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**Teaching Tips**  
**For Student-Centered**  
**Classroom Discussions**

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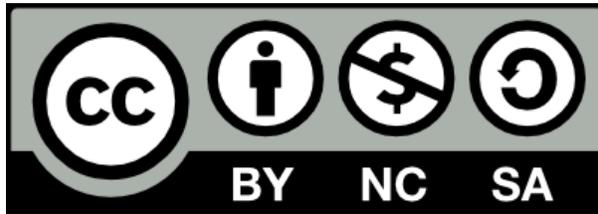
# **Teaching Tips For Student-Centered Classroom Discussions**

**By Jack Byrd, Jr.**

**Edited by Jeff Prudhomme  
And Sue Goodney Lea**

**First Edition, July 2009**

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## Round Robin Introductions

### Use This When

You want each team member to get to know the other team members during the first team meeting.

### The Approach

1. Start with one team member. Ask the team member to introduce himself/herself to the others. You may want to give the team members some guidance for their introductions (e.g. what they like to do in their free time). It would be helpful for each introduction to contain as many personal details as there are persons in the team.
2. Then move at random to another team member. Ask this person to introduce himself/herself. Then ask the team member to identify all of the team members previously introduced and mention one item from each of their introductions. The items mentioned in the “reintroduction” should be ones not previously used in the reintroductions. Should the team member not be able to remember an item, have one of the team members who have already been introduced to list an item.
3. The process continues until all team members have been introduced.
4. At the end of the introductions, make the point that this exercise requires intensive active listening. This is a skill that will be needed as the discussions unfold.

## Shadow Teammates

### Use this when

You want to provide each student with feedback on his/her support of others during discussions. This is an effective way to provide peer-to-peer assessments without the filter of the teacher.

### What to do

1. Place each team member's name on a small card.
2. Describe to the class that you would like to have each of them shadow a team mate for the next X classes (typically one month). At the conclusion of each day, you would like them to do a short assessment of their team mate for that day. More will be said about this in Step (3), below. Then hand out the cards. Tell students to keep the cards confidential.
3. At the conclusion of each class meeting, ask the students to do a brief +/△ assessment of the student they are shadowing using the form in Exhibit A. The (+) column should list something the student they were shadowing did well, such as "s/he kept the discussion moving." The (△) column should list something that the observed student should work on improving, such as "s/he should try harder to include all members of the group in the discussion." You might want to provide a couple of minutes at the end of each class to ensure that this is done. It is important that the students provide feedback to one another over several class meetings.
4. At the end of the month, ask students to develop a summary +/△ for their shadow teammate. Also, ask each student to prepare a response to the following statement:

"My shadow team mate would be terrific if he/she would..."

5. During a subsequent class, ask each student to give his/her shadow teammate a summary of the +/△ assessment and the response to the statement described in Step (4), above. This would be done in a group meeting. Once the shadow team mate report is given, ask other student to comment on the assessment. When all of the students have had a chance to speak, ask the student being evaluated to respond.
6. For homework, ask each student to reflect on the experience. These questions might be useful as prompts
  - What did you learn from your peer's assessment of your performance?

- Giving feedback to others and responding to feedback from others are critical skills in any work situation. How would you assess your ability to give and receive feedback
- Do you think your group will be better as a result of this experience?

Note: This is often one of the most useful classes for students. They are learning valuable skills in this process. In almost all cases, these discussions will lead to more effective group and individual performance.



## Paint Ball Facilitation

### Use This When

Paint ball facilitation is a fun way to get students to take appropriate facilitation action when they see disruptive behaviors occurring in their group. This is also an effective tool for keeping students constantly alert to the types of behaviors that can be disruptive.

### The Approach

The steps in doing the paint ball facilitation feedback are as follows

#### Preparation

Introduce students to the game of paintball. "A group of paintball players are equipped with special guns that shoot a paint pellet that is visible when it hits someone else. Players wear clothes that protect them, including helmets. The paint will wash off of the clothes. Players are positioned around a course, and the object is to hit other players with a paint pellet before you are hit."

Then tell students, we will be using colored stickers rather than paint pellets. When the facilitator corrects a disruptive behavior, a sticker is placed on the student(s) who were displaying the disruptive behavior. Once the students are tagged with the sticker, they need to discontinue their disruptive behavior.

#### Understanding what to do in response to disruptive behaviors

Have the students read [Exhibit A](#). This document contains the most common forms of disruptive behaviors.

#### Conduct a disruptive behavior challenge session

During one of the regular group discussion sessions, hand out slips of paper to group members that describe a disruptive behavior you want each of them to exhibit sometime during class. Each student will have a different disruptive behavior.

Ask the facilitator to take appropriate action when he/she sees a disruptive behavior taking place. If the group feels the corrective action was appropriate, the facilitator can then tag the person with the sticker. Once tagged, the person should quit displaying the disruptive behavior.

Eventually all students in a group should be tagged.

**Note:** While this exercise may seem to lead to chaos, the discussions during these sessions are often some of the best ones that students will have. The disruptive behavior role playing helps the students become less uptight about the discussions.

**On-going use**

Throughout the semester, the facilitator should take corrective actions as described in Exhibit A. When the group sees that an appropriate action is taken, the facilitator should be able to tag the offending student. This is a gentle and fun way for peers to correct each other. You should also comment that when a facilitator is allowed to tag a student, this will be noted in the student's assessment as a facilitator.

## Exhibit A

### **Disruptive and Difficult Behaviors**

#### **Someone who remains passive**

This person might not participate or might answer, "I don't know." He or she may have ideas to contribute, but worries the ideas might not be acceptable to the group. Just say they can jump in if someone else's idea triggers something. In other words, pass over them. They usually jump in at some point. If they don't, call on them and probe for information. Also you may want to give this person the first chance to contribute ideas.

#### **Someone who is continuously negative**

If someone dwells on problems, ask how he or she might solve those problems. Record the person's ideas and move on to the next person. If the person can't think of a solution, move on. Don't dwell on any one person or problem for extended periods of time because there is only so much time available in the session. Keep the group focused on moving forward. If someone persists with a single issue, ask the group whether they want to address it.

#### **Someone who rambles or dominates**

During a pause in the monologue, the facilitator should jump in and make a summary statement of what was said. Then, the facilitator should either say that we need to move on or ask how the rambling relates to the discussion. Again, record the idea, if any, and move on. If the person continues, ask the group if they think it's worthwhile to focus on this issue, given the other items that need to be covered. If the person continues to dominate against the group's wish, talk to the person at break. Point out how much time he/she is taking and what effect it is having on the group. Help them recognize the cues sent by other group members who want them to stop (e.g., glazed eyes, looking at their watches, etc.).

#### **Someone who just isn't with the discussion**

This can occur when a person seems to be focusing on something other than the discussion. The person could be troubled by something or the person could be thinking about something else. When this happens, ask for the person's specific thoughts rather than waiting for the person to volunteer information. You can also ask the person to help you on some task. If these actions don't work, you may want to talk to this person at a break to see if there is something you can do to help.

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**Someone who attacks others personally**

This rarely happens. When it does happen, the facilitator should direct it away from personal issues to systemic issues. For example, if someone says, “Betty is ineffective and should be replaced,” the facilitator should respond with something like, “We don’t want to focus on individuals. Rather, we need to look at what types of things any person in that position might do to help the overall functioning of the group and what types of things others might do to help that person.” In other words, focus on issues, not people.

**Someone who is overly helpful**

Sometimes a group member will be inappropriately helpful to the facilitator. For example, he/she might summarize statements for you, but you notice that they are not accurately reflecting what you said. They are usually trying to control the direction of the group by trying to align themselves with the more ‘formal power’, namely you. Point this out to them if it becomes too frequent. Help them state their own opinions and make it clear that you will not allow yourself to become their mouthpiece. Also make it clear that you do not ‘control’ the group’s decisions or actions. Therefore, they need to align themselves with the entire team in order to influence the process.

**Someone who starts side conversations**

This can be particularly disruptive to the group and needs to be addressed. If the group sets ‘no side conversations’ as a ground rule, simply remind the offender of the ground rules that were established by the group. If it happens several times, try to vary the use of the following tactics:

- Move closer to the offenders and gesture for them to be quiet.
- Ask the offenders whether they heard the current discussion.
- Ask the offenders their opinions on the current discussion.
- Ask the group how they feel about side conversations.
- Talk about how destructive alliances can be to building a true team.
- Talk to the offenders at break.

**Someone who is distrustful of the process**

This often happens during the early stage of the process and shouldn’t be overlooked. These persons might not understand the big picture. Spend time explaining it to them or have the group discuss why this particular process was chosen. Let them know why they were chosen to participate. This person also might not understand the technical process you’ve chosen for problem-solving. Explain it in more detail. Also, ask the person to trust you through the early stages until they can see the process unfold.

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**Someone who repeats points already made**

This usually happens because the facilitator has not been paraphrasing and summarizing points or have not written them down on a flipchart. People tend to repeat when they are afraid their point was not captured or understood. Write it down and ask the person whether you've adequately summarized what they have said. People also repeat themselves to try to convince others to agree with them. They think, "If you really were listening to me, you'd see the value of my point of view and you'd agree with me. Therefore, I'll repeat myself to give you another chance at listening." What they don't understand is that others have listened carefully, but they still don't agree. You might simply say to the repeater, "I get the feeling that you don't think people are listening to you. Could someone paraphrase what was just said?" Once someone paraphrases, ask the group whether they want to resolve the underlying differences or agree to disagree and move on. Speak to the person privately if they persist.

**Someone who is distracted**

This often occurs when a cell phone rings or buzzes. The person is more focused on the caller than what the group is doing. The group may decide to put all cell phones on a table away from the discussion. If this isn't appropriate, the facilitator may say something like "if the call is that important, maybe you should step outside and respond to the call." Typically the person will put away the phone and others will be less likely to let a call interrupt the discussion.

## The Nominal Group Technique (NGT)

### Use This When

The nominal group technique is a useful approach for generating a number of responses to a question in a short period of time. The advantages of the nominal group technique are that:

- It is a structured approach to generating a number of responses
- It is very efficient with respect to time
- The approach also gives you a sense of the most valued responses
- The approach works well for shy participants

### The Approach

The steps in conducting the NGT are as follows:

#### Preparation

- To start the meeting, develop a question you want the participants to respond to.
- You may want to add some qualifications to your question that it can “bound” the responses. Typical qualifications include:
  - Time horizon considered
  - Acceptability – are any options out of bounds?
  - Financial – are there any cost considerations?
- You will need a room for this where you can display flipcharts. A large blackboard will also work, but you will need to be careful how you write the responses since all responses will need to be visible throughout the process.

#### Introduction

- When the meeting begins, introduce the question. Discuss the question to be sure all the participants understand it. Allow participants to clarify the statement if they feel it is necessary. Next, give a brief review of the steps in the NGT.

### Silent Generation

- Ask the participants to spend approximately ten minutes individually writing down as many responses as possible to the question. Ask the participants to limit their responses to a list of 5-7 words or phrases.

### Round Robin

- Tell the participants that you will call on each person to contribute one of their responses. If possible call on people in random order. Continue until no one has additional responses to contribute. Write each response on a flipchart and number each one separately. Tell participants that they can add something to a previous response if the person who gave the previous response agrees. Do not allow discussion of the ideas at this time. The important thing is to get all the responses recorded. As a rule of thumb, you should expect 2.5 – 3 times the number of responses as you have participants.

### Discuss and Combine Responses

- Ask the participants if any of the responses need to be clarified. At this point, similar responses may be combined. Before combining responses, make sure that everyone agrees to the combination. Explain that this step of the NGT is critical because you will be asking them to prioritize their responses.

### Silent Individual Ranking

- Ask people to rank their priorities on a sheet of paper. Ask them to work individually and silently. The number of answers to prioritize depends on how many ideas were generated. For example, if 35 ideas were generated, you might ask them to prioritize the top five. If only eight were generated, you might only prioritize the top three. See the table below for guidance on how many responses to rank.

Total Number of Responses	Rank the Top
1-20	3 Responses
21-30	4 Responses
31-40	5 Responses
41-50	6 Responses
51-	7 Responses

## Group Voting

- List on a new page of the flipchart all of the numbers of the response that were generated. Leave a blank space behind each number. Ask each person for their first priority and give it the highest number of points (e.g., if you asked the participants to pick five responses, the first priority gets five points, the next one gets four points, etc.). Write the number of points next to the appropriate response on the flipchart. You may want each person to record his/her responses on the flip chart. This works well when you are short on time. A typical voting is shown below:

Response Number	Points
23	5
12	4
1	3
5	2
6	1

← The most valued response

- Add all the points for each response. The response with the most points is generally the top priority. Responses to be considered further would be those who had the highest vote total or those which had a lot of votes even if the total vote wasn't high. Typically you will find clustering of votes around specific responses. Also you will typically find a distinctive break between the high vote responses and the other responses.

## Wrap-up/Action Items

- Once the top priorities have been identified, tell the participants the priority responses will be the agenda for future discussions.

## Expanding Dimensions

### Use This When

You would like students to investigate an expanding set of dimensions for a specific topic you are studying. This is a good exercise when you want students to discover more dimensions of a topic before you explore these dimensions in class (e.g. exploring what various dimensions of the concept of “civil rights” might be). This can be especially helpful when you’d like students to open up their thinking to a broader range of possibilities by moving them beyond a focus on minimal possibilities or the dimensions closest at hand. It can help students to uncover more levels of meaning or more dimensions of a topic than they might otherwise have found.

### The Approach:

In short, you’ll have students work individually and then in groups of three (along the lines of a “think-pair-share” model) to explore three different levels at which they might describe the possible dimensions of the topic under discussion.

1. Ask students to get out three sheets of paper
2. Explain the three levels at which you want them to explore different dimensions of the topic under discussion

#### **Level 1:** Dimensions at a basic level

These are dimensions at the most fundamental level. These are things you’d take for granted, things you’d just expect to be there as part of the basic elements of whatever you’re discussing (like the way you’d expect that the car you’re about to buy comes with wheels). These might be aspects of the topic that could be overlooked because they seem almost too obvious to mention. You might think of these as the minimal or entry-level dimensions. In the civil rights example, a level 1 right might be “the ownership of property.”

#### **Level 2:** Dimensions at a performance level

These are dimensions at the level that might be targeted for performance or that might be deemed essential. These are key features where you’d likely focus your attention, dimensions that you’d really be looking for (like the way you might look for a car that has a certain level of fuel efficiency). These might be aspects of the topic that represent current societal thinking or core expectations. In the civil rights example, a level 2 right might be “equal opportunity for employment.”

#### **Level 3:** Dimensions at an excitement level

These are dimensions at an emergent level or that are on the horizon. These are features you might not think to look for, perhaps because they

push beyond our current expectations (like finding out the car with good mileage also comes with a navigation system). These might be aspects of the topic that are just beginning to develop or that we might think of only in an optimal situation. They might be things you didn't even think were possible or things that make you say, "wow." In the civil rights example, a level 3 right might be "universal access to a publicly funded college education."

3. Ask each student to generate a set of dimensions for the topic area and place these dimensions in each of the three levels as they view them. Continue this silent generation process until you see that most students have finished writing. Generally this takes around 5 minutes.
4. Ask students to work in groups of three to share with each other their individual lists and develop a new list that represents the combined thinking of the group of three students. Each of the students should record this new list on a separate sheet of paper. Continue this step until it seems that most groups have finished. Generally this takes 10-15 minutes.
5. Ask students to repeat this process again, but this time the group of three students will be different. In most cases you can put students in groups based upon alphabetical order of their last names. You may want to give them some items to think about as they do this step. These reminders are used to stimulate additional thoughts. The same process is followed as in step (4) above. Each student should end up with a new list of dimensions. This step generally takes about 10-15 minutes. This includes time for students to rearrange where they are sitting in the classroom.
6. (*Optional*) If you have time, you may wish to make a list of the dimensions from all of the groups. Ask each group to give you a dimension. Record the dimension on the board and see if other groups had this dimension. Also record the level where each of the groups placed this dimension. You might want to give your own thoughts as these are being given. The time for this could vary. You may only have a chance to explore a few dimensions in more detail.
7. Conclude class with the homework assignment below.

### Assignment

Ask students to re-examine their list of dimensions and prepare a final list as they view the dimensions. They can change them from the list they had in class. For each item on the student's list, ask the student to:

- Provide a description of the dimension
- Provide a rationale for the level assigned to it.

**Example Response**

Below is an example response from a classroom exercise to have students identify communications expectations they might face in our society today.

**Level 1**

- The ability to develop a report that provides the insights and action steps needed by decision makers.
- The ability to develop and make presentations in small group settings with confidence.
- An understanding of when/what/how to communicate important information to those you work with.
- The ability to function effectively in meetings and in discussion with others.
- The ability to speak and write, using correct grammar.
- The knowledge of basic computer skills such as Word, Excel, PowerPoint, etc.
- The ability to listen and comprehend during a conversation.

**Level 2**

- The ability to facilitate problem solving sessions.
- The ability to present your idea to a wide variety of people at different levels of the organization.
- The ability to provide positive and corrective feedback to those you work with and supervise.
- The ability to talk with others and obtain important information.
- The continual process of active listening.
- The ability to participate in social conversation.
- The ability to maintain a positive attitude toward group efforts.
- The ability to take initiative on projects that are not directly assigned.
- The ability to use appropriate visual aids during presentations.
- The ability to use appropriate body language/gestures during communication.
- The ability to resolve conflict among group members.
- The ability to network among peers and colleagues.
- The drive to push group members to perform above average.

**Level 3**

- The ability to interpret subtle messages from others.
- Maintaining an ongoing active reading program.
- The ability to communicate across cultures/bilingual.
- The ability to achieve consensus in difficult situations.
- Possession of an advanced vocabulary.

## Good Words

### Use This When

You want to further develop a possibility from its initial formulation into a more complete possibility. Often initial possibilities can be very promising but the thinking behind them needs to be developed a bit more robustly. Often a group will try to flesh out the possibility with specific details when what is really needed is further conceptual development.

### The Approach

1. Show the group the Good Words listed in [Exhibit A](#). Ask the group whether they have any other good words they want to add to the list. Also you might see if anyone in the group needs a clarification on any of the words.
2. Split up the words among the groups so that each person gets 3-4 words to work with. This is best done randomly. (Put the words in a bowl and have the participants select their words.)
3. Ask each participant to expand the description of the possibility in a way that explicitly accommodates each of his/her good words. A person might describe how the possibility relates either positively or negatively to a given word, or how it might connect to a transformed or unusual sense of that word.
4. Ask the participants to prepare a brief outline of their possibility and place the description on a piece of flip chart paper. Have the flip chart pages displayed around the room.
5. Ask each participant to describe the thinking behind their version of the possibility.
6. Once all the descriptions are given, ask the group to think about specific features of the various possibilities that they think could fit well into a more robust description of the possibility. Make a list of these specific features.
7. The facilitator will then take the input from step (6) and incorporate that into a new description of the possibility for review at the next meeting.

## Exhibit A

### Good Words

Justice	Harmony
Fairness	Demanding
Integrity	Hopeful
Openness	Freedom
Efficient	Dignity
Effective	Protecting
Responsive	Independence
Transforming	Collaborative
Accountability	Responsibility
Innovative	Creative
Breakthrough	Intelligent
Improving	Conserve
Elevating	Trust
Adjusting	Flourish
Caring	Sharing
Sustainability	Maximize

## Avatar Discussions

### Use This When

You want the group to discuss an issue from perspectives other than their own. This can be a good exercise when you feel that your students are hemmed in by their own personal perspectives. You might feel that the students' discussion is too narrow or overly defensive of particular limited viewpoints. This approach can help to expand class discussions to include perspectives that would otherwise be overlooked or excluded. It can also help to open up new dimensions of the topic under discussion or to enable the discovery of new possibilities.

### The Approach

#### Avatar Creation

1. Hand out the Avatar Creation sheet to each student (Attachment A).
2. Ask students as a group to complete the top half of the document. Provide them with the following guidance:
  - We want varied perspectives. Think about the kinds of perspectives you would find interesting in a discussion – or that might be useful for really opening up a discussion. You might think about what perspectives have been missing from the discussion so far (or from typical discussions of the topic).
  - We want realistic perspectives not caricatures or fantasies. You should be able to imagine a real person with this background.
3. Create as many avatars as there are students in the group.
4. Once the top half of the creation document is completed, ask each student to take on the role of one of the avatars. Then ask the student as an individual to complete the second half of the avatar creation document ([Attachment A](#)). Caution the students that we want the descriptions of their avatar to be believable and respectful of the avatar's perspective as worthy of consideration. Tell students that the bottom portion of the avatar document should not be shared with others in their group.
5. Instruct each student to be prepared to take on the role of his/her avatar during upcoming class discussions.

[continued on next page]

### Avatar Discussions

1. At different times throughout the semester ask students to conduct their discussions as an avatar group. You may want to do this:
  - To expand on the dimensions of an issue
  - To help the students view an issue from perspectives different than their own.
  - To test possibilities as they might be viewed by others
  - To stimulate new thinking and new discoveries from the students
2. At the conclusion of each of these discussions, ask the students to reflect on what they learned from this discussion that they might not have learned from their regular classroom discussions in their own personal roles.

### Notes

1. You may want to do step (4) of Avatar Creation as a homework activity
2. Ask students to prepare a summary recap of the top half of the Avatar Creation document so that students can relate to each other better in their new roles.

## Attachment A

### Avatar Creation

#### Do this as a group

1. Name of the person:
2. Where does the person live (community, state):
3. What is relevant demographic information:
  - Age
  - Gender
  - Race
  - Ethnic Origin
  - Religious Affiliation/Level of Religious Activity
  - Educational Achievement
  - Family Status
  - Occupation
  - Annual Family Income
  - Health Status
  - Political Identity/Political Activity (Voter Registration, etc.)
  - Others (Disabilities, Community Involvements, etc.)

#### Do this on your own

1. How would you describe the person's personality?
2. What makes this person angry?
3. What (if anything) is this person passionate about?
4. How would you describe this person's lifestyle?

5. What would a typical workday be like for this person?
6. What would a typical weekend be like for this person?
7. How informed is this person about public affairs, whether local, state, national or global?
8. Where does this person get information about what is going on outside his/her immediate community?
9. What does this person talk about with
  - Co-workers or those in her/his circle of social interactions
  - Friends
  - Family
10. What (if any) organizations does this person belong to? How active is she/he?

## Serial Editing

### Use This When

You want the team to develop a written document that is truly reflective of the team and not just the product of one of the team members.

### The Approach

1. Divide the contents of the report into sections so that each team member will have a section to write.
2. Ask each team member to prepare his/her section of the report prior to the class session when the editing will be done. Give the team members some guidance on page length for each section. Also tell the team members to double space what they write to facilitate the editing.
3. During class, divide up the sections among the team members so that each student will be editing another student's work. Ask students to edit their section of the report.
4. After a student has finished editing a section of the report, ask the student to pass on their section to the next student. This step will continue until every student has edited each section of the report.



