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 (kaleidoscope 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