Discussion Techniques

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Group Dynamics Seminar

Goals of discussion

- an increased curiosity about the subject area
- more positive perceptions about the value of the subject
- higher ratings of the course
- increased time spent reading materials related to the subject
- higher attendance at course sessions
  - Rasmussen, 1984

- increased general and specific knowledge and skill in research, science, and math

Discussion problems to avoid

- Several participants dominate the discussion. The others are passive, and, often, resentful.
- Sometimes the discussion flows well, but more often it bogs down and loses its spark.
- The discussion goes off on tangents making it difficult for the workshop leader to pull things together.
- Many participants seem bored/look as if they're eager to have the discussion stop.
  - Rasmussen, 1984
- Most of what's said is by the mentor.
- The students are going down an unproductive or wrong line of thinking.

Different Types of Discussion

- Divergent (Creative) Thinking
  - Brainstorming
  - Roundtable discussion
  - Question posted, write comments/inquiries
- Problem-solving
  - Pose a question, answer a question
  - Think-pair-share
- Sharing (vs. Generating) Information
  - Individual/pair presentations
  - Have formal reporter(s)/recorder(s)

Divergent Thinking

- Want everyone contributing ideas
  - watch for “loafing,” hesitancy
  - encourage a sense of safety (set rules at beginning about no criticism!)
  - need specified recorder, switch off
  - specific time limit?
  - iterate between thinking times and idea proposal times (kaleidescope method: Businessballs.com, 2006)
- Theory: sharing creative ideas lead to more creative ideas; but:
  - high stimulus yields high results from “high thinkers”
  - low stimulus yields low results from all
    - Valacich, Jung, Looney (2006)
  - people may wait for others and forget ideas

Problem-solving

- Encourage preparatory work
- Overcome student's fear of 'answering'
- Teach students how to ask questions
- Pay attention to how questions are phrased
  - **low level**: requires only rote memory
  - **high level**: requires analysis, synthesis, and evaluation
  - **convergent**: implies there is a single right answer to a question; risky to answer; requires more time to organize an answer
  - **divergent**: there are a number of plausible answers; safer to venture a viewpoint; allows for more spontaneity in offering responses to the question
  - **unstructured**: wide open; requires time to organize an answer
  - **structured**: directs the learner to specific approaches/areas as a means of arriving at an answer; narrows the learner's focus to arrive at an answer more quickly
  - **straightforward**: singular in nature; allows learners to focus on one issue at a time
  - **multiple**: learners may not know what is being asked of them
    - Rasmussen, 1984

Information Sharing

- Encourages preparatory work
- Allows for specific individual responsibilities
- Allows for a division of labor and can utilize individual strengths
- Students can practice presentation, teaching, and recording skills

Discussion methods balancing-act

- Individual reflection time
- (Sub)group discussion

- Individual contributions
- Group work

- Idea generation
- Problem solving
- Record-keeping/Information sharing
- Presentation-making

Discussion mentors key-points

- Set discussion structure at the beginning
- Write down all points/questions
- Continuously scan for verbal and non-verbal cues that someone wants to participate/is losing interest
- Watch types of questions and presentation of questions (own and students')
- Encourage a supportive climate
- Expect progress to be gradual
  - Rasmussen, 1984

Citations

- Businessballs (2006). Kaleidoscope brainstorming process. *http://www.businessballs.com/kaleidoscopebrainstorming.htm*
- Rasmussen, R. V. (1984). Practical discussion techniques for instructors. *AACE Journal, 12*(2), 38-47.
- *Valacich*, J., J. Jung, & C. Looney (2006). The effects of individual cognitive ability and idea stimulation on idea-generation performance. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice, 10*(1), 1-15.