Hampton notes on leading discussions

NCEAS Institute

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Notes on discussion facilitation approaches that are frequently used at NCEAS

**Round-robin** – useful for hearing everyone’s voice in equal doses, and/or brainstorming. Can be a LONG process and tedious enough that it should be used sparingly in big groups. For challenging questions on which you want to maximize creativity, consider posing the question further in advance (e.g. the night before).

1. Pose the **question**
2. Give everyone several minutes to **write** down their answer quietly, aiming for a compact phrase easy to capture on a board
3. Go **around the room** asking each person to answer in a short phrase captured in writing on the board in a numbered list:
   1. Rule 1: Go around room in a specified *order*
   2. Rule 2: *New* answers only – if your answer is already there, or close enough, just say “pass”
   3. Rule 3: “*No idea is a bad idea*” – this exercise is for information gathering only so there is no critique or discussion – clarifying questions are OK but be careful that it doesn’t lead into longer discussions or evaluation
   4. Rule 4: *Synthesis waits till the end* (e.g. “#2 and #12 sound the same, can we put them together?”)
4. **Synthesis** – usually the leader helps to identify which seem the same, and might be combined, needs consent of those who presented the ideas – careful that this discussion doesn’t take too long or go off the rails.
5. If prioritization is a goal of the discussion, it’s common to use **votes**, but it is important to emphasize that the vote is not (or almost never) intended to create a final solution, rather it can focus the group’s discussion usefully
   1. Take a few minutes to have everyone silently consider ‘what are the top ideas’ or ‘highest priority items’ currently on the board, and independently *write the numbers* on separate “sticky dots” or sticky notes. (this is key to do while sitting alone, as group-think can kick in when they go up to the board to vote and see where the popular votes lie…)
   2. Everyone places their *sticky notes on the board* next to the corresponding number – no changing votes during this phase
   3. Leader *tallies* votes on high priority items – these may or may not be the ‘winners’ in the end, but the exercise can help to focus discussion (e.g. if two people are passionate about a topic and prepared to do something useful on it, the group may be very enthusiastic about having them pursue it even though not everyone thought it was highest priority)
6. A **break** is usually needed right about here, for leaders or facilitators to figure out what this means for the rest of the group process and suggest path forward
7. Next phase is normally a discussion of the **actions** that now proceed from the discussion (e.g. what steps to take to pursue high priority items) – perhaps breaking into small groups focused on specific tasks or high priority ideas

**Paired discussion exercises** – very useful when there are topics that people really need to discuss aloud and refine them.

1. Pose the **question**
2. People **pair** off, usually by numbering around the room (though some situations may call for similar-minded people to pair up in order to refine their common perspective or plan)
3. Together they take some time (5 - 30 min depending on the complexity) to **discuss** and collectively develop an answer to the question
   1. Each may make a ‘pitch’ to the other
   2. Collectively decide on an answer to present to group, taking care to note the areas where they may disagree
4. Back in the larger group, one of the pair presents the answer in “**round robin**” style
5. Next phase is normally a discussion of the **actions** that now proceed from the discussion – perhaps breaking into small groups focused around specific tasks or high priority ideas

**Writing exercises** – useful for gathering perspectives on topics that need some deep reflection, or for collective writing of a document. This can be very good in small groups.

1. Pose the **question** or the writing goal
2. Ask individuals to **write** an answer in a defined period of time (e.g. 5 min)
3. **Pass** the papers to the left or right
4. Ask people to spend some designated time **editing** or making comments on written documents – focus on solutions and improvement, rather than simply identifying problems
5. When it arrives back to the origin, allow each person to spend some designated time digesting the comments and editing it into a **final** document
6. Depending on the point of the exercise, you may now choose to:
   1. Have each person verbally *present* the idea to the group (set a time limit), followed by voting or outlining action items
   2. *Collate* the documents for your next purpose (e.g. if each person were writing different sections of a document), but usually the group is eager for at least a quick *verbal exchange* about what they learned in the process (set a time limit)

**Open Discussion** – the most common exchange at NCEAS. Set a *time limit* for it and a *goal*. Observe *ground rules*, and be sensitive to dominance by certain speakers. When time is up, a leader should *summarize* whether and how the goal was achieved, and if it was not achieved, then outline a plan to reach the goal.

**The “parking lot”** – excellent ideas that are totally off-topic frequently emerge in discussion. Don’t squash them but don’t let them take you off-topic in the moment

1. “Is this an idea for the parking lot?”
2. Write it on the board designated as the parking lot.
3. Revisit it before the end of the day, creating a plan for it to be addressed – e.g. a small group may choose to discuss it over lunch and report back to the group

**Ground rules** – establish ground rules at the beginning of the discussion if they have not been otherwise made clear, are an understood part of culture, etc. Effective ground rules are typically enforced by the participants, not just the leader. Some rule-breaking is natural, unavoidable, and sometimes even highly productive - but adhering to the ground rules should be a collective goal.

Sample:

1. Listen.
2. “Step up / step back.” People who talk a lot should try not to dominate discussion, people who don’t typically talk as much should speak up if they have something to say.
3. Respect others’ opinions.
4. No side conversations while someone is speaking.
5. Don’t interrupt (but don’t use this ground rule to hog the floor either!)
6. Start and end on time.
7. Stay focused on the group activity – i.e. no email or personal texting – if you have to take care of something at a certain time, let your colleagues know beforehand and step out to do it.
8. Computers generally closed during discussions.
9. In critiques, aim to improve the ideas at hand not to just refute.
10. Own it – take responsibility for the quality of your participation.
11. Take a break if you need it. (If everyone is taking breaks, the leaders should probably go ahead and call a break!)
12. Summarize the finished and unfinished business at the end of the session.