

Guidelines on Class Discussions

Participating in discussion does not necessarily mean talking a lot or showing everyone else that you know or have studied a lot. Good discussion participation involves people trying to build on, and synthesize, comments from others, and on showing appreciation for others' contributions. It also involves inviting others to say more about what they are thinking.

Demonstrating good participation in a discussion: Below are some specific behavioral examples of good participation in discussion:

- Ask a question of a peer that draws out their thinking.
- Make a comment that underscores the link between two people's contributions & make this link explicit in your comment.
- Use body language (without comic exaggeration) to show interest in what different speakers are saying.
- Contribute something that builds on, or springs from, what someone else has said. Be explicit about the way you are building on the other person's thoughts.
- Make a comment indicating that you found another person's ideas interesting or useful. Be specific as to why this was the case.
- When you think it's appropriate, ask the group for a moment's silence to slow the pace of conversation to give you, and others, time to think.
- Make a comment that at least partly paraphrases a point someone has already made.
- Make a summary observation that takes into account several people's contributions & that touches on a recurring theme in the discussion.
- Ask a cause and effect question - for example, "can you explain why you think it's true that if these things are in place such and such a thing will occur?"
- Find a way to express appreciation for the enlightenment you have gained from the discussion. Try to be specific about what helped you.

Discussion ground rules: Aside from how to make good contributions to the discussion, here are some other guidelines:

The 2-person rule: Once you have spoken I will ask that you not make another contribution until at least 2 other people have spoken – unless someone asks you directly to expand on your comment.

Expectations: Here is what I expect from you and what you can expect from me:

Showing your preparedness: I expect that either during the discussion or in the self-assessment that follows, you will demonstrate that you read and grappled with the readings.

Affirm & Confront: Please come prepared with one item from the reading that you wish to affirm and discuss, plus one item that you wish to confront and discuss.

Being quiet during discussions: Silence is allowed and will not be interpreted as mental disengagement, lack of intelligence or lack of commitment. Speech will not be interpreted as a sign of intelligence, extreme engagement or superlative diligence.

Instructor's role: If needed I will guide the discussion with some questions, but I will be working hard to keep out of the way of your ensuing discussion (this is tough for a teacher). I will be making notes as you talk about things I hear, and I will reserve 5 minutes at the end of each discussion to offer my thoughts. Unlike regular lecture, where your questions are directed to me, I ask that you treat each other as a resource for answering questions and clarifying things.

Post-Discussion Assessment: The purpose of discussion is to flesh out your ideas on the subject and expose you to the thinking of others. Especially if you prefer to be a listener during discussions, this is your chance to show me what you have gained. This is due the day after discussion. Emailing this to me is fine, but please send an attached document (.doc or PDF) that will print neatly.

Post-Discussion Self-Assessment & Learning Audit:

- A) Rate your level of preparedness for the discussion. Give yourself a score out of 10 and give a sentence or two of explanation.
- B) Consult the discussion participation examples (near the top of the previous page) and then rate your level of engagement during this discussion. Give yourself a score out of 10 and give a brief explanation.
- C) Did you focus your efforts more on listening or talking?
 - If listening was your focus, give details about how your perspective changed over the course of the discussion. Since you did not make your preparation and participation obvious to me in the discussion you will have to do so here. If, for example, you didn't speak at all during class, your response to this part will need to be much more extensive.
 - If talking was your focus, give me some reminders about how your comments contributed to the direction of the conversation.
 - Regardless, remind/inform me of what your affirm/confront items were from the WarmUp.

As a result of today's discussion ...

- D) What do you know that you didn't know this time last week? What can you do that you couldn't do this time last week? What could you teach someone else to know or do that you couldn't teach them this time last week? You can answer each of these separately, blend them together or just answer one of them more thoroughly.

Many of these ideas regarding discussion are adapted from work by Stephen Brookfield.