of what might happen for any particular possibility, nor are they trying to be conclusive in any way. Consequences are stated as questions (e.g., Could this possibility lead to a feeling of hopelessness?....) Conceptual consequences are broad explorations of what might happen should a possibility be developed further and implemented as a government program.

Such explorations of consequences, in most cases, will examine the social, economic, and political consequences of possibilities. The selection of consequences to examine is judgmental and represents the best conceptual thinking of the students at this point.

The examination of consequences is to be used in phase 6 to make selections and exclusions among the various contrasting possibilities. Exhibit A (below) contains an example of a set of consequence questions for one possibility from an actual project.

#### Exhibit A

#### Consequence Questions for an Intellectual Property Possibility Titled “Individual Creator Ownership/Control Rights”

- How might different nations accept this?
- Does this possibly favor or discourage the individual creator?
- Can a central governmental realistically enforce such a possibility?
- How might this possibility encourage innovation?

Note: This is a sample set of questions about consequences. There are approximately 25 questions of this nature resulting from the actual project discussion.

## 2-N

### Selecting and Excluding Possibilities

In phase 4, students developed a number of possibilities that seemed reasonable answers to the questions identified in the discussions. In phase 5, these possibilities were examined further by informally exploring the conceptual consequences of each possibility being considered. In phase 6, students are asked to explore each of the emerging possibilities to see whether it might be excluded from further consideration, or significantly revised, or combined with other possibilities.

The basis for each informal selection or exclusion is neither quantitative nor formally structured. Each possibility eventually selected (or excluded) represents the student's exploration among the possibilities, and their consequences. Some factors which might be considered in the exclusion process are shown in the table below.

Such factors are *not* to be evaluated in a structured way (e.g., by which the students answer Yes or No to each factor). Rather, these factors are simply listed as what the students want to take into account in their deliberative discussions.

<b>Some illustrative factors to actually consider in the exclusion of possibilities:</b>	<b>Some illustrative factors which should <u>not</u> be considered in the exclusion of possibilities:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Lack of practical relevance to the discussion topic.</li> <li>■ Lack of apparent usefulness of the choice in addressing the discussion topic.</li> <li>■ Too many anticipated adverse conceptual consequences.</li> <li>■ Weaker in comparison to another possibility in all aspects of the discussion topic.</li> <li>■ Filled with one or more internal consistencies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Lack of personal support by discussion participants.</li> <li>■ Lack of currently perceived political support or acceptance.</li> <li>■ Too much deviation from – or too similar to – the current political situation.</li> </ul>

Ultimately, any student may keep a possibility from being excluded by his/her request that the possibility be considered further.

Lack of practical relevance is generally a situation where the students feel that the possibility does not really address the issues described in the discussion topic. This might occur when the students feel that the approach has a very small likelihood of having a useful impact on the more serious aspects of the discussion topic.

Lack of apparent usefulness to the discussion topic refers to a situation where the possibility may address some aspects of the discussion topic but not in a way that would have the outcome that was desired when the possibility was originally proposed or discussed.

Too many adverse consequences refer to a situation where the possibility may have a number of unintended consequences or other consequences that make it unattractive. Typically these adverse consequences are not ones that can be dealt with by making revisions to the possibility.

In some cases, one possibility may not be better than one of the other possibilities being considered on any of the crucial aspects of the discussion topic. In such cases, such a possibility could be considered for exclusion.

In other cases, the possibility may be combined or merged into another possibility. This is often the case when two possibilities may be focused on the same basic aspects of the discussion topic but do so in slightly different approaches that are, however, complementary to each other.

Finally, a possibility may be excluded if it is filled with internal inconsistencies or contradictions. The evaluation of likely consequences may reveal these inconsistencies. These possibilities would be excluded if the panel feels that they are unlikely to be resolved by a revision of the possibility.

Rather than being excluded altogether, some possibilities may be re-described so as to deal with the foreseen consequences. In other cases, possibilities may be combined to form a new possibility.

Each student does not need personally to support any particular possibility for it to undergo further development. The personally held views or beliefs of each of the students should not (of themselves) be decisive considerations for complete or partial exclusions. In a similar manner, the perceived political support for or against a possibility should not be a decisive factor in considering whether to exclude a possibility.

The current political situation is also not (of itself) a consideration for use in the exclusion process. Descriptions of possibilities to be retained may be significantly different from the current situation, or they may be very similar.

The process of exclusion is based upon an informal exploration of the conceptual possibilities which are being discussed. Conceptual possibilities are not to be ranked against any selected criteria, nor are they to be ranked against each other.

Some general questions that may be useful in exploring which (if any) possibilities are to be excluded.

- What changes could be made to avoid its being excluded?
- If the possibility were excluded, might such exclusion lead to a less interesting and useful public discussion based on the final written document?
- Would the ultimate written document be less useful if this particular possibility were to be entirely excluded?
- Does this possibility still have useful aspects which might be incorporated into other possibilities?

Once each of the possible candidates for selection and exclusion has been developed, the students may want then to reexamine the entire set of selections as a group.

The following question may be used as guidance:

“Are there any gaps in the tentative selections and exclusions to be addressed in order to make the final collection of possibilities as useful as possible?”

The students may then want to determine whether additional possibilities still should be considered.

**2-O****Limiting the Loss from Excluding a Possibility**

All possibilities that get considered in phase 6 have some value. They also are likely to be of value to some students who have suggested them. When these possibilities are being considered for exclusion, there could be some loss of insight that led to the possibility. There could also be some emotional attachment to the possibility suggested by a student. The challenge that students face is how to control the intellectual and emotional loss when a possibility is excluded.

When possibilities are excluded it is generally because they add little to the collection of possibilities. But aspects of the possibility could remain of value. As a result, the most beneficial aspects of an excluded possibility are often incorporated into other possibilities. In these cases, there is limited intellectual loss from excluding the possibility.

There are other cases where the possibility is perceived to have too many “negatives” to continue further consideration. Often these possibilities were suggested originally because they were thought provoking. Their value is often in “keeping the other possibilities honest”. Often these possibilities stimulated the thinking of the students in an alternative direction. This direction may have been found to be inherently flawed, but it did stimulate the further development of other possibilities. Should this possibility be excluded, the intellectual contribution of the possibility could remain in the other possibilities.

In contrast to the above cases, the exclusion of a possibility may be based upon the wrong reasons (e.g., student bias, faulty assessment of consequences, undue focus on political factors). In these cases, the students need to be challenged to consider the overall value of the project itself and the role of non-advocacy in the project. The key question to ask the students is whether the possibility adds insight for others who might view the students’ work. When the answer to this question is generally positive, the possibility should not be excluded.

There is also a possible emotional loss when a possibility is excluded. Students “adopt” possibilities as their work and can feel personal rejection when a possibility is being considered for exclusion. On the other hand, students may be reluctant to exclude a possibility when they fear that it will cause an emotional problem for another panelist. While a student always has a right to keep a possibility from being excluded, many students may be reluctant to exercise their right.

This emotional loss can be minimized if each possibility is given a proper assessment by other students. The critical challenge is to take the insights from all possibilities and make the most of these insights. Whether these insights remain as a possibility or get integrated into other possibilities, the insights still retain some value.



## 2-P

### Developing the Conceptual Possibilities in Written Form (Phase 7)

Once the possibilities have been selected, the next step is to describe these possibilities in written form. The written descriptions of the possibilities should have the following features:

- They should be concise statements of the possibilities.
- The statements should describe each possibility as a possibility and not as a recommendation.
- The statement of the possibilities should be conceptual in nature and not detailed for specific application.
- The statements should be written in an easy-to-read format that invites explorations from others.

Exhibit A (on the following page) is an example of a written description of a possibility.

The written statements of the possibilities are a shared effort of the student group. One way to do this is to have each student in the group write one statement. Once the draft written statements are prepared, then have the students do serial editing of them. Serial editing in this case would have the students edit statements in a round robin fashion. Thus each student will be a first editor of one possibility, a second editor of another possibility, a third editor of another possibility, etc. Using this serial editing process helps involve all students in the writing process and helps ensure some uniformity in the written descriptions.

In addition to the written descriptions of the possibilities, the students should include a sense of their thinking that led to the possibility. The sense of thinking should describe how the possibility responds to the questions developed by the students in describing the discussion topic. The sense of thinking should be a concise statement, written to explain the thinking of the panel, not to advocate the policy possibility. See Exhibit B (on the following page) for an example of a Sense of Thinking statement.

Students should be told that the purpose of their report is to share their thinking with others. In most cases, this will be a change in perspective for students, who are accustomed to writing research papers to be read by the teacher and probably no one else. Students need to concern themselves with the clarity of their writing and how it will be received by others.

Outlined below are some guidelines for making the reports more accessible and inviting:

- Write as if you are talking to another person.
- Use personal pronouns to give the statements a personal feel.

- Limit the words in a sentence to 15 or less.
- The average syllables per word should be 1.5 or less.
- Use active voice.

The process of communicating the results in clear, easy-to-read language can be a very valuable skill for students to learn.

### **Exhibit A**

#### **Description of a Conceptual Possibility for Intellectual Property Rights**

We propose that creators and discoverers of intellectual property benefit from their creations/discoveries in proportion to the ultimate value of their creation/discovery. These ownership rights may be transferable to an employer or to another person or organization, but the transfer of intellectual property rights must ensure that the creators/discoverers will benefit in any long-term income generated by the intellectual property in proportion to its value.

### **Exhibit B**

#### **Sense of Thinking**

One of the key issues we explored was the economic justice aspects associated with intellectual property. One group raised questions about whether inventors/discoverers were benefiting fairly from their intellectual contributions. This possibility addresses the economic justice concern by suggesting that creators/discoverers have economic rights that should not be voided by employment arrangements or other contractual relationships.

# **Section Three**

## **Discovery Learning**

### 3-A

## The Concept of Discovery Learning

We tend to view learning as a process of transmission of information/insights/skills from a professor to students. Discovery learning is instead a process of guiding the learner in the acquisition of knowledge so that the learner uncovers the key points in a process of self-directed discovery.

Discovery learning typically involves a five-step process:

- Context setting – developing an awareness of the need for a concept
- Emotional acceptance – developing a sense of personal linkage with the material being taught
- Demonstration – showing the application of the concept in some tangible situation
- Transferral – asking students to relate their understanding of the concept to a different situation
- Generalizing – developing a broader understanding of the concept by reflecting on what was learned

Throughout the discovery learning process, students develop their own understanding of the concept being taught. Rather than have the teacher present the concept to them, they develop their own personal connection to it.

The discovery learning process is not an especially efficient means of information transfer – if efficiency is measured only by the amount of information transmitted in a given amount of time. Most university instructors are driven by a textbook that is designed to fill every week of a semester with a great deal of information to be presented by the professor and consumed by the students. Increasingly, though, professors are reticent to simply spoon-feed masses of information to their students. They find this method to be overwhelming to many students and ineffective in terms of students' long-term learning. The discovery learning process offers an alternative approach and is likely to lead to a greater degree of sustained learning.

The use of the discovery learning requires an experienced teacher but can be enhanced by following the guidance shown in the following [Exhibits A-E](#). In effect, discovery learning creates learning environments where the students can learn key concepts for themselves. The role of the teacher in discovery learning is to create the learning experience and guide students through the learning experience.

There is more guidance on the use of the discovery learning concepts in subsequent components of this section.

## Exhibit A

### Context Setting

Context setting involves developing an awareness of the need for a concept. It helps student with the questions: “Why do we need to know this?”

#### The purposes of context setting are to –

- Review why the topic being presented is important.
- Link the content with other topics already covered.
- Review any knowledge necessary for the understanding of this topic.
- Provide a transition from the immediately preceding topic.
- Preview what will be covered in this classroom experience.

#### Ways to do context setting:

- Introduce something currently in the news and relate it to the topic to be covered.
- Do an informal survey of student experiences that could be relevant.
- Give the students a situational analysis that describes the context.
- Give them a visual description that connects the new topic to prior topics.

## Exhibit B

### Emotional Acceptance

Emotional acceptance is developing a sense of personal linkage with the material being taught. It is the creation of students' willingness to develop new understanding.

#### The purposes of emotional acceptance are to—

- Break down barriers to the acceptance of the concept.
- Build an acceptance of the need for the concept.
- Make the concept less threatening.

#### Ways to build emotional acceptance:

- Use a case study or news article to show how people are coping with the discussion topic.
- Conduct an exercise or game that demonstrates an understanding of the concept in a fun, non-threatening manner.
- Use a story that can serve as a testimonial for the value of the concept.
- Use statistics or a series of short vignettes to validate the breadth of the issue.

## Exhibit C

### Demonstration

Demonstration involves showing the application of the concept in some tangible situation. This is when students connect the concept being taught with the context that had been previously developed

#### The purposes of demonstration are to—

- Show how the concept works.
- Show how to use the concept in different representative applications.
- Cover any special situations that may come up in the use of the concept.

#### Ways to do the demonstration:

- Use a simple example to show the application of the concept.
- Expand the application of the concept by showing examples of how the concept is used in different situations.
- Provide a series of situations and applications as demonstrations.

## **Exhibit D**

### **Transferral**

Transferral involves asking students to relate their understanding of the concept to a different situation. This is the point in the learning experience when the teacher can evaluate the students' true understanding of the concept.

#### **The purpose of transferral are to—**

- Reinforce concepts discussed in the demonstration phase.
- Build confidence that the students understand key concepts.
- Test understanding of the concept knowledge.

#### **Ways to do transferral:**

- Conduct a series of short discussions that connect the concept to other situations
- Conduct role playing to test understanding
- Conduct a question/ answer discussion on key concepts.



## Exhibit E

### **Generalizing**

Generalizing involves developing a broader understanding of the concept by reflecting on what was learned. Generalizing is the point in the learning process when students begin to create new insights for themselves from their self-discovery experiences.

#### **The purposes of generalizing are to –**

- Build on specific learning experiences to develop new insights.
- Broaden the value of a specific learning experience.
- Reinforce the value of reflective thinking as a key aspect in life- long learning.

#### **Ways to do generalizing:**

- Ask students: What are the broader insights that come from this experience?
- Ask students how they might apply what they just learned to other situations. For instance, ask students to find a case reported in the news to which the concept applies and to briefly explain their understanding of how the case illustrates the concept.

## 3-B

### Student-Centered Discussions and Discovery Learning

Student-centered discussions are one way to practice discovery learning in a classroom. Students are given a topic to explore through a facilitated small group discussion. They then work through the various phases of the discussion as shown in Section 2-A of this Guidebook.

Exhibit A (on the following page) shows the correspondence of student-centered discussions with the discovery learning approach. When students begin their discussions, they develop various aspects of the discussion topic. They do this exploration with minimal prompting from the teacher. In effect, they are building on knowledge they have from the class and other sources to develop the context for their new discussion topic.

Once students start developing their questions, they become emotionally engaged with the discussion topic. Curiosity, hopefulness, and anger are emotions that are likely to emerge as they think about what is, what could be, and what should be types of questions. The very process of asking questions brings about a sense of engagement with the topic.

Developing possible answers and subsequently shaping these answers into contrasting possibilities is a demonstration of the students' understanding of the core concepts they are learning. In effect, students are being challenged to create connections between what they have learned with what they are exploring.

When students begin the process of exploring consequences of the possibilities they have developed, they are able to relate their creative efforts to the broader area within which their work is centered. They are, in effect, transferring the possibilities developed in their discussions to the world outside of the classroom.

Finally, students need to generalize their discussions into a report that could be useful to others. Reporting is a process of deciding how to capture very extensive discussions into general language that others can then use to extend their own understanding of the discussion topic.

**Exhibit A****Correspondence of Student-Centered Discussions and Discovery Learning**

<b>Student-Centered Discussion Phases</b>	<b>Context Setting</b>	<b>Emotional Acceptance</b>	<b>Demonstration</b>	<b>Transferral</b>	<b>Generalizing</b>
Developing the various aspects of the discussion topic	X				
Developing general questions		X			
Developing possible answers			X		
Shaping answers into contrasting possibilities			X		
Exploring consequences				X	
Selecting/excluding possibilities				X	
Developing the summary report					X

### 3-C

## Using Student-Centered Discussions to Enrich Content Understanding

One of the challenges that a teacher has in incorporating student-centered discussions into a class is how to ensure content is not sacrificed in favor of student-centered discussion. In reality, the discussions can be used as a teaching approach for developing a deeper understanding of content. Consider the following example.

Suppose that the teacher spends the first couple of weeks on the normal class start-up activities and an introduction to the use of discussion as a learning tool. During the first couple of weeks, students would also learn about facilitation.

After this initial start-up period, the teacher divides up the class into groups and gives each group a discussion topic. Students begin their discussion of the topic. As their discussions progress, students begin to develop a set of content inquiries coming from the discussion topic that relate to the content of the course. These content inquiries are kept in a file for later use in the class. Also the teacher is maintaining a collection of observations and comments related to the content. Some of these observations/comments may be examples of where students discovered for themselves fundamental concepts related to the content. Other observations/comments may reflect points of confusion or misunderstanding that the teacher wants to discuss.

Student discussions would continue like this through phase 1 of the discussion process. At this time, the teacher calls a “time-out” in the discussions and devotes several class periods to content presentations. Rather than the usual content presentations, the teacher and students have more of an interactive dialogue where content is presented in response to content inquiries developed by students during their discussions. Or the teacher could use observation/comment notes to present a specific key element of the content.

After several class periods devoted to content, the student discussions commence the next phases of the discussion process. The teacher prompts these discussions by giving students some thought provoking questions that will help guide the students to discover additional key concepts to be later covered in the class sessions that focus on content.

The interactivity of student discussions and content presentations will continue through each of the phases of the student centered discussion process.

In this model, content is covered in response to content inquiries and developmental needs. Will all of the content be covered as would be covered in a typical presentation-only format? Perhaps not, but the content understanding is likely to be much deeper than in a typical classroom format.

### 3-D

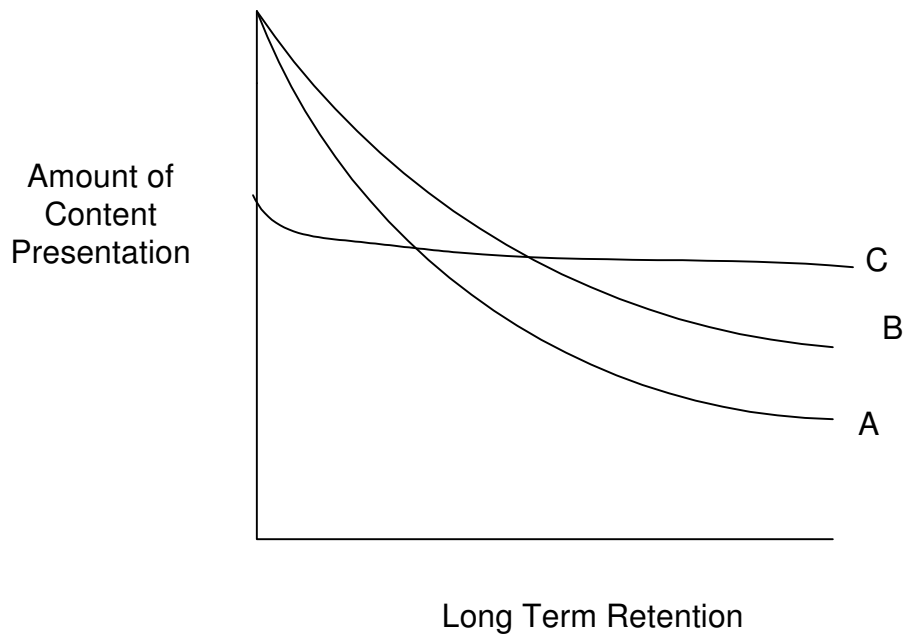
## Balancing Time between Discussion and Content Presentations

All faculty have fairly strong views about the content that needs to be covered in a class. The term “covered” in this context means that the teacher presents the content to students through a lecture format. Student-centered discussions take time away from content presentations. The challenge that faculty need to confront is how to ensure that essential content is not sacrificed in favor of discussion. Outlined below are some general concepts to consider in resolving the content coverage issue.

1. Content should be developed and reinforced in the student discussions. There are several ways to do this:
  - Give students specific priming questions when they begin their discussions. These questions should ask them to explore issues that will be later covered in the content presentations. Or the questions can ask them to use concepts covered in the content presentations in their discussions.
  - Once the discussions have concluded (at the end of class or at the start of the next class), conduct a debriefing of the discussion that connects specific moments in the student’s discussion to content topics.
2. Some content is better covered in a discussion format than in a lecture. Specific content that works best in a discussion includes:
  - Material that can benefit from sharing of multiple perspectives
  - Material that requires some form of internalization by students to be meaningful
  - Material that can be interpreted in different ways
  - Material that is best absorbed by students working with other students.

When the content fits one of the above criteria, student-centered discussions may become a more effective delivery of such content.

3. Some content may have marginal value when compared to what students might gain from a fuller engagement with other content. All content is not of equal value in any course. Student-centered discussion classes force faculty to assess priorities about what content is really important.
4. Retention of content is a reality that faculty are often reluctant to address. The fact is that the great majority of what gets presented in class is not retained by students. As the learning pyramid in Section 1-B demonstrates, classes which involve students more actively have the greatest retention rate. The relationship between amount of content presented and long term retention can be thought of as shown in [Figure 1](#) (on the following page).



**Figure 1 - Content Coverage vs. Long-Term Retention**

Line A represents the case of a teacher with average teaching skills. Content coverage is high but the retention level declines rapidly. Line B is an outstanding teacher. Content coverage is high and retention falls off but not as rapidly as with the average teacher. Line C is the case where some content coverage is sacrificed for more student-centered discussion. Content retention has better long term retention.

In summary, student-centered discussions do not have to lead to significant reductions in content coverage. When long term retention is considered, content coverage may actually be more effective when student-centered discussions are a part of the teaching approach.

**3-E****Syllabus Components for Student-Centered Discussions**

When student-centered discussions are used in a class, the syllabus needs to describe this aspect of the course. Outlined below is language that might be included in a syllabus.

**Student-Centered Discussions**

- A significant portion of this class will be devoted to student-centered discussions. The class will be divided up into discussion groups. Discussions will be managed by student facilitators. Both the facilitator and the discussion group will be evaluated during their discussion.

**Assessment Practices**

- Students will be evaluated when they facilitate. The teacher will use a facilitation rubric for this evaluation. [Including this rubric in the syllabus can be very helpful. See Section 6-B of this Guidebook for an example of this facilitation rubric] Each facilitation will be worth \_\_\_ points.
- The discussion group will also be evaluated during each discussion. A rubric will be used for this evaluation. Each discussion evaluation will be worth \_\_\_ points. All students will be given the same grade for their discussion. Any student missing class on a discussion day will receive 0 points for that discussion.

These syllabus entries should be integrated into the overall syllabus for the course.





**Section Four**  
**Operational Practices**  
**for Student-Centered Discussions**

## 4-A

### Putting Together Discussion Groups

Student groups typically consist of 6-8 students. The composition of these groups can be a major factor in the effectiveness of the classroom discussion. The formation of a student group is best done by the teacher. While there are no set rules for how to group students, there are some general guidelines that can be helpful.

1. Select groups which have a mix of personality types. Exhibit A (on the following page) contains a short self-survey which can be given to students to help with the identification of these personality types. As a rule of thumb, groups work best when:
  - There is only one red type student in each group.
  - There can be multiple orange types in each group, but groups work best when the orange types don't know each other very well at the start of the semester.
  - Every group should have at least one blue type student. When there are extra blue types, try to distribute these equally among the groups.
  - Limit the yellow type students to one per team if possible.
2. Whenever possible try to make each group fairly even with respect to:
  - Gender
  - Race
  - Ethnicity

This mix helps to ensure diverse perspectives

3. When there are ranges of academic ranks in the class, try to distribute freshmen and sophomores evenly among the groups.

Generally the discussion groups will stay together for an entire semester so it's important that careful thought be given to their selection. The teacher may want to take advantage of commercial surveys to select team members. Other campus counseling services will have access to these surveys. Section 8 of this document contains suggestions for how to deal with groups that are having troubles.

**Exhibit A****Team Membership Survey**

Which of the following do you feel best describes you when working with others?

<b>Red</b>	■ “I like to be in charge so I can be certain the results are the best they can be.”
<b>Orange</b>	■ “I enjoy working with others and getting to know them.”
<b>Blue</b>	■ “I like being with a group that is disciplined and focused on getting the job done.”
<b>Yellow</b>	■ “I want to be with others who believe in doing the work the right way.”

## 4-B

### Starting Up a Discussion Group

Since the discussion groups will be working together for the entire semester, it's important that the discussion groups get started well. Outlined below are a few things the discussion groups need to do when they first get together.

- A. Exchange of personal information: Students need to introduce themselves to each other and collect contact information (e.g., email addresses, phone numbers). There also needs to be an ice breaker activity to get them more familiar with each other. See Exhibit A (on the following page) for one ice breaker that can be used.
- B. Students need to put together a cooperative agreement of how they intend to work together. This agreement should address the types of issues that students normally encounter when they work together. Exhibit B contains an example of what an agreement would look like.
- C. Students need to put together a communications system which they can use to notify each other of any problems with attendance, missed assignments, out-of-class meetings, etc. Typically this communications plan is a call list.
- D. Students need to set up a legacy filing system for maintenance of discussion notes and other important documents. The legacy file is discussed later in this section.

Starting up a discussion group may take a class period to accomplish. Since this is the first time the group is together, it is also a good time for the teacher to observe the team work together and to give feedback that can be useful in the discussions to follow.

## **Exhibit A**

### **An Example Ice Breaker**

Pair up with another person in your group who you don't know at all or very well. Each pair should interview each other to obtain information that might be helpful in getting to know the person.

After 10 minutes of paired interviews, the student doing the interviewing should introduce the other student being interviewed to the entire group.

## **Exhibit B**

### **Cooperative Behavior Guidelines**

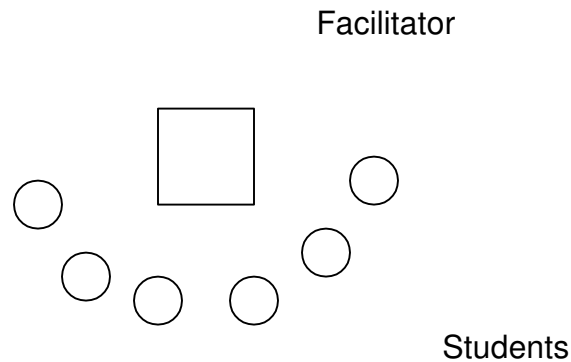
#### **Sample Response**

1. We will not miss a team meeting unless we have a valid excuse. When we do miss a meeting, we will give another team member our assignment.
2. We will complete all assignments by the day they are due.
3. Each of us will speak up every time we meet as a team.
4. When the team agrees to do something, we will each do our part.
5. We will not criticize any team member.
6. We will resolve conflicts by words, not by physical actions.
7. We will help each other when asked. We will ask for help when needed.
8. We will support the ideas of team members by adding to their ideas.
9. We will do our best job so we don't hurt our team members.

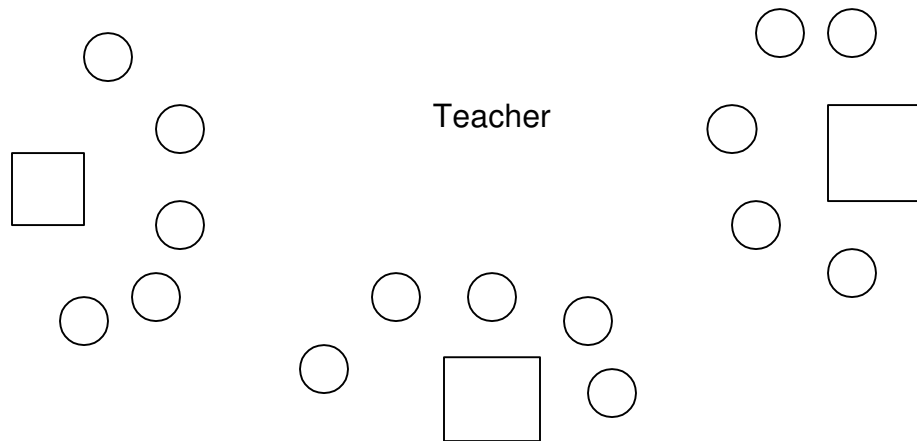
## 4-C Classroom Arrangements/Supplies

Classes with a significant amount of student-centered discussion need special arrangements and supplies. The discussion groups will need space to hold their discussions. Typically, discussion groups are separated as far apart in a classroom as possible to reduce problems of discussions from one discussion interfering with another. Whenever possible, the classroom used for teaching should be larger than might normally be used for a given number of students.

Students should arrange their seating in a semi-circle as shown below:



The facilitators should be standing in a position that the teacher can see what is being written. This arrangement is shown below:



The teacher will need to sit at a place in the room where he/she can observe each of the discussion groups at work with only minor movement. A suggested arrangement is shown above.

Each discussion group will need to have a flipchart stand and flipchart paper to use to record discussion points. Each discussion group will also need to equip itself with a collection of facilitation supplies (see [Exhibit A on the following page](#)).

The discussion groups should be responsible for having the equipment and supplies in the classroom. The teacher's office or some other room will need to be used to store the flipchart stands and the facilitation kits.

A routine needs to be developed to manage the setup of the classroom arrangements each day there is to be a discussion. After one or two days the start-up of a class should become efficient.



## **Exhibit A**

### **Facilitation Kits**

The facilitation kit contains the supplies students will need during their discussion. Typically the kit consists of a small tub (12" x 13" x 6") that can be purchased at any office supplies store.

The contents of the kit should include:

- Colored markers to write on the flip charts
- Masking tape to place flip completed charts on walls
- Post-it Note pads
- A notebook containing discussion notes
- Stick pins for flip chart notes if the room has a cork strip that can be used for posting

The contents of the kit may also contain:

- Extra pen/pencils should students need them
- Extra legal pads
- Candy to be used as a self reward when the group had a good discussion

## 4-D Developing a Class Discussion Schedule

One of the most significant benefits of a student-centered discussion format in classes is that students get experience with facilitation. To ensure that all students benefit from the facilitation experience, a schedule needs to be developed for each class period when discussion is to be used. In addition to the facilitation schedule, a schedule also needs to be created for the note-taker. A representative schedule is shown below:

<u>Class Session</u>	<u>Facilitator</u>	<u>Note-Taker</u>
1	Student A	Student B
2	Student B	Student C
3	Student C	Student D
4	Student D	Student E
5	Student E	Student F
6	Student F	Student G
7	Student G	Student A

Note that the schedule is set up so that the note-taker becomes the facilitator for the next class discussion. The reason for this is that the note-taker will be producing a discussion summary at the end of the class. This discussion summary can be very useful preparation for the next class facilitation.

When students have advance notice of their roles, they are more likely to take more responsibility for these roles. A schedule also ensures that each student will have at least one – and desirably two – opportunities with each role

## 4-E Note-Taking Practices

Note-taking is critical to the discussion. Notes consist of two forms. The first set of notes contains the points captured by the facilitator on the flip charts. Mostly these notes are short 3-5 word place-markers for the discussion. These notes are used to keep the discussion points visible during the discussion. They are primarily used during the discussion. See [Exhibit A](#) (on the following page) for sample flip chart notes taken during an actual discussion.

The second set of notes is kept by a note-taker. These notes are a more complete record of what was discussed. Typically these notes have the form shown in the following example.

(N.T.) Concerned about access under this possibility.
---

The letters in parenthesis represent the initials of the speaker. What follows is a brief synopsis of what the person said. The notes are not designed to be a transcript but rather a concise statement of the key point(s) made by the person. Typically there would be a line for each speaker. [Exhibit B](#) contains a sample of note-taker notes.

Some note-takers may wish to use a laptop computer for note-taking, while others may take notes by hand. In either case, the notes should be put in electronic format and made available to the group before the next discussion.

The detailed discussion notes are also used to prepare work documents for the next discussion. More will be said about the work documents in the next section of this Guidebook.

## Exhibit A

### Flipchart Notes

The following are the notes that were taken on the flip chart paper during the discussion session. They follow the temporal sequence of the discussion. The facilitator prompts or comments are in italics.

- *What might be some different possible ways to understand “public” or “civic discourse”? And what might be some of its features or components?*
  - *What makes it “public” or “civic”?*
  - *What might we mean by “discourse” or “discussion”?*
  - *What might it be about?*
- “Discourse” - implies 2-way communication, give and take, listening, not just talking.
- “Civic” or “public” - might have different meanings depending on your school of thought.
  - Libertarians might want to restrict the “public” role.
  - Social progressives might want to expand the role of the public, or space for the public.
- Discourse for policy reasons vs. discourse as individual expression.
  - Politics play a different role in each of these.
  - One group may feel more limited about what could be said: you shouldn’t even be talking about X topic – it is none of the public’s business.
- Discourse connects with “deliberation”: Deliberation is not “Debate”.
  - Debate is yes/no statement of position (and counter-position).
  - Deliberation is more rare (Voltaire, affirm the right to disagree).
  - Exploring different ways to look at things.
  - Polarized argument can be an obstacle to “discourse”.
  - Listening is essential to discourse.

Note: These are just some of the flip chart notes that were taken.

**Exhibit B****Note-Taker Notes (Sample Page)**

Note: Initials are not used here.

- Key Issue: No one really listens anymore.
  - I heard recently on NPR that the biggest change in Congress in 20 years has been that no one listens anymore.
  - Listening is essential to discourse.
  - How much are positions formed before any discourse?
- When was the golden age?
  - Founding fathers had discourse over dinner- they had the idea, but we've lost it since.
  - Anything in last 50 years similar to Lincoln-Douglas debate?
  - Most of Senate floor is posturing for CSPAN, not real debate.
    - Constituents and re-election is the focus, not debate.
    - Constant fundraising leads to corruption.
    - The founding fathers were gentlemen and could not anticipate this.
- Who will be the next American Idol?
  - Entertainment as public concern more than policies.
  - Al Gore's *Assault on Reason* complains:  
MSNBS & CNN cover Paris Hilton and not real stuff
  - But, who decides what's on the news? WE watch...
  - Anchors chosen by how they look; how can one be any better than the other?
    - How do we evaluate?
- Discourse takes time and we're in an age of TV sound bytes.
  - Used to be a national pastime.
  - Now we live busy, hectic lives.
- Respect and trust are key to discourse.
  - E.g., my masters program –
    - We discussed really heated issues and we had many backgrounds.
    - Tempers flared.
    - But we could still talk and like each other the next day.
    - Like a sanctuary.

- Same- a message board for pregnant women.
  - Very varied group.
  - Fired up discussions.
  - But from a base of respect.
    - Nice oasis I'm glad I have.
- If you don't have a basis of respect and trust you can't discuss.
  - "Living with Freedom's Terrors" essay -
  - If we want freedom, we must embrace ambiguity & discomfort.
  - Democracy is a terrible system, but it's the best we have.
    - Churchill?
- Knowing someone only virtually enforces that we are sensitive to how we present self.
  - Connects to respect and trust - predictability.
- We forget in a divisive country that we can disagree but still like the other person.
- Confusion between the president and the country.
  - Are they with us or against us?
  - Not the same thing.

**4-F****Developing Discussion Summary Documents**

The meeting minutes serve as a record of the discussion. Discussion summary documents are a synthesis of what was discussed. These documents bring an organization of the discussion that may not be evident by a reading of the minutes. The discussion summary documents are in essence an organization of the developing thinking of the group as they work through their discussions. See [Exhibit A](#) (on the following page) for an example of the discussion summary document.

The development of the discussion summary documents can be very challenging for students. The following guidelines may be useful to students.

1. The discussion summary notes are an attempt to capture the main points of the discussion in a useful organization. There are many ways the discussion summary notes can be organized.
2. There may be discussion comments that don't fit into any organization. There can be placed in a "Parking Lot." Essentially the parking lot is a place holder for thoughts that don't fit into other thoughts. They are held to a later point in the discussion when there is a better fit. See the topic on Parking Lot in Section 4-I.
3. The discussion summaries need to be prepared as soon as possible after the discussion. That way the discussion will still be current.
4. Discussion summary notes work best when they are developed as bullet statements rather than narrative text.
5. A one-hour discussion would typically lead to a discussion summary of 2-3 pages.

Outlined below is a series of steps that students may want to follow to produce the discussion summary documents.

- Step 1: Review the meeting minutes. While you are reviewing these minutes, make a list of major organizing categories that seem to be present.
- Step 2: Take one item from the category list and summarize key points from the meeting notes that seem to fit this category. These key points can be restatements of what was actually said. Often several discussion comments will be captured as one key point.
- Step 3: Continue this process for all of the category list items. Often category list items will be dropped, combined with other list items, or altered at this step. There should be an approximate balance in the key points for each of the major categories.
- Step 4: If any discussion points don't seem to fit any of the major categories, place these in a parking lot for discussion at a later point in time.

The discussion summary notes should be prepared by the student who will be the next facilitator in the rotation. That way, the student will have a good grasp of what was covered in the previous discussion and where the discussion will be going.

## **Exhibit A**

### **Discussion Summary Notes**

#### **Overview**

The following notes represent a thematically organized summary of the meeting on June 11, 2007. These notes are intended to recap the substance of the discussion, not to reproduce it verbatim. Some of the comments appear in different ways to capture or draw out different aspects touched on during the discussion. The notes are grouped into some of the overlapping topics that began to emerge in the course of the discussions. The groupings are not intended to indicate rigid distinctions, since most of the material was clearly interrelated. Further, these groupings are simply one way, and not the only possible way, to organize the discussion material to help move the discussion forward.

This was the first discussion session. Most of the discussion was devoted to the exploring various aspects of public or civic discourse in response to the question below:

- *What might be some different possible ways to understand “public” or “civic discourse”? And what might be some of its features or components?*
  - *What makes it “public” or civic”?*
  - *What might be mean by “discourse” or “discussion”?*
  - *What might it be about?*

In future discussions we will likely develop some of these thoughts more fully and will likely explore some ways to develop these in alternative or contrasting directions. As you read through these, you might ask yourself how you could build upon some of these thoughts. You might also ask how you could bring some alternative perspectives or contrasting responses into the discussion, perhaps using some of the material below as a jumping-off point.

#### **Discussion Summary**

##### **Notions of Public or Civic Discourse**

The following are some of the various concerns and questions that emerged about the ideas and realities of “public” or “civic discourse.” This discussion circled around such questions as: What might “public” or “civic discourse” mean? What might be different ways to think about public/civic discourse? And what different meanings might emerge between “public discourse” and “civic discourse”?



## Discourse

### ■ Notions of “Discourse”

- It might imply two-way communication with real give and take interaction
  - Implies listening, not just talking at someone
  - A potential for effecting change? You might change your position as a result of discourse and deliberation
    - Do Congress persons ever change their positions as a result of debate in Congress (or do they come and go with unchanging positions)?
    - Is this just an ideal (did such deliberative discourse ever exist, say, beyond the Founding Fathers)?
- Discourse as connected to, or interwoven with, the practice of “deliberation”
  - Deliberative discourse explores different ways to look at something, explores possibilities
  - It is less common than “debate” or the simple point-counterpoint kind of argument
  - It affirms the right to disagree, to dissent
  - Such deliberative discourse takes time, yet we live in fast-paced times and often feel we must rush to make decisions rather than exploring possibilities
- Debate as a kind of discourse?
  - Debate as the yes/no statement of position and counter-position
  - It leaves little room for interaction or genuine engagement (not likely to change someone’s thinking)
  - It fosters a tendency to polarized argument: an impediment to deliberative discourse?
  - What might be the relation of debate or argument to “discourse”?
- Discourse as speechmaking, speaking at or to someone
  - For whom and to whom
    - Politicians speaking for the cameras, to an audience not present, or speaking to constituents?
- Discourse as individual expression
- Discourse for policy reasons

Note: The discussion summary shown here is abbreviated. The actual discussion summary was 6 pages long.

## 4-G

### Developing Pre-Work Documents

The pre-work documents are what the facilitator prepares in advance of the discussion. These documents include three items:

1. The discussion summary document from the previous class discussion (See Section 4-F)
2. The discussion outline for the next class discussion
3. Some guidance that the facilitator would like to give fellow students for the discussion

The discussion summary document should be emailed to students as soon as it is available.

The discussion outline contains 3-4 major items for the discussion. Exhibit A (on the following page) contains an example of a discussion outline. While no time periods are assigned to the discussion topics, the facilitator should consider how much time might be used for each topic when putting together the outline.

The guidance provided to the students could cover improvements that need to be made in the discussion or specific reminders for the discussion. Guidance could also reference material from past discussions which could be especially helpful in the upcoming discussion.

**Exhibit A**  
**Example Discussion Outline**

During our next class discussion, we will be covering the following topics:

1. Complete our discussion on factors that are likely to influence poverty.
2. Begin the development of possible answers for reducing poverty.

We should initially focus on:

- Economic factors
- Educational factors

## 4-H

### Developing a Legacy File

A legacy file is a compilation of all documents associated with a discussion project. The legacy file would contain:

- Flip chart notes
- Discussion notes
- Discussion summary notes
- Pre work documents
- Working documents
- Readings
- Group documents (phone numbers, email addresses, etc.)

The legacy files are placed in a three-ring binder and kept in the facilitation kit so the students will have their documents available to them at all times.

In order to make the legacy file more useful, items in the legacy file should have a reference number that provides for quick access. One reference code that works well is shown below:

XX-YY-ZZ-NN

XX = Month

YY = Day

ZZ = Year

NN = Number of the document for that day (first document on the date would be given the number 1, the second document for the same date would be given a number 2, etc.)

At the front of the legacy file, there should be a table of contents that shows the reference number and a brief description of the document.

One of the students in the group should be given the responsibility for keeping the legacy file.

## **4-I Maintaining a Parking Lot**

The parking lot is a collection of discussion points that were raised at some point in time that do not fit into the overall flow of the discussion. These points are considered relevant but not timely. The parking lot is a way to capture these points for later discussion and use.

The student who maintains the legacy file should have an itemized listing of the parking lot items. At designated points in time (e.g. every two weeks, the students should go over the parking lot list to see if they want to place any of the items on their active discussion agenda).

The parking lot is a way for maintaining the flow of the discussion but not ignoring important points which are not timely.



# **Section Five**

## **Skill Development in Student-Centered Discussion Classes**

## 5-A Facilitation Skill Development

Student-centered discussions place students in situations where they facilitate discussions. Facilitation skill development is something that occurs over time. Learning to be a good facilitator is something that can only be learned by doing. While there are a number of techniques and mechanics of facilitation that can be learned from a book or from a teacher, the essence of facilitation can only be acquired by doing.

The companion volume to this Guidebook (Facilitation Guidebook- available through the Interactivity Foundation (<http://www.interactivityfoundation.org/>)) contains information on the practice of facilitation. But the actual act of facilitation can only be learned through practice, mentoring, and learning by doing.

The essence of what it takes to be a great facilitator is captured in the interview transcribed on Exhibit A – on the following page.

Facilitation is a very instinctive skill. There are no rules or structures that guarantee successful facilitation. Rather, successful facilitators react to the moment based upon their experience, judgment, and instinct. This is why practice makes perfect. The more facilitation experience a student gains, the more the student will hone his or her instincts.

Student-centered discussions provide the opportunity to develop facilitation skills. Students learn by observing the teacher in facilitation demonstrations. They learn by observing their peers as facilitators and they learn by doing.

What facilitation skills can students be expected to develop in a typical course that incorporates student-centered discussion?

- Students should be able to guide the flow of the discussion so that the discussion group makes useful progress.
- Students should be able to set the tone and maintain a tone of discussion that is civil, useful, and insightful.
- Students should be able to ask probing questions that elevate the discussion to explore concepts beyond those that are obvious.
- Students should be able to involve everyone in the discussion.
- Students should be instinctive in their facilitation and not be unduly constrained by a plan.
- Students should demonstrate that they can learn from each facilitation experience and use these learning experiences to make personal improvement.

Facilitation is not a “one size fits all” practice. Everyone has their own style of facilitation. The key for students is to learn how to evolve their style to one that works for them.



## Exhibit A

### **An Interview with Ed Byers**

Ed Byers had just won his third national title as a glider pilot. The award was based upon his ability to guide his powerless glider over a long distance and land the plane at a target location. Ed's story had become a personal interest story in an extreme sports magazine.

Reporter:	I'm impressed by your award but I'm curious. What skills do you need to be a champion glider pilot?
Ed:	Obviously you need to know how to pilot a plane, but that's not what makes you a champion.
Reporter:	I'm intrigued. I thought you would have told me about your piloting skills.
Ed:	Actually, I think of myself as a micrometeorologist. When you fly a glider, you have to judge the weather 10 feet in front of the glider. Then you just have to guide your plane in response to the immediate weather you see.
Reporter:	It sounds like your success is really controlled by things you can't control?
Ed:	It's true that I can't control the weather but I can, to some extent, control the weather that I fly my glider into. With experience, you can learn that one small segment of weather will often lead to other segments of weather.
Reporter:	Fascinating. Could you say that you are less of a pilot and more of a facilitator for your plane?
Ed:	Very well said.

Facilitating a discussion is much like being a glider pilot. You have no power to control the substance of the discussion, but you can guide the discussion to make it useful. The function of facilitator guidance is one of sensing where the discussion is going and guiding the discussion by asking questions and by helping put the discussion into proper perspective. Like the successful glider pilot, a facilitator is anticipating the next five minutes of discussion and making adjustments to ensure that the discussion flows in a useful direction. Unlike the glider pilot, there is no target or distance goal to facilitation. The measure of successful facilitation is much more difficult to describe (more will be said about this later.)

## 5-B Intense Listening

Listening is the communications approach that we use most often (more than speaking, writing, etc). It is also the communications skill that gets taught the least. When listening is taught, the teaching tends to focus on tools for active listening. When these tools are practiced, it tends to be in a classroom exercise environment. There is often very limited transferal from the exercise to a student's daily life.

Student-centered discussions require the practice of intense listening over the span of the entire semester. Listening skills are developed through continuous practice and then become a part of the student's routine communications practice. There are three ways these listening skills are developed.

The facilitator must listen carefully to what each person is saying and then abstract from their comments to place notes on a flip chart. Since the notes are visible to the group and crucial to their on-going discussion, the facilitator needs to reduce the comments into useful words that support the discussion. The facilitator is not a scribe but an interpreter. To be an effective interpreter, the facilitator needs to listen carefully without bias and then paraphrase what is being said in useful language. Often the facilitator must also ask follow-up questions to gather more information from the participants. This follow-up questioning is an act that helps others understand what is being said.

The note-taker must also be an intense listener in order to capture the essence of the discussion. The note-taker's job is one of abstracting comments rather than producing a transcript. The process of abstracting also requires judgment in that not everything that is being said can be captured in words. Obviously the note-taker must be an intense listener in order to keep up with the discussion.

Perhaps the most subtle but most important listening is practiced by the group members themselves. If student centered discussions are to be effective, the discussion participants need to listen in a way that is rarely practiced. Their role in listening is to hear what the other person is saying and then to help that person understand the thoughts he/she is expressing. This is a very different form of listening from what is normally practiced in groups. In most cases, we listen to what the other person is saying so we can offer comments in response that "one-up" the other person. This type of listening is one in which our response is based not on what the person is saying but on what we can say in response. Listening to others to help them express their thoughts requires intense understanding of what the person is saying and what the person is feeling.

These listening skills develop with coaching from the teacher. The teacher will need to give students feedback on their listening practices. Students may not even be aware of how they are developing these skills unless feedback and coaching is provided.

## 5-C

### Expressing Ideas

The ability to express your ideas is a crucial skill for anyone. A student develops this skill in a formal academic setting through writing and presentation assignments. It's interesting that students' formal training in expressing their ideas comes from situations where they have extensive preparation time. In reality the ability to express one's ideas requires:

- Quick thinking
- Courage to speak up
- Organization of one's thoughts
- Setting the right tone in the presentation

Expressing one's ideas often requires immediacy rather than extensive preparation.

Students struggle to express their ideas for a number of reasons:

- They don't want to seem foolish.
- They are intimidated in speaking up in a large group.
- They aren't given an opportunity, especially in situations where others speak up more quickly.
- They can't make a personal connection to the topic.
- They are embarrassed about their personal situation (e.g., voice, grammar, looks, etc.).

Students struggle speaking up in teacher-led classroom discussions for many of the reasons cited above.

In student-centered discussions, students develop the ability to express their ideas in an environment that is very supportive.

- The small group environment is less intimidating.
- The fact that students share the responsibility to help each other makes it easier for students to speak up without seeming to be foolish.
- The teacher becomes "invisible" to the students after a while and students find the discussion environment one that they are very comfortable with.
- Students who are shy are given an opportunity to speak up first.

In effect, student-centered discussions serve as a catalyst for helping students to express their ideas. Once they become comfortable with expressing their ideas in the supportive environment of their group, they are much more confident in speaking up in other environments.

## 5-D

### Building on Others' Ideas

We tend to grow up in competitive environments where we are expected to challenge others. In many cases, discussions have become a competition where each participant tries to “win” the discussion. Student-centered discussions encourage students to help each other think about issues. Discussions are not debates which have winners and losers. Discussions are effective when ideas are developed through collegiality.

In his 2006 commencement speech at Knox College, the comedian and political satirist Stephen Colbert described an attitude of saying “yes-and” that is vital to successful dramatic improvisation. His closing admonition to the graduates was to adopt this as a general attitude toward life. It also happens to be particularly good advice for students to think about how they should approach their discussions. Below is a relevant excerpt (the whole speech can be found at (<http://www.knox.edu/x12547.xml>)):

So say “yes.” In fact, say “yes” as often as you can. When I was starting out in Chicago, doing improvisational theater with Second City and other places, there was really only one rule I was taught about improv. That was, “yes-and.” In this case, “yes-and” is a verb. To “yes-and.” I yes-and, you yes-and, he, she, or it yes-ands. And yes-and’ing means that when you go onstage to improvise a scene with no script, you have no idea what’s going to happen, maybe with someone you’ve never met before. To build a scene, you have to accept. To build anything onstage, you have to accept what the other improviser initiates on stage. They say you’re doctors-you’re doctors. And then, you add to that: We’re doctors and we’re trapped in an ice cave. That’s the “-and.” And then hopefully they “yes-and” you back. You have to keep your eyes open when you do this. You have to be aware of what the other performer is offering you, so that you can agree and add to it. And through these agreements, you can improvise a scene or a one-act play. And because, by following each other’s lead, neither of you is really in control. It’s more of a mutual discovery than a solo adventure. What happens in a scene is often as much a surprise as it is to the audience.

Students don’t have a script for their discussions. They don’t know how the discussion is going to develop. They likely end up at places that are a surprise to them- places they may never have found on their own. They won’t know in advance whether some lines of discussion may lead them astray or whether, by such meandering, they will actually come upon important insights they might never have found without such a detour. Adopting an attitude of saying “yes-and” will do much to boost the creative potential of student discussions.

Contrast the “yes-and” approach to discussions with the “yes, but”, approach that is more common. Yes-and suggests a discussion that builds where “yes-but” suggests a

discussion that leads to point-counterpoint arguments but very little in the way of creative development.

The ability to build on another person's ideas is one that is rare in our society, but it's an ability that is vitally needed.

## 5-E

### Staying Focused

When you survey college students about what they like to do in their free time, they will often use the phrase: “hanging out with my friends.” Hanging out loosely translates into getting together with friends and just talking about anything. Often these conversations will wander all over.

Obviously student-centered discussions need to have a focus. Wandering conversation may be enjoyable, but there is limited educational potential to such a conversation. Students need to develop the ability to stay focused on the specific subject being discussed.

The facilitator should be the control point for staying focused, but facilitator intervention should be unnecessary if the student group accepts its responsibility to stay focused. Outlined below are some simple guidelines that can be shared with students to help them stay focused.

1. Don't bring up a new subject until the previous topic has been fully discussed. Often we have a habit of blurting out a comment that is unrelated to the topic being discussed.
2. Eliminate comments that “drill down” too deep on the topic. Any conversation needs to strike a balance about how specific the discussion should become and covering the topic enough to do justice to the topic.
3. Avoid story-telling. Everyone has personal stories that connect to the issue being discussed. While these stories can be very interesting, they often can be distracting.
4. Speak up when you think a conversation is getting off track.
5. Eliminate conversations that are completely off subject. Students will often get off into private discussions that should be left for after class.

The teacher should have “staying focused” as an evaluation criteria for the group's assessment. More will be said about this in the next section of this Guidebook.

## 5-F Valuing Diverse Perspectives

Universities have long promoted valuing diversity as one of their core missions. Student populations have become more diverse. A number of courses focus on valuing diversity and in many cases students have a course requirement that focuses on valuing diversity.

Student-centered classes develop an appreciation of diversity through the discussions themselves. The discussion group by its very nature will bring together a number of diverse perspectives in the students themselves. There can be diversity with respect to race, gender, and ethnicity, but there can also be diversity with respect to faith, culture, political views, personality and the way students explore a new issue.

What makes student-centered discussions somewhat different is that each student is expected to help other student members think about issues. In effect, students are asked to adopt their classmate's perspective and think about the issue from this perspective. Not only do they gain an appreciation for another perspective, but they try to think about issues from that perspective. This is a discussion in which a student will at times share their own perspective with other students but at other times adopt another perspective to help a classmate.

The focus of the discussion is not to develop one possibility that can be supported by all perspectives because such a possibility often compromises the value of the diversity of the student group. The focus of student-centered discussions should instead be on the development of a number of possibilities that come from the diversity of the student perspectives.

Student-centered discussions in effect put the valuing of diversity into a tangible shared experience.

## 5-G

### Working Together

One of the complaints that students often have about college is group projects. These group efforts are often horrible experiences because students are never really taught how to work together. Often the private sector must make a significant investment in team building programs because they have found that employees have never really learned to work together.

Student-centered discussions are the ultimate form of group project. In contrast to other courses using group projects, students value the experience of working together in a student-centered discussion. There are several reasons why a group project works in a student-centered discussion class, but it doesn't work in other classes.

1. Students develop a shared expectation of what is needed to make the student group a success. (See Section 4-B)
2. Students have defined roles which shift throughout the semester. This way every student gets the full experience of working in a group.
3. The tone of the discussion makes the experience comfortable for every student. Aggressive students are less likely to command the group.
4. The teacher is observing the group and giving it feedback. This is in contrast to most group project classes where the group's interaction occurs outside of class.
5. Students are given frequent feedback on their ability to work together. As a result of this feedback, students can adapt their approach. In contrast, most project experiences that students have in other courses rarely evaluate the students' ability to work together and if an evaluation is done, it is at the end of the project.

Student-centered discussions are excellent preparation for the experiences students will have when they graduate and must work in groups with others.



## **5-H**

### **Using Insight Journals to Reinforce Skills Development**

While student-centered discussions are very useful in developing important student skills, students are often unaware that they are actually developing these skills. They are caught up in their discussions, and they lose sight of what they are learning from the experience.

One way to reinforce what students are learning is to ask students to maintain an insight journal. After each class, students would be expected to write a short journal entry about what they learned from the discussion. The teacher may want to give students some guidance on a specific focus for each insight journal entry. That way the student can be challenged to develop insights that would not have been developed without prompting.

The teacher may want to collect the insight journals periodically and review these. Following this review, the teacher might want to devote a short amount of time in a class to reinforce the insights and the experiential learning process.

Without some organized approach to capture insights and then reinforce these, the skills the students develop from their discussions may not develop as completely as they could.



# **Section Six**

## **Assessment of Student-Centered Discussions**

## 6-A

### Essential Elements of the Assessment of Student-Centered Discussions

The assessment of student-centered discussions follows a pattern that is more closely associated with mentoring than it is with the quantitative evaluations used in most classes. The teacher is an observer of student performance. The evaluation that follows from the observation is a collection of notes that are used to guide the students toward improved performance. While a grade is assigned as part of the evaluation, the grade is of less importance than the coaching notes that accompany the evaluation.

In many respects, the evaluation of students in a student-centered discussion class resembles the type of evaluation that students would receive in the performing or visual arts.

Outlined below are some essential elements in an assessment of student-centered discussions.

1. Each discussion should have three evaluation components.
  - A facilitator evaluation provided by the teacher
  - A group discussion evaluation provided by the teacher
  - A group self-evaluation performed by the students
2. Feedback on facilitator evaluation should be provided as soon after the class as possible. This facilitation evaluation works best as a coaching session where the primary focus is on how the student can enhance his/her facilitation skills. (See Section 6-B for more details).
3. Feedback on the group discussion evaluation should use both an assessment rubric and a written narrative and be provided to the group prior to their next discussion. (See Section 6-C for more details).
4. The group self-evaluation should be done at the end of the class discussion and use the +/△ process (See Section 6-D for more details).
5. At one-month intervals over the semester the teacher should give each group an interim progress evaluation to let them know how they are progressing (See Section 6-K for more details).
6. A major component of the evaluation should be on student progress. This reflects the performance nature of the class in that the goal is to encourage and develop what the student is doing right.
7. The grade a student receives in the course should have both an individual and group component.

Since the evaluation system in a student-centered discussion class is quite different from other classes, students need to be given a clear explanation of what to expect. At first students may struggle with the “live” performance aspect of their grade but after some experience with the grading system, many students will value the coaching aspect of the evaluation.

## 6-B Evaluating the Facilitation

The teacher observes both the facilitator and the group during the discussion and makes observation notes. Exhibit A (on the following pages) contains an example of an assessment rubric that might be used in preparing the facilitation evaluation.

The components of the evaluation include:

1. **Discussion Strategy:** the overall approach used to obtain the progress needed in the discussion. Did the facilitator have a discussion approach or did the facilitator just let the students talk?
2. **Facilitation Mechanics:** the use of proper facilitation practices (e.g., recording of comments on flip charts, encouraging contributions from everyone, restraint in making his/her own comments).
3. **Discussion Leadership:** ensuring that the discussion was useful through asking questions, challenging students to go beyond the obvious, knowing when to change directions or topics, etc.
4. **Use of Course Content in the Discussion:** how the facilitator connected the discussion with the main topics being covered in the class (i.e., did the content of the course inform the discussion?).
5. **Progress Made:** the continual development of the discussion topic with new insights. Did the discussion advance the development of the discussion topic or was the discussion primarily a rehashing of previous discussions?

On the back of the rubric is a place for the teacher to record notes on things the facilitator did well on and improvements needed. After the student has been evaluated once, it's also useful to comment on progress the student has made.

The teacher may also want to assign a point value to the various components of the evaluation. These point values can then be used to assign a grade to the facilitation effort.

If possible, students should be given feedback on their facilitation performance after the class. Face-to-face feedback works best since it gives the teacher and student the opportunity to go beyond just the words on the rubric. In all cases, the facilitator evaluation should be returned to the student prior to the next class.

The student should share his/her evaluation with the other students in the group. This will help raise the overall level of quality of the facilitation and reinforce the concept of what it takes to be successful as a group.

**Exhibit A**  
**Facilitation Evaluation (Front Side)**

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Discussion Topic \_\_\_\_\_

Evaluation Component	Evaluation Notes	Evaluation Score
1. Discussion Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> </ul>	1 = Outstanding 2 = Very Good 3 = Average 4 = Below Average 5 = Unacceptable
2. Facilitation Mechanics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> </ul>	1 = Outstanding 2 = Very Good 3 = Average 4 = Below Average 5 = Unacceptable
3. Discussion Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> </ul>	1 = Outstanding 2 = Very Good 3 = Average 4 = Below Average 5 = Unacceptable
4. Use of Course Content in the Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> </ul>	1 = Outstanding 2 = Very Good 3 = Average 4 = Below Average 5 = Unacceptable
5. Progress Made	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> </ul>	1 = Outstanding 2 = Very Good 3 = Average 4 = Below Average 5 = Unacceptable
6. Other Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> </ul>	1 = Outstanding 2 = Very Good 3 = Average 4 = Below Average 5 = Unacceptable
7. Overall Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> </ul>	1 = Outstanding 2 = Very Good 3 = Average 4 = Below Average 5 = Unacceptable

Exhibit A – Facilitation Evaluation

(Back Side)

■ Improvement Needs

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■ Keep on Doing

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■ Progress made from Previous Evaluation

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## 6-C Evaluating the Group Discussion

The teacher needs to evaluate the group discussion in addition to the facilitator evaluation. The group discussion is used to reinforce the key aspects of what it takes to have a useful discussion. The rubric shown in Exhibit A on the following pages may be useful in doing the group evaluation.

The components of the evaluation are described below:

1. Level of Participation: did all group members make useful contributions?
2. Progress Made: the continual development of the discussion topic with new insights. Did the discussion advance the development of the discussion topic or was the discussion primarily a rehashing of previous discussions?
3. Tone of the Discussion: did the group members help each other in thinking through the issue? Were debates and pointless arguments minimized?
4. Use of Course Content in the Discussion: did the group connect the discussion with the main topics being covered in class (i.e., did the content of the course inform the discussion?)
5. Staying Focused: staying on topic and avoiding distractions. Did the group have a process for bringing itself back on target?

On the back of the rubric is a place for the teacher to record notes on things the group did well and improvements needed. Of special relevance is the section that reviews the progress the group made from the previous evaluation.

A point value may be assigned to the components of the group evaluation as shown. These can then be used to assign a grade to the group's efforts.

The teacher should return the group evaluation to the students at the beginning of the next class. Whenever possible, the teacher should review any points on the evaluation that indicate a need for significant improvement.



**Exhibit A**  
**Group Evaluation** (Front Side) (Provided by the Teacher)

Group Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Discussion Topic \_\_\_\_\_

Evaluation Component	Evaluation Notes	Evaluation Score
1. Level of Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> </ul>	1 = Outstanding 2 = Very Good 3 = Average 4 = Below Average 5 = Unacceptable
2. Progress made	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> </ul>	1 = Outstanding 2 = Very Good 3 = Average 4 = Below Average 5 = Unacceptable
3. Tone of the Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> </ul>	1 = Outstanding 2 = Very Good 3 = Average 4 = Below Average 5 = Unacceptable
4. Use of Course Content in the Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> </ul>	1 = Outstanding 2 = Very Good 3 = Average 4 = Below Average 5 = Unacceptable
5. Staying Focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> </ul>	1 = Outstanding 2 = Very Good 3 = Average 4 = Below Average 5 = Unacceptable
6. Other Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> </ul>	1 = Outstanding 2 = Very Good 3 = Average 4 = Below Average 5 = Unacceptable
7. Overall Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> <li>■</li> </ul>	1 = Outstanding 2 = Very Good 3 = Average 4 = Below Average 5 = Unacceptable

(Back Side)  
Facilitation Evaluation

■ Improvement Needs

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■ Keep on Doing

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■ Progress made from Previous Evaluation

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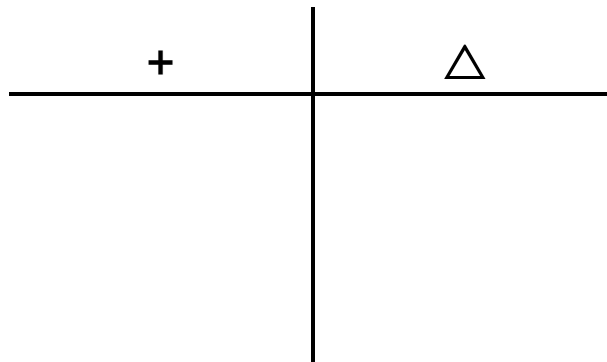
## 6-D A Group Self Evaluation

While the teacher's feedback is critical to determine a grade, students need to be able to assess their own performance and develop their own ideas for improvement. These self evaluations will be the model for what they will be doing after they graduate and no longer have an assigned grade.

The plus/delta (+/Δ) process is a very useful device for students to use in assessing their own performance.

The +/Δ process works as follows:

1. Once per week ask students to stop their discussions with 5 minutes to go in the class.
2. The facilitator places a large T on the board with a + on one side and a Δ on the other side as shown below.



3. Ask students to suggest something they think they did well in the discussion (+), followed by an improvement they think they should make (Δ). Pluses and deltas are added to the chart until all items are listed.
4. The note-taker records these and the group reviews these prior to the next discussion to reinforce the improvement aspect of the +/Δ process.

There is no grade associated with the self evaluation, but the teacher should review the self evaluations and make comments on them as appropriate. Rather than make comments on specific items on the +/Δ lists, the teacher should limit comments instead to how perceptive the students were in their self evaluation.

**6-E****Evaluating the Overall Performance of the Discussion Group**

The overall performance of the discussion group consists of a number of components:

- The daily discussion group grades.
- Performance on specific assignment given.
- The quality of insights developed in the discussion.
- A final report prepared by students about their discussion topic.

The daily discussion grades are simply averaged to make up this component. The teacher may want to drop the lowest 2-3 grades in calculating the average.

In many cases, the teacher may wish to give short-term assignments to the groups. These could be short papers, quizzes, interviews, etc. These assignments may be done as individuals or as a group. When the assignments are done by individual students, the teacher may want to use the average of the individual grades as a group grade. Using the average grade helps to reinforce the group performance aspect of the grade.

The quality of the insights developed in the discussion is more subjective. What is being measured here is how well the students explored the discussion topic. An outstanding grade in this segment would be given when:

- The students discovered important concepts for themselves.
- The students were able to incorporate course content into their discussions in a way that showed connections that were not immediately apparent.
- The students made exceptional efforts in the integration of their many discussions into a set of possibilities that were both thoughtful and useful.

The final segment of the grade is the final report they prepare as a summary of their discussions. (See Section 2-P.) This segment is graded as would be any written document.

The weighting given to each of these components will depend on the teacher's focus.

## 6-F Peer Evaluations/Shadowing

The group discussions are a performance and need to be evaluated as a performance. In previous topics in this section, evaluation instruments are presented for facilitator and group evaluations. The evaluation of each student as a discussion participant is also needed.

The teacher cannot effectively evaluate individual students except in the smallest of classes. Rather than having the teacher evaluate every student, a peer shadow is used. The peer shadow works as follows:

1. Each student in the group is assigned a peer shadow. These assignments are random and anonymous. For one month, the peer shadow evaluates the performance of the assigned student.
2. At the end of each day's discussion, the peer shadow prepares a +/△ evaluation (See Section 6-E) of the assigned student. These are kept confidential at first.
3. At the end of one month, the peer shadow prepares a composite +/△ evaluation of their assigned students.
4. During a class period (or in an outside of class session), the peer shadows share their +/△ evaluations of their assigned students with the entire group. Once the peer shadow has presented his/her evaluation, other students in the group can make comments as well. After the +/△ evaluation is presented, the assigned student is then asked to respond.
5. Each student is then asked to prepare a summary of what they heard and what they intend to do in response.
6. The process repeats each month with new peer shadows assigned.

The peer shadow presentations have a very interesting impact on the discussion group. Rather than create tension as might be expected, the "clearing the air" that occurs with the peer shadow evaluations lets students know how others view their contributions and what they can do to improve.

The teacher should not use these peer shadow evaluations as an element in the student's grade. The teacher should view the student responses and comment on the responsiveness of the student rather than comment on specific pluses or deltas.

## 6-G

### The Role of Attendance in the Evaluation

Student-centered classes have a higher requirement for attendance than other classes. Students need to be in class to demonstrate their contributions to a discussion. Outlined below is a statement on attendance that might be included in the syllabus.

“Your performance as a discussion participant will be evaluated each class period. Students who are not in class will receive a zero for their portion of the group discussion grade. You will be allowed two missed classes over the semester no matter the reason.”

Group discussions don't work very well unless there is a full contingent of students participating. Students need to accept responsibility for attendance in that it affects not only their grade but also their group's grade. Outlined below is a statement on attendance that covers the group aspect of the grade.

“Group discussions don't work well unless the full group is in attendance. The group's discussion grade will be reduced by students' absence.

One student absent = 1 letter grade reduction

Two students absent = 2 letter grade reduction

Three students absent = 3 letter grade reduction

Should four or more students be absent from a group on a particular day, the group members who are in attendance will be assigned to other groups for that day, and the group will receive a zero for the group's discussion on that day. Attendance points will not be deducted for one day selected by the group.”

Students should be encouraged to notify their group members in advance about any class that they will miss.

## 6-H

### The Coaching/Mentoring Aspect of the Evaluation Process

Student-centered discussion classes require a high degree of coaching/mentoring to be effective. The coaching/mentoring process is something that may occur between a specific student and a teacher or advisor. These coaching/mentoring conversations, when they do occur, are often triggered by a particular incident. What makes the coaching/mentoring different in a student-centered discussion class is that the coaching/mentoring occurs with every student on a planned basis.

Coaching/mentoring in student-centered discussions is used to help students improve upon their facilitation skills and their leadership of their discussion groups. Ideally these coaching/mentoring sessions will follow the facilitation experience as closely as possible. The teacher, in the capacity as a coach/mentor, may want to follow the guidelines described below.

1. Elevate specific observations to general principles to provide guidance to the student. The discussion with the student should not dwell on specific instances but use these to make general points that might be helpful to students.
2. Provide feedback on both what the student did well and what needs to be improved.
3. Make the coaching/mentoring a developmental experience. Whenever possible refer to past experiences and discuss the student's developmental growth.
4. Keep the discussion focused on the student's development and not on what went into the grade.
5. Be positive and hopeful but also be firm with the guidance provided.

The coaching/mentoring sessions do not need to be lengthy. A 5-10 minute discussion will work well in most cases.

**6-I****Integrating the Discussion Grade into the Overall Course Grade**

The discussion aspect of a student-centered course is but one element in most such courses. The other aspects of the course typically include what is fairly standard fare in regular courses (e.g. readings, papers, lectures, exams).

There is no need to change the other evaluation components in a course. The only change in the overall course structure is that discussion makes up a component of the final grade.

Exams and other traditional forms of evaluation and the discussion evaluations can be mutually supportive. The discussion evaluations can be a useful assessment of a student's understanding of the course concepts that are hard to assess in written exams and papers. The traditional aspects of the evaluation can provide an encouragement for students to learn the basic concepts of the class so they can use these concepts in their discussions.

How much of the final grade should be based upon discussion activities and how much should be based upon traditional classroom activities? The percentage distribution will vary by how much of the class is devoted to discussion. In most cases, the percent of the grade devoted to discussion activities will range between 30% and 70%. Anything less than 30% probably doesn't give sufficient emphasis to discussion, while anything over 70% puts too much weight on the discussions.



## 6-J Letting Students Find Their Way

Student-centered classes can be very challenging to a teacher who “wants to make the play, rather than be a coach.” Faculty typically are frustrated by observing student discussions that they feel are going off track or even may be based on wrong information. Faculty can also be frustrated in not imparting a thought to a discussion group which could enlighten the discussion. Letting students find their way can be difficult.

When is it appropriate for the teacher to interrupt a discussion group? There are some general rules of thumb which might be helpful in answering this question.

1. Don't interrupt the students' discussion unless you feel that they are going in a direction that is totally off track, and they will not be able to get back on track without your intervention.
2. Don't interrupt the student's discussion when you disagree with a point of view being expressed. Should the point of view be based on some factual error, you can correct the student's error during your subsequent content presentation. Often students learn a lot from mistakes.
3. Don't interrupt the students' discussion even if you find their discussion comments to be offensive or against your own sense of what is right. But during your feedback, comment that the group should explore other perspectives and possibilities.
4. Do interrupt the discussion should you observe behavior that is abusive or threatening or a gross violation of the concept of sanctuary.

In general, the teacher should let the students find their own way and not interrupt them. Corrective measures are best left for the feedback sessions or for the content presentations in class.

## 6-K Conducting One-Month Evaluations

In most classes, students have a reasonable idea of their grade through their test, paper, and homework grades.

In a student-centered discussion course, evaluations are given daily for facilitation and the group discussion. These evaluations are snap shots of the discussions, but they don't necessarily give a good sense of the overall work of the students. Individual discussions can go well, but the group may not be developing a "work product" that is particularly insightful or useful.

The groups can benefit from monthly progress checks. These can be done in class or at some other arranged time. The value of a monthly progress check is that it gives students a sense of how they are doing overall.

The faculty member may wish to review the following topics with the students:

1. How well did the students work through each of the phases in the discussion process (See Section 2-A) scheduled for discussion?
2. Have the discussions been insightful? Did the students develop thoughts that go beyond what would be expected?
3. How has the group performed as a unit? What improvements do they need to make?

The above three questions are answered by the teacher. Once this part of the assessment has concluded, the teacher may then ask the students: "What have you learned from your discussions so far?"

- About the content of the course
- About working together as a group
- About the value of discussion

No grade is given at this time, but the teacher may wish to project a grade the students would receive for the discussion portion of the class.

**Section Seven**  
**The Role of the Teacher**  
**in Student-Centered Discussions**

## **7-A**

### **The Teacher as Facilitator Demonstrator**

The teacher in a student-centered discussion class needs to take on a number of roles that are typically not expected of a teacher in a conventional class. One of these roles is a facilitator demonstrator.

Since students will be serving as facilitators during their discussions, they need to have some guidance in what it means to be a facilitator. During the early part of the semester, the teacher needs to demonstrate effective facilitation practice.

The best approach to do the facilitation demonstration is to hold 2-3 classroom discussions on content relevant to the course. The teacher will need to use a flip chart and demonstrate how notes are captured. The teacher will also need to demonstrate how the inquiry process is managed by the facilitator. This includes making sure that everyone has a chance to contribute. It also includes asking follow-up questions to ensure that discussion points are fully explored.

After the teacher has done the facilitation demonstration, some time needs to be spent in doing a debriefing on what the students observed during the facilitation demonstration. In order to make the debriefing effective, the teacher should ask each student to make notes with observations or questions to present once the demonstration has concluded.

Periodically during the semester, the teacher may wish to do additional facilitation demonstrations when presenting course content. In many cases, the teacher may find it difficult to return to conventional teaching approaches and will shift to a facilitation style of teaching.

**7-B****The Teacher as Discussion Context-Setter**

One of the challenges in conducting a student-centered discussion is to ensure that students have an understanding of the proper context for the discussion. The context in this case is the background for the discussion topic and the questions that should be the focus of the discussion.

The discussion context works best when it is in writing. Exhibit A (on the following page) is an example of what a context document might look like for a discussion.

The teacher should ask students to read the context document and then let students ask questions about what they are to discuss.

The context document has another purpose. When properly developed, the context document can ensure that the discussion will build on what is being presented in the content portions of the class.

## **Exhibit A**

### **Public Policy for Public Discourse in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

#### **Context**

What might it mean to be an “informed” citizen in a 21<sup>st</sup> century democracy? How might citizens partake in civic discourse on public matters? What might be the implications of constricting the flow of public discourse (say, in the name of national security or through economic consolidation of the media)-or of opening it up through new technologies? What might be the implications of an increasingly multi-linguistic society? And, what might be the role, if any, of public policy in all this? The exploration of questions such as these, along with contrasting possible responses, will form the heart of this project on the public policy concerns related to public or civic discourse in a 21<sup>st</sup> century democracy. The focus of the project is on the organic and evolving phenomenon of civic discourse: the ebb and flow of public communication about public matters for public purposes, within the context of a democratic society.

Concerns about civic discourse cut to the heart of what it means to be a functioning democratic society. The very idea of a democratic society requires that attention be paid to whether and how citizens of that society are able to discuss matters of public importance, and whether and how they might be able to share information and ideas about such matters. What are the public matters at the heart of civic discourse? How might such discussion occur, and by whom? A concern for public discourse encompasses not only the ways that citizens may receive information, but also the ways they may discourse has long been a feature of the American democratic experiment. Nonetheless, there are new challenges emerging in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that call for renewed thoughtful discussion. Some of these might have to do with: the evolving nature of communities, evolving market practices and forces, evolving information and communication technologies, and evolving attitudes and purposes. The goal of this project is to develop contrasting conceptual policy possibilities to respond to this evolving area of concern-and to anticipate the possible consequences of these policy possibilities.

#### **Discussion**

To start your discussions, you might begin to think about some of the following.

- What might be some different possible ways to understand “public” or “civic discourse”? And, what might be some of its features or components, such as, what make it “public” or “civic”? Or, who gets to take part in it? What might it mean to be a “citizen”?
- Try to think ahead: twenty years from now, what might be some of the core public policy concerns regarding public discourse?

- Think about some specific issues and see what larger public policy concerns you might find there.
  - You might think about the ways you (or your family or peers) get the information you feel you need to be a citizen, and how this may have changed, or may be changing.
  - You might think about the situation of non-English speaking citizens.
  - You might think about a recent case where “secret” governmental information has been revealed, or conversely, where information is being withheld from the public.
  - You might move from any specific example and ask yourself, what are the bigger questions here? What values might be involved? What rights or responsibilities? Or what social, cultural, or psychological factors might come into play?

**7-C****The Teacher as Discussion Evaluator**

The role of the teacher as discussion evaluator has been discussed extensively in Section 6. This topic will examine approaches that a teacher might use in doing these discussion evaluations. Outlined below are some recommendations for doing discussion evaluations.

1. Sit in a location where you can see as many discussion groups as possible without moving. When you don't have to physically move, you become less "visible" to students and they are less affected by the observation.
2. Maintain a rotation schedule of changing the observation focus from one group to another. In most cases, a 3-4 minute observation cycle per group is sufficient to do an effective evaluation. This cycle also allows multiple observations of each group during each class period. Watch out for focusing too much time on groups whose discussions are more interesting.
3. Develop a system for managing the observation documents. Without some system, valuable observation time can be lost in finding the appropriate observation documents for a group to be observed.
4. Make observation notes throughout the class period rather than waiting until the end of the class. In many cases, evaluation scores can also be given during the last 15 minutes of class even though the discussions may not have ended.
5. Maintain a file of past observations that you can refer to in your current observations. This file can be useful to see whether or not the student is making improvements.

Any teacher who does observation for the first time can be overwhelmed by the experience, especially when there are multiple groups to observe. Eventually the teacher will develop an observation regimen that works.



## 7-D

### The Teacher as Coach

An essential role of the teacher is to coach students to improve their performance as –

- Facilitators
- Discussion Participants (as individuals)
- Discussion Participants (as groups)

Coaching in this context refers to teaching students what is expected of them, giving them feedback on their performance, and creating the environment for students to succeed through the motivation of each student.

Coaching is very different from the way a teacher normally interacts with students. The student's performance is not measured by his/her response to a predetermined evaluation instrument (e.g. exam, paper). Student-centered classes ask students to respond to real time situations using guidance provided by the teacher. Coaching is a process of helping students succeed in situations where they must make real time responses.

The teacher as coach must be able to take a specific situation and make general observations from that situation that can be used to guide a student's performance. The coach must be able to assess whether the student was able to understand the guidance sufficiently to perform better in similar situations in the future.

In a coaching situation, a student's failure to perform is also an indication that the coaching was insufficient. There is a shared responsibility for performance.

The approach a teacher takes in coaching a student needs to vary from student to student. This is often a new experience for faculty who generally don't have much direct contact with students.

**7-E****The Teacher as Integrator of the Discussions  
and the Course Content**

Student discussions may not be much of an educational experience unless there is a tangible connection between the discussions and the course content. The teacher needs to be the integrator of the content and the discussions. This integration process is not a casual undertaking. It needs to be planned and thought through.

The integration starts with observations made by the teacher from the class discussions and the work documents developed by the students. Initially all the teacher needs to do is to make note of a point that needs to be covered in the content portion of the class.

The actual integration discussion in class works best when it has a familiar structure. A structure that has worked well is shown below:

- **Summary of the observation:** Share with students what you saw, heard, or read.
- **Framing of the Inquiry:** Develop inquiries for the class that can be used to connect your observation to the content. These should not be too apparent to students. You want them to have an “aha” moment as they think through the inquiries.
- **Making the Connection:** Once the students have worked through the inquiries, connect the experience they had with the content. Often this is a 10-15 minute presentation on content but with specific reference to what the students have experienced for themselves.

Integration moments should be planned for every week of class. These are often some of the most insightful moments in the course for the students and the teacher.

## 7-F The Teacher as Mentor

The terms mentor and coach are often used interchangeably. For this Guidebook, coaching is used to refer to the support the teacher provides the student during the semester. This coaching role is discussed in section 7-D. Mentoring is used in this Guidebook to refer to an interaction between teacher and student that continues after the course has concluded.

Why is mentoring an important consideration in a student-centered class? The following is a very common scenario.

“You will have a couple of students in class who have rarely distinguished themselves in other courses. They are frightened by the facilitation experience. But when they do their facilitation, they become a different person. It’s almost a magical transformation. These students find their calling. No matter their major area of study, they want to have a career where they can be involved in facilitating groups of people working through issues. These students turn to you for career advice as a mentor.”

How rare is such a student? The above scenario occurs in almost every student-centered class. The facilitation experience and the structure of the class seem to bring out latent talents in a way that doesn’t often happen in regular courses.

The teacher as mentor can support a student in many ways:

- Networking support – the teacher may be able to find persons who do extensive facilitating to help advise the student.
- Opportunity creation – faculty often have professional activities where they work with groups to explore an issue. These are great opportunities for students to observe and participate.
- Continued education – the teacher may help the student evaluate different graduate opportunities to identify those that can be supportive of increased facilitator development.
- Career support – after a student graduates the teacher can continue to be a support in providing career advice and perhaps connections that lead to greater facilitation opportunities.

The teacher as mentor is a role that can be very rewarding for both the teacher and student. Often the students can help the teacher by sharing his/her practical experiences as a facilitator.



# **Section Eight**

## **Challenges for Student-Centered Discussions**

## 8-A Dealing with the Freeloader

One of the fears that a teacher might have about a student-centered class is what to do with the freeloader. Basically the freeloader is a student who makes very limited contribution to a group. The freeloader may display any or all of the following behaviors.

- Rarely has relevant comments in the discussion
- Performs poorly on individual assignments
- Facilitates with minimal personal engagement
- Does an inadequate job of note taking

In most cases, the freeloader can be identified after only a few class periods. Outlined below is a strategy for dealing with a freeloader.

1. Analyze the behavior carefully. What is perceived to be a freeloader may actually be a student who is having trouble coping in a discussion-oriented class.
2. Talk to the student and give specific guidance on changes you expect.
3. Should the student's behavior not improve, suggest to the student that he/she may wish to drop the course.
4. If the student doesn't drop the course but continues to display the same behaviors, document the student's lack of performance carefully to deal with any problems that might result from a bad final grade.

On occasion, there might be freeloaders in more than one discussion group. Should this be the case, you might want to consider forming a new group of those students who are not making a contribution. While the new group may not perform better, at least the freeloader will not drag down the original group.

## 8-B

### Managing Problem Discussion Groups

In many cases, one of the discussion groups in a class can have problems that are unlikely to resolve themselves without your intervention. Symptoms of problem discussion groups include:

- Class discussions that don't go anywhere or rarely go beyond the superficial.
- Personality conflicts among the students that influence the desired tone of the discussion.
- Inadequate performance on assignments for most team members.
- Poor discussion summaries and other work products needed in the discussion.
- Lack of focus on discussions resulting in frequent off-track discussions.

The first step in dealing with a problem group is to talk with them about your observations. The group needs to be given specific guidance on what they need to do to improve.

Next you need to focus on the improvements you requested. The group will be evaluated each class period, and your evaluation should be very detailed and specific.

You may want to suggest an external activity for the group to help them come together. There are a number of both organized and unorganized activities that can be useful.

Let the group know your assessment of their improvement. In most cases, such groups need continual reminders of what they need to do to be a success. Appropriate feedback on a good activity may help them get "over the hump."

One other strategy deserves careful thought. You could break up the problem group and reassign the students to other groups. Or you could ask a strong performing student to join the problem group. If you use either of these strategies, you are likely to affect the group dynamics of other discussion groups. In general these are risky strategies and not ones that are recommended. In effect you are inflicting the problems of one group on to others.

## 8-C

### Giving the Appropriate Level of Feedback

The teacher's feedback is a critical element in the success of student-centered classes. One of the challenges that a teacher faces is how to decide on the appropriate level of feedback.

Feedback that is too direct and specific can have a cowering effect on students. Rather than making judgments based upon their own instincts, they make judgments based upon what the teacher is likely to say to them.

Feedback that is too general can have minimal impact in improving performance. Such feedback can give students very limited guidance on what to do.

Feedback also needs to be adjusted to the student. Some students can accept strong corrective feedback while others cannot. Some students need assertive support, whereas such feedback may not be appropriate for other students.

There are some general rules-of-thumb that can be used in giving feedback.

1. Be specific on what you expect but do so in a way that doesn't destroy the confidence of the student. Feedback which is given in a matter-of-fact manner works best.
2. Don't use feedback to criticize. You can do that by saying: "Here's something you can do to ....." This type of feedback is better than feedback that starts with "You shouldn't do ....."
3. In general, the quieter the student is, the more specific the feedback should be. These students also benefit from feedback that involves an incremental change and not a radical charge.
4. In general, the more outgoing students prefer feedback that gives them "clues" for improvement rather than directive feedback that tells them exactly what to do.
5. When you observe abusive or inappropriate behavior, be specific, and be firm. There should be no doubt about what you want.

Giving the appropriate feedback ultimately rests on the experience of the teacher.



## **8-D**

### **Helping Students Who Lack Skills to be a Success in Discussions**

Student-centered classes ask students to do things they don't often do in more conventional classes. The skills required of students include:

- Describing their ideas orally, without extensive time to think about what they say.
- Helping others work through their ideas.
- Capturing the essence of what is being said in notes for later use.
- Asking questions that are likely to lead to new insights.
- Thinking about issues from multiple perspectives and view points other than their own.
- Going from the specific to the conceptual in framing ideas.

These are all very important skills that are almost never discussed in a classroom. In fact, many of these skills are learned primarily from real-world experience, if at all.

The best way to help students learn these skills is to engage them in reflections which they place in their insight journals. You can take a specific incident from class and phrase it in a way that elicits the students' thinking about the skills they are learning. Self-reflection from actual experience is the most effective way to help students acquire these skills.

## 8-E

### Helping Students See the Big Picture in their Discussions

One of the challenges in a semester-long, student-centered discussion class is the fatigue that often sets in as the semester moves into its later weeks. Students often don't see the big picture, and they feel their discussions aren't going anywhere. In many respects, students in a student-centered class are experiencing the same fatigue they have in any class, but this fatigue can affect their discussions. Outlined below are some things you can do to help them appreciate the big picture.

1. At periodic intervals, remind the students where they are in the overall discussion process (See Section 2-A). These reminders can give them a sense of accomplishment. The students will also have a better sense of where they are going.
2. When possible, share with students short news articles or articles that are relevant to their topic. These written pieces can accomplish two things. They can reinforce the importance of the topic. They can also show students how their ideas match up with what others are saying.
3. When fatigue sets in, spend a short amount of class time on reinforcing what the students are learning. The focus of these class breaks may be on the skills the students are acquiring.
4. Invite visitors to the class to observe the discussions. At the end of class, ask the visitors for their comments. Often visitors can be very useful in helping students see the significance of what they are doing.

Each of the ideas mentioned above can be very useful to help break the fatigue and help students value the experience they are going through.

## 8-F

### Helping Students Put Together a Report

A suggested model for the written report is given in Section 2-P. What makes the writing of a report a challenge in a student-centered class is that it is written by all of the students in the group. This will be a new experience for the students.

The focus of the report is the possibilities the students develop. The descriptions of these possibilities are to be written in a plain or spoken language rather than the more formal language students are used to in their other courses. While spoken-language writing is a new experience for students, they will adjust to it once they have the experience.

The initial draft of the report is prepared by having each student write one of the possibilities. Then have the students engage in a serial editing process. Serial editing is basically a process that asks each student to edit a possibility and then pass it on to the next student for editing. Any student in the group will be the first editor for one possibility, the second editor for another possibility, the third editor for another, etc.

This serial editing process will probably need to continue for 3-4 iterations. The teacher may want to review the student drafts after the second iteration.

The other sections of the report will be written in the same way with one student writing the original content and the other students providing editing support.

Finally the teacher may want to give the students a visual image of the intended audience. The audience in this case will be an average citizen, not the teacher or a scholarly group. This perspective may help students.

## 8-G

### Helping Students Get through Difficult Moments in their Discussions

In general, the teacher should resist the temptation to step in when students are having difficulties. Students need to learn how to resolve discussion difficulties on their own. There are three situations when students can be expected to have trouble.

1. Making the transition from one phase in the discussion process to another.
2. Stalling out on a topic when students are simply lost for how to add to what they have already done.
3. Having conflicts among group members.

Making the transition in phases is always a challenge. In these cases, the teacher may want to meet with the facilitators in advance to help them prepare a discussion catalyst that will make the transition go easier. The teacher should avoid intervening into the actual discussions themselves since students need to learn how to make these transitions. The teacher should be available to students who have a question about the next phase.

Virtually all discussions have a point in time when they stall out. The teacher should not intervene in such moments until it is very clear that no further progress is likely. This may result in long periods of silence or limited progress. But at some point the teacher may need to intervene. When this happens, the best intervention is to ask a question which can prompt a line of discussion that is useful.

Conflicts among group members are common. The teacher should remain out of these conflicts unless they are abusive or potentially harmful (mentally or physically). When the teacher senses the conflict has reached a serious level, the teacher should meet with the group out of class. This meeting should be used to open up the cause of the conflict and what can be done about it. A professional conflict mediator may also be useful in these cases. Rarely do the conflicts rise to the level when the teacher needs to be involved.

Intervention into a discussion should be rarely done and never done without serious thought. As a rule of thumb, the teacher should let a class period lapse before any intervention is done.

## **8-H**

### **Managing Student Comfort Levels**

Students go through a remarkable transition in comfort level in a student-centered class as the semester unfolds. At first, students in a group are not comfortable with each other. They are somewhat reluctant to express their thoughts with “strangers” in their group.

It doesn’t take long for the students to be very comfortable with each other. Discussions become much more open. A humor begins to develop in the group, and a genuine fondness develops among team members.

As comfort increases, students also become less focused in their discussion. Often student discussions digress into personal interests and outside of class activities.

Students will naturally develop their own comfort. The teacher may need to handle situations where student comfort with each other becomes so strong that it distracts from the overall discussion.

The best way to manage these situations is to note instances of this in the feedback given the students. When students see that their performance evaluation is impacted by their distractions, they will learn to keep their discussions on target.