



Techniques for Facilitating Group Discussion: How to get everyone participating

Simultaneity techniques

These techniques get everyone participating at the same time:

- Pair-share: give students the opportunity to practice forming, explaining, and defending their ideas in a low-risk space (with a partner rather than in front of the whole group). This technique also encourages active listening to other points of view.
- Quick-write: ask students to write down their thoughts in a given time frame. These may be structured in response to a prompt or more general (e.g., impressions or themes).
- Timed thinking: provide safeguarded time so that students can formulate their ideas. Let them know that discussion will resume after a given time (e.g., 60 seconds), and stick to that.
- Choral response: have the whole class respond in unison. This is best done when a response is one or two words, but can also expose students to a myriad of views or approaches to a prompt without consensus.



“Conversational moves”

Give each participant a slip of paper with a “conversational move” (see reverse) and ask students to practice their move during that day’s discussion. When the class is over, you can distribute the entire list of moves so students see the variety of ways to participate.

Creative grouping

Whole group discussion can be intimidating for some students. As a result, the more socially confident or aggressive may dominate the conversation. It can help to break students into smaller groups and encourage more even participation. You can also assign a particular role to each group member (e.g., the problem poser, theme spotter, devil’s advocate, detective, umpire) so students can each speak from a specific perspective.



Hatful of quotes

Choose several quotes (either directly from the readings, or that are related to the topic being studied) and type them out. Make enough copies so that each student can select a quote from a hat. Give a few minutes for everyone to think about their quote, then have each student read their quote out loud and comment on it. Because there are multiple copies of each quote, the students who go later will have had their quote already read, so they can build on previous comments, and/or dispute what has already been said.

Circle of voices

Put students in groups of three or four. Give each member a couple minutes of uninterrupted time to respond to a prompt. When everyone has had a chance to speak, the discussion becomes more free-flowing, but an individual can only respond to what someone else says. This technique can short-circuit grandstanding, as there is no asserting one’s own ideas independent of what others have said.

Circular response

Have students get into a large circle. Give each student three minutes to i) paraphrase the comments of the previous person, and ii) make remarks that strive to link to what the previous person said. You can also assign a couple students the role of “summarizer” who will report on the collective remarks at the end.

Adapted from *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, by Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, Jossey-Bass, 2005.



Conversational Moves

Ask a question or make a comment that shows you are interested in what another person has said.	Ask a question or make a comment that encourages someone else to elaborate on something he/she has said.
Make a comment that underscores the link between two people's contributions. Make the link explicit.	Use body language (in a slightly exaggerated way) to show interest in what other speakers are saying.
Make a comment indicating that you found another person's ideas interesting or useful. Be specific as to why this was the case.	Contribute something that builds on what someone else has said. Be explicit about the way you are building on the other person's comments.
Make a comment that at least partly paraphrases a point someone has already made.	Make a summary observation that takes into account the comments of several people.
At an appropriate time, ask the group to pause for a minute or two of silence to slow the pace of conversation and give everyone an opportunity to think.	Find a way to express appreciation for something you have learned from the discussion. Be specific about what it was that helped you.
Disagree with someone in a respectful and constructive way.	Ask a question that encourages someone else to clarify something he/she has said.

