

Tips for Facilitating Discussion Groups & Brainstorms

Project 540, Students Turn for a Change

Project 540 is a national high school civic engagement initiative, housed at Providence College in Rhode Island.

Tips for Facilitating Dialogue Groups

- **Have people sit in a circle:** This allows students to see each other.
- **Introductions:** Allow everyone to introduce themselves.
- **Equal Time Sharing:** After introductions, take the next 5-10 minutes and divide it equally among the number of participants in your group. This gives each person in the group a certain amount of time to speak. Have someone keep time.
- **Don't interrupt:** As each person speaks, all others in the group should be listening without interruption. If anyone should begin to interrupt, quietly ask him/her to wait his/her turn and tell the person speaking to continue.
- **Try to encourage, not force participation:** For many people, silence is a sign of thinking rather than disengagement, and you will need to keep this in mind when approaching some of your classmates who seem reluctant to join in conversation. Remember also that everyone has a choice of whether or not to participate in these dialogues. Keeping all this in mind, it is still worth trying to get all members of your group to talk at some point. Simply going around the circle and asking each one of your classmates to add something at any particular point might do the trick.
- **Appreciate:** Wherever possible appreciate participants for their contributions.
- **Wrap up:** Use the final five minutes for wrapping up the conversation during which everyone discusses the closing question. Using an equal-timed listening approach, give everyone the opportunity to answer the question as a way to close the session.
- **Consider smaller groups if conversation stalls:** Ideally, Student Dialogue groups offer an opportunity for practicing good group listening and talking skills. Occasionally, however, it may prove equally or more productive to divide students into groups of two or three in order to prompt further conversation.
- **Asking for and gaining the support of classroom teachers:** Many school participation plans call for Student Dialogue Groups to occur during class time. In such cases a teacher will very likely be in the classroom from the outset, and you can use this to your advantage. Consider asking her or him for the following assistance:
 - **Setting the tone:** Ask the teacher to remind students to take each other seriously, and to keep the tone of their conversations positive and productive.
 - **Timekeeping:** Have the teacher signal you at the mid-point of a dialogue, as well as when you are within five minutes of the end of a conversation.

- **Dealing with seriously disruptive students:** Ask the teacher to help you manage students who are consistently undermining the Student Dialogue group process. You need not go at this alone!

Some suggested ground rules:

- Be attentive to the speaker
- Do not judge
- Respect everyone in the group
- Listen more, offer less advice
- Openly appreciate people
- Make eye contact
- Accept the opinions and feelings of others
- Everything said is **confidential**

Tips for Brainstorming

How to Brainstorm

- **Let the answers flow:** Once the brainstorm question is posed, allow students to say any answers that come to mind. Brainstorming is all about unclogging our thought processes and not censoring our ideas because we think they might be wrong.
- **Respect everyone's ideas:** No one in the group should make fun of or dismiss any ideas during a brainstorm. This is meant to be a process that generates a lot of thinking that might not actually get adopted; but even saying something silly out loud can allow for the play and creativity that will produce new ideas.
- **Repeating is okay:** Even if someone already said an idea, don't be afraid to reiterate it or say it a little differently.
- **Answer now. Evaluate later:** Wait until the entire group has completed the brainstorm before you start to evaluate it. While the brainstorm is still going, simply focus on facilitating the conversation.

Why brainstorm?

- **Free thinking:** Brainstorming allows students to run with their ideas, to free associate, and let new thoughts flow.
- **Group building:** Brainstorming gets a group thinking together. People begin to play off of one another's ideas.
- **Everyone contributes:** Brainstorming gives everyone a chance to speak. Even those who are shy or more inhibited can speak out in the group without fear of judgment.
- **Cooperative products:** Brainstorming produces a list of ideas that don't belong to any one person. They belong to the entire group.