Leading Group Discussions

Leading a group discussion can be a daunting task. Unlike a presentation, you do not have complete control over how the discussion will go. However, there are some ways you can make your discussion flow more easily and productively.

Starting the Discussion

Simply stating the topic for discussion is too vague to get people to discuss it in depth. To start a discussion, you need to research the topic and define the main issues to present to the group. This could be done by presenting an overview, using a case study, a role play, an interview or a video clip from a film.

What if there is no response from the group?

This is probably the greatest fear of someone leading a discussion. Remember, though, that people need time to think if they are going to answer a question which involves taking into account a variety of issues. Don’t be afraid of silence. Wait for people to gather their thoughts. Avoid the temptation to respond to the question yourself or ask a question on another subject. A way to get around a slow moving discussion could be to give out your discussion questions prior to your session so that people have time to reflect on them.

Directing the Discussion

A useful structure for a discussion is to introduce the topic generally and focusing on two or three main issues that you have identified in your research. Then the discussion can be directed to these issues with separate questions and discussion time for each issue. Set times limits for each section so that you cover all the issues mentioned.

Asking Questions

There are various types of questions which may help to promote discussion.

- The open ended question on an aspect of the topic. This type of question calls for a range of responses but it is not so vague that people go completely off the track. For example: “In what ways do you think this school’s curriculum design meets the needs of the students?” Rather than “What do you think of the school?”

- The focal question. This may have a limited range of responses but group members are required to give reasons for their responses. For example: “So, do you think on the evidence that capital punishment is a good deterrent from crime?” This type of question is good especially for controversial subjects.

- The brainstorm. This is where the group members are asked to generate as many ideas and opinions about an aspect of a topic as they can within a short period of time. The idea behind this is just to let the ideas flow without stopping to decided whether they are feasible/suitable or not. For example: “What
would be a really creative way to teach shapes to Prep students?"

- Finally, the follow up question is a vital tool in discussions. This is where the discussion leader asks people to clarify/explain/add to their answers. This could be used to draw out someone who just given a vague answer ("Could you expand on that") or to include other people in the discussion ("What do other people think? Peter?").

**Responding to the discussion**

Don’t feel that you have to respond to all the comments in a discussion as not all will be relevant or helpful. However, all comments should be acknowledged, thanking the contributor and moving back to the point or on to another point. Concentrate on those contributions which are most useful to your agenda. Listen carefully to what is said so you can link to previous comments later in the discussion.

Summarising briefly the points made in the discussion helps to keep people on track. You could summarise at the end of each section of the discussion and also make an overall summary at the end.

However, it is difficult to direct the discussion and keep things in mind to summarise at the same time. You may allocate those two tasks to different people in the group leading the discussion or people could take turns leading or summarising throughout the discussion. Another way is to ask members of the group to summarise at the end of a section.

**Encouraging Appropriate Involvement**

Inevitably, there will be some members of the group who are too willing or too reluctant to join in. These are ways you can help them be involved more appropriately

- You can cut the talkative person off politely by rephrasing what they just said and asking others to respond. Or, if one person jumps in quickly all the time, thank them for their participation and ask them not to respond immediately to give other people the time to think.
- For members who are too shy or too unprepared to respond, ask for their opinion but not straight away. Give them time to get comfortable and to pick up some information from other responses first.
- Politely stop people who interrupt and point out that it is someone else’s turn to speak. However, you should go back them soon after and let them have their say.
- Don’t allow people to be rude or abusive to each other. Stop the discussion immediately and return to the main points of the discussion. Be assertive (but not aggressive).
- Interrupt people politely if they are talking off topic and remind them of the question again to get them back on track.

**Wrapping Up**

At the end of the discussion, wrap it up with a final summary. You may also want to ask the members of the group what they considered to be the main points which came out of the discussion.

**PHOTO REFERENCES**