

GROUP DISCUSSIONS

In the best circumstances, conversations allow people to share their ideas in order to create new understanding for everyone in the group. Have you ever been in a conversation where all the group members were listening to each other, interested, and enthusiastic? These are the situations that lead us to those aha moments when we understand something in a new way. The big puzzle is, what are those circumstances that allow people to feel comfortable to share their personal opinions and ideas with others? And that allow isolated and individual thoughts and opinions to synthesize into new and fresh ideas. How could we have conversations that energize the members and make them feel important, included, and engaged? It is a group discussion.

Elements of a good discussion

First, it's important that you come to the conversation prepared. Often the topic or issue of the conversation is given beforehand. Familiarize yourself with as much background information that you can so that you'll have some reliable facts and information to contribute to the conversation. **Secondly**, when the group meets make sure that where and how you're sitting makes everyone feel comfortable and part of the group. Everyone should be on the same level, should have eye contact with each other, and the desk should be cleared of any distractions. **Thirdly**, know the purpose of the conversation and help the group achieve it. It's important that the group has a common goal so they can move toward it together. Stay focused on the topic, make comments that are relevant, encourage your group members to do the same. **Fourth**, listen to understand. Be honestly interested in what others have to say. Believe that you have something to learn from them. Give yourself quiet time to think about the information that's been said and ask follow up questions if you don't understand. **Next**, communicate clearly, try to have your ideas organized in your mind before you share them with the group. Give relevant and specific examples that illustrate the point you want to make. Use language cues to help the listeners follow along. Look for the listeners' gestures that communicate things like agreement or disagreement, confusion, or even boredom, and adjust what you're saying accordingly. **Sixth**, think deeply.

Research has shown that by applying, analyzing, and evaluating concepts, people will learn it better and will remember it longer. Challenge your group members and yourself by asking interesting questions. **Seventh**, be dynamic with your voice and gestures to bring positive energy to the group. Use your voice to emphasize important ideas by saying them louder and longer. Keep everyone's attention by saying some things fast and some things slowly, or in a high pitch, or in a low pitch. Use your eyes, hands, arms, and your smile to make gestures that keep the group members engaged with what you have to say. And lastly, be humble, positive, and respectful. Truly believe that everyone you will ever meet knows something that you don't, and act accordingly. Avoid being the person who has all the answers and tells others where they're wrong, instead be someone who's open-minded and admits there's a lot that can be learned. Respect others by not interrupting and by responding positively and relevantly to their ideas.

Problems in Group Discussions

In this lesson, we are going to have a look at how to have a smooth discussion. You already know that a discussion should involve teamwork. Everyone should put in the same effort and work together to construct a good discussion. Of course, many things can go wrong when you're working in a team or a group, that is just the nature of interacting with people. In this lesson, we are going to look at some of the common problems that can arise in a discussion, and how to prevent them. Three common problems that may occur are.

Getting off track, uneven participation, and a bad attitude. First is getting off track. This is very simple. When you are playing a game, you need to keep the ball on the field. Getting off track in a discussion is like a ball going out of bounds. It's really very easy to get off track in a discussion. Here's a discussion about Doping in Professional Sports. Sometimes, people just aren't interested in the topic, so they talk about something else. This student isn't even close to being on topic when he says, hey, I heard a new restaurant opened across the street. Have you tried it? Sometimes people aren't exactly sure what they should be talking about. So they never get on the right track to begin with like when this student says, I don't get it. Are we supposed to be finding solutions or just looking at causes? And sometimes the discussion takes an interesting turn, and everyone is very involved but they've gone off track. Like when this student references a movie he saw. It relates to the topic, and the others are interested in hearing about it. They start asking him questions, but they don't get back to the main thread of the discussion. The main solution to getting off track is just to be aware of where the discussion is going. You can remind the group to stay on track with phrases like, I think we're getting a little off topic or we are running short on time, so let's get back on topic. Which is a little more direct or, please keep to the point everyone which is firm and direct.

Another common problem in a discussion is uneven participation. In a good balance discussion everyone contributes about the same. There are two main problems that can occur. One is talking too much; one person shouldn't dominate the entire conversation. The other is not participating enough, everyone should contribute. The person who doesn't say anything is hindering a good discussion just as much as the person who talks too much. There's nothing to respond to. There needs to be talking, listening, and turn-taking, From everyone. First, be aware of your own participation. Be sure you add your ideas, but be sure to listen too. You may feel like you can't find a good moment to jump into the conversation. And sometimes there won't be a space. You're going to have to interrupt. Use eye contact and body language to signal that you want to jump in. And/or you can say something like, I would like to add an idea, or, can I say something here? Or before we go on I want to say. These are all good ways to interrupt and jump in with your ideas. You should be aware of how much you are participating, but if you noticed that someone else is dominating the discussion, or someone's not saying anything at all, don't be afraid to speak up. A lot of the time people don't realize how much they are talking. Say something like, that's interesting but we haven't heard from John yet, or let's make sure we hear from everyone. And feel free to invite others to speak. You can say things like, hey John, what do you want to say about this? Or simply, John, what do you think? To try to get everyone involved.

The third problem we are looking at is a bad attitude. A bad attitude can mean many things, it can be a general lack of motivation or a disinterest in the discussion. It can mean not taking the topic seriously, joking around too much, or distracting others from the task at hand. And, most problematic, a bad attitude can mean frustration and anger when there's disagreement. This can really ruin a discussion. You can be aware of your own body language during a discussion. But what do you do if other members of your group are looking bored and not participating. Well you can invite them to share their ideas by saying things like, what do you want to say about this, or maybe even, come on work with us. But keep a friendly tone. You aren't going to get anyone to talk if you scold them. Sometimes all it takes is a direct invitation to speak. You can have a friendly attitude but take the discussion seriously. Be a good listener, make eye contact and show respect for each member of the group. If someone is joking around too much, don't be afraid to tell them to stop. But usually, you can just set the tone and others will follow. Finally, it is normal and completely okay if there is not agreement in a discussion. The goal is to explore a topic. Agreeing isn't necessary, and not agreeing actually improves some discussions because different viewpoints make people think. Don't let yourself get frustrated or angry during a discussion just because other people don't think the same way you do. Don't get personal and don't take things personally. There are many polite ways to disagree. The important thing is to show respect and allow others to express their ideas. In the United States we say, we'll just have to agree to disagree. How you interact with other members of the group is a vital part of a successful discussion. Your behavior sets the tone, and there are many things you can do and say to steer your conversation in a positive direction. Stay on track, aim for balanced participation, and maintain a good attitude, even when there is disagreement. Hopefully, following these ideas will ensure smooth sailing for your discussion.

Preparing the Discussion

Before we talk about academic discussions, let's take a moment to talk about building houses. Which house will be better? The house that sits on a strong foundation or a house with no foundation at all? Obviously, it's the house with the strong foundation. Building a strong foundation for something is called Laying the Groundwork. Group discussions are similar to houses. You have to lay the groundwork too, but what's the groundwork in a Group Discussion? It's your pre-discussion preparation. If you don't prepare, your discussion could be a disaster. Participants don't have much to say and this makes for very short, and unsatisfying conversations. Preparation can prevent this problem. Let's look at some ways to prepare for a group discussion.

Reading is the key to helping you prepare to talk. When you do this reading, you must read actively. This means reading with an engaged mind. Here are four strategies that will help you to get the most out of your pre-discussion reading. Mark the text. Take double-entry notes. Note key vocabulary and make list. First, don't just read the text, you need to react to it. An academic text is an argument. And when you read it, you need to think about and react to this argument. It's like having a conversation with the author, but in your head. One great way to do this is to mark the margins of the text with some symbols. If you read something you agree with, put a check mark

next to it. If you don't agree with an idea, put a x. An exclamation mark can be used for new, surprising or memorable ideas and important points to discuss can be marked with an asterisk. Also, you can write a question mark for questions or unclear ideas and a pound sign for ideas that contradict, or challenge your expectations. If you mark your text. Then during the discussion, you can easily find ideas that you can comment on or ask questions about. Another way to prepare is to take double-entry notes. First, draw a line down your paper. On the left side, you'll take notes on the author's argument. On the right side, you'll write your personal reactions. What is the authors view point? Record it on the left. How does the author organize the text? What are the parts of argument? For each of those parts, what support does the author give? It's important to indent your notes to show the hierarchy or importance of ideas. And again, it's important for you to react to this argument.

On the right side, write some of your own personal reaction to the ideas in your notes. You can use this comments when you need ideas or point to discuss. A third way to prepare is to know key vocabulary from the text, especially if the discussion is not in your native language. If a word is a keyword related to the topic, write it down and listen to the pronunciation online, so that you can confidently use the word in the discussion. Note the part of speech of the word and lookup the word's meaning. If you really want to remember the word, write it in your own original example syntax. These things will help you remember key vocabulary when you're talking and you'll feel more confident expressing your ideas in English. Finally, a fourth option for preparing is to make a short list of things you'd like to say or ask about the topic. First, list points that you'd like to make during the conversation. However, be flexible and open to change. Someone might change your mind during the conversation and these points may become irrelevant. That's what a discussion is all about. More importantly, make a list of questions you'd like to ask about things you don't know or would like to hear other people discuss. Questions show that you're trying to learn from others and that you're open to new possibilities. If you use one or more of these strategies to prepare, you're so much more confident going into the discussion. You'll understand more and you'll be much more likely to participate.

Exercise

A. Following are two examples of two students' discussion preparation reading. Which is better and why? The both read material on "Water Crisis" for group discussion.

Would these double-entry notes be useful during an academic discussion?

Notes	My reaction
Water security = 1 of biggest probs of 20th cent.	
2050: high pop. countries in Asia will be w/out 1/4 of needed grain	Interesting.
2013: Year of H ₂ O cooperation (UN)	Cool!
Read Elsevier	

Notes	My Reaction
Water security = 1 of biggest probs of 20th cent.	
① Effects	
• 2050 - high pop. countries in Asia w/out 1/4 of needed grain	This is a scary prospect! How would we handle this?
• Drought = #1 threat to food supply → deaths than any other nat. disaster	
② Drawing Atten. to the Prob.	Why does this not receive more media atten.?
• 2013: Yr of H ₂ O coop. (UN)	Good. Corporations need more involvement
• \$175K for clean H ₂ O projects	

B. Comment on the usefulness of the following for the group discussion.

Points to Make	Questions to Ask
1. This is a social justice issue → there is fresh H ₂ O, but the people who need it most are the least likely to have access to it	1. Why doesn't this issue receive more media attention?
2. Corporations & gov'ts need to take a great role in clean H ₂ O initiatives	2. Should there be repercussions for gov'ts that won't cooperate?

Points to Make

1. Enough fresh water for the planet, but the problem is that it is mismanaged.
2. One of the reasons this is that water is an international issue, but the solutions on a local level do not take into account the global issue.

Questions to Ask

1. What are potential ways to consider the problem on a larger scale?

Critically read the following article and use the discussion preparation method to prepare for your group discussion. The topic of your group discussion is “The Multi-layered Education System of Pakistan”.

A government school and an O-level school are two extremes of the stratified education system that exists in the country. Which one of them will children end up in depends on how much money their parents have.

A rough estimate of the various layers that make up urban education brings forward eight categories of parallel systems that have been functioning for years - Madrassahs, government schools, English-medium schools, cadet schools and colleges, O- and A- level schools, the Aga Khan University board, government colleges and public and private universities.

In the absence of any formal tab, each of these schooling systems devises a different curriculum and fee structure. As a result, each institute attracts a certain social class, and year after year, churns out batches of students, who share life experiences completely alien to each other.

According to a survey titled 'Education in Pakistan' conducted by the Strengthening Participatory Organisation, "Madrassahs, Urdu- and Sindhi-medium schools and English-medium schools cater for different socio-economic classes and further increase the alienation that exists between them.

The system is unjust as it distributes the most lucrative and powerful jobs advantageously to the elite, which is educated in English-medium institutions. Meanwhile, the Madrassah-educated people and those who fail in Urdu-medium schools join the increasing army of the unemployed, who use the idiom of religion to express their defused sense of being cheated of their rights. Hence, the unjust system of schooling might increase Islamic militancy in Pakistan that will be as much an expression of resentment against the present policies of the ruling elite as the commitment to Islamising the society."

Professor Jaffer Ahmed, the director of the Area Study Centre for Pakistan Studies, has a similar perspective. "The stratification in education is creating two nations within the country with no communication bridge."

Officials in the education department say there are 2,800 government schools in Karachi. Private schools are even greater in number. "There are about 6,000 registered private schools, and a conservative estimate will reveal that there are 4,000 unregistered private schools in the city," said Syed Khalid Shah of the All Private School Management Association.

Education at government schools comes free of charge, but the standards are such that even a poor man prefers to send his children to a small-scale private school.

In survey carried out by the Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi titled "Urban Trends in Education", it was discovered that only 34.8 percent fifth grade students at government schools in Karachi could

read English sentences and solve three-digit division sums. Only 47.8 percent of them could read an Urdu storybook.

The figures for fifth grade students at private schools were relatively higher, but not satisfactory as 51.4 percent could read an Urdu storybook, 91.4 percent could read English sentences and 62.9 percent could solve three-digit division sums.

The same survey also pointed out that the disparity among private and public sector schools was the highest in Karachi in comparison with Lahore and Peshawar. Of the total percentage of students enrolled in schools, 26.5 percent attended government schools and 70.8 percent private schools.

A brief history

According to the state policy, taxes should be spent on educating students in Urdu and Sindhi languages only. This had been the practice in schools which operated in the 60s and 70s. Teaching continued in the mother tongue till fifth grade, after which it was carried on in both English and Urdu.

It was stated in the Strengthening Participatory Organisation survey that it was during Ayub Khan's time that cadet colleges were first constructed. The medium of instruction there was English, and the reason given for the armed forces to step into the field of education was the "need to produce officials, who could step into the military bureaucracy".

These institutes provided education at a subsidised rate, and were situated in state-of-the-art buildings. After nationalisation in 1972, the standards of government schools suffered a serious blow. It was then that O-and A-level schools began to spread. The market gap for quality education was captured by a number of private schools of all sizes that mushroomed in the city.

On the other hand, the Madrassah is an educational institution that exists with every other mosque, even in remote villages with no schools.

More often than not, parents send their children to these 'boarding schools' to ease the burden of extreme poverty.

The Aga Khan Board was introduced in 2003, and offers both matriculation and intermediate education. It follows the national curriculum and claims that its fee is "less than one-third of O-and A-level schools" but the standard is the same.

Pakistan might be the only country with an education system as layered as this and produces children completely alienated to each other. Here, one child has no bench to sit in a classroom and the other has access to lush green football stadiums. In a situation like this, one is forced to ask that if the constitution guarantees that all citizens are equal, why are some more equal than others? By Sidrah Roghay (The news)

How to Start the Discussion Conversation?

Let's look at actually getting the talking started. First, remember, a conversation is not a competitive sport. The goal is not to plow over everyone to get your point across or to dominate the conversation. If anything, an academic conversation should be a team endeavor, with equal effort and even participation from all. So go in with a collaborative attitude. So the first step is to get settled into a position where all participants are able to see each other. You may have to move chairs and desks to reposition yourselves. A circle formation is ideal, that way everyone can see each other. Avoid negative body language such as crossed arms. Try to be aware of your body language. You should clear everything you don't need off of the desktops. There shouldn't be sweatshirts, backpacks, or even large drinks creating a wall between group members. If you don't need your computer or phone for notes, it's a good idea to put those away too. They're just distractions. This is much better. So now you're set up to talk. The next step is to introduce yourself.

In the United States, handshaking is common when you meet someone. But if this seems too formal to you or you've been sitting next to the person in class for weeks already, a handshake is not necessary. A friendly smile works great in any introduction. It's time to get down to business and start talking about the topic. Look at your materials. What are the discussion questions? Make sure everyone in the group agrees on what needs to be discussed. It's very important to address the question. A really common problem in discussions is going off topic or not hitting the target. It's really important that all group members agree on what should be discussed. Let's say the question is, discuss the causes of the water crisis, and your group talks about how to conserve water. Well, this isn't a cause of the crisis; you have missed the target. Or say the topic is, discuss possible solutions to the high cost of university tuition. And then your group ends up talking about how hard it is to pay for college, well, it may be true but your goal was to discuss solutions. Again, you've missed your target. If the question is, discuss the advantages and disadvantages of social media, a good idea is to start by writing two columns in your notes to list advantages and disadvantages. This way, you know that your discussion will hit your goal. To sum up, make sure you have a good arrangement so everyone can see each other and participate equally. Then introduce yourself to establish a friendly environment, and so you can use each other's name during discussion. And finally, make sure everyone understands the discussion topic so that your conversation achieves its goal. Now you're ready to start your conversation.

Constructing Conversation in Discussions

There have been some pretty fantastic buildings constructed in the world. Each one of these buildings had someone who followed a set of steps to get the job done. One essential step is to build a firm foundation. The foundation supports the building by lifting it above the ground, by keeping moisture out, and by resisting the Earth's movement around it. A building can crumble if the foundation is not firm. Another step is to have a blueprint of the building. The builders need to have an idea of what the building is supposed to look like. The blue print guides the construction and gives focus to the people involved in the process. Lastly, in the construction of any stable

building, each brick or piece of wood needs to be placed intentionally upon the last. That's how progress is made, by building on what already exists. In this short lesson, we will develop the idea of how the construction of a discussion is much like the construction of a building. And then we'll emphasize how important it is to build on the ideas of others. Just as a solid building needs a firm foundation, so does a solid conversation.

The foundation of a house includes steel rods and concrete, the foundation of a conversation includes background knowledge of the discussion topic and an understanding of the value of the discussion. Background knowledge can be developed by doing the assigned task related to the topic as well as taking the initiative and doing some independent research on your own. Knowledge of the topic will allow you to contribute information and ideas that will elevate the conversation. Having knowledge of the topic will also allow you to understand the scope of the discussion, and will help you detect irrelevant information that could sneak into the conversation. An understanding of the value of the discussion can be developed by asking yourself, why am I in this discussion group? What are some of the benefits of being in this discussion? Some responses may be that the discussion will deepen your understanding of the content, that it will be a chance for you to build community as you get to know the viewpoints of your group members. Understanding the value and purpose for what you're doing provides the foundation to resist obstacles that can collapse the conversation, such as apathy, disagreement, etc. Just as a solid building requires a blue print to guide construction, a discussion requires a clear task. The task is what specifically needs to be done, such as responding to a set of questions and reporting it back to the group or sharing ideas on a particular topic or making a decision or judgement on something.

The task guides the development of the topic and it provides focus for all the group members. Just as a brick needs to be placed intentionally upon the last to make progress on a building, comments in a discussion need to build on and refer to comments made by group members for good ideas to develop. There are a couple of reasons why this is important. First, by acknowledging comments made by your group members, you strengthen the spirit of the group as you show that their comments count and that they're being heard. Secondly, building on the comments of others usually requires critical thinking, which as we've discussed previously, adds depth to any discussion. As you build on another comment you can analyze it and break it into parts and comment on those parts. You can synthesize it with your own ideas or evaluate it and discuss its strengths or weaknesses. Lastly, building on the comments of others simply moves an idea further. Let's build fantastic discussions by following these three simple steps. Build a firm foundation. Be clear about the task your group needs to accomplish. And build on the comments and ideas of others.

Elaboration in Discussion

Elaborate means to add more. When you elaborate in a discussion, you add more details to your answer. In a discussion, you bring your ideas and opinions to the table. You want your contributions to be generous. The way to be generous in a conversation is to elaborate, or add more to your answers. You want to fill in all the details and give your listeners enough information

to understand what you mean and to have plenty to respond to. How can you know if bringing a detailed response or an insufficient response to a conversation? Well, you can be aware of the characteristics of comments that lack elaboration. There are many reasons why a discussion comment may lack elaboration. Here are just a few common ones. Insufficiently elaborated responses can be too short, they can be vague or not specific, or they can just be a repetition of what you've already said.

Let's look at responses that are too short. In a discussion on GMOs, genetically modified organisms, a short comment could be, well, I think we need GMOs. This person does not explain his answer. Why do we need GMOs? What are their reasons? How are they beneficial? The other people in this conversation would not be convinced. Maybe he has a good point in mind, but he hasn't explained or elaborated enough to convince us. Another type of insufficiently elaborated comment is the vague comment. Well, I think GMOs are an important aspect of modern life that can be found anywhere at any time. This guy is using a lot of words, but the words don't really mean anything, they're not specific. The other conversation partners would have nothing of substance to respond to. It's like giving your friend only the whipped cream that goes in the middle of the cake without actually giving them any cake at all. Other insufficient comments are repetitive. The speaker may repeat what he or she has already said. GMOs will be an important food source when our population grows. The world's population grows every year, and GMOs will provide us with enough food. This comments repeats the same point twice, just in different words. This is called paraphrasing. And paraphrasing is not elaborating. You'll bore the other people you're talking to. It's kind of like taking a bunch of identical cakes to a party. What's the point of that?

In a conversation you have two jobs when it comes to elaboration. The first job is to elaborate on your own responses. You need to support and explain your ideas. You could do this with facts, like statistics or examples from a text. Anecdotes, those are stories. Analogies, which are comparisons between two things. And hypotheticals are imagined examples. You want to explain your ideas well so that people will clearly understand what it is you're trying to communicate. Your second job in a conversation is to ask your partners to elaborate on their answers, especially if they've offered a response that is short, vague or repetitive. You can do this through asking the right kinds of questions. You could try asking, what do you mean by? Or, can you be more specific? Or, I'd love to hear more about. One last thing you should remember about elaboration, don't elaborate too much. If you start to elaborate too much, you run the risk of taking over the conversation. Or of making your response disorganized. Know how to use just the right amount of elaboration and you'll satisfy your conversation partners.

Critical Thinking in Discussions

Have you ever studied ocean life? There's another world underneath the ocean, the deeper you go the more interesting and unusual the fish become. Ordinary common looking fish such as mackerel, cobia, catshark and krill, live on the surface toward the top. As you go deeper, the fish get more interesting and out of the ordinary. Fish like the rat tail fish, the grouper eel, the black swallower and the angler fish live deep down in the ocean. The various types of fish in the deep

sea look like they're from another planet. It's also true that the deeper that you go in conversation, the more interesting your conversation becomes. What I mean by going deeper is to have discussions that require critical thinking.

To have discussions where the participants are thinking independently, and coming up with new ideas. In this lesson, we will talk about how thinking can be divided into six different levels, which of those levels are considered critical thinking, and how you can incorporate these levels of critical thinking into your discussions. A psychologist named Benjamin Bloom categorized thinking into six levels. Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation. The lower level skills, knowledge, comprehension and application, involve repeating facts, summarizing information that's been received, and carrying out a procedure that's been taught in a familiar situation. Basically, with lower levels of thinking, information is presented and the learner needs to repeat it. Lower level thinking skills do not require that the learner develop new thoughts.

Higher level thinking analysis, synthesis and evaluation on the other hand trains people to think independently. These three levels are considered to be critical thinking. These skills help learners to see patterns and connections, to identify problems and find solutions. To think of alternative possibilities, to see different perspectives. To apply skills to new situations and to support an opinion with relevant evidence. Research consistently finds that when learners practice a concept using higher level thinking skills, they remember it longer and apply it more easily to new situations. In academic conversation, it's important to know and understand the facts, however, thinking deeply and critically make the conversations more memorable and more meaningful. Read the following questions, which of them do you think will be interesting and engaging to discuss in the discussion group? Each of these questions represents one of the six levels of thinking. Let's learn a little more about each specific level of thinking now.

The first and the most basic level of thinking is knowledge. At the knowledge level of thinking, the learner recalls information. An example of a knowledge level question is, what is genetically modified food? Some questions you can ask to your group members could begin with one of the following questions starters. The second level of thinking is comprehension. At the comprehension thinking level, learners show their understanding of ideas. An example of a comprehension level question is; how would you summarize the reasons that GMOs have been created? Some questions you can ask your group members could begin with one of the following question starters. The third level of thinking is application. At the application level of thinking learners used their knowledge state learned in a familiar situation. An example of an application level question is, what would be the best approach to convincing the government in the United States to require the labeling of genetically modified food. Now onto the higher level thinking skills. At the analysis level of thinking, learners break down information into small parts to find the relationship between them. An example of an analysis question is, what do you think are the main reasons that the United States do not require GM food to be labeled? The fifth level of thinking is synthesis, at the synthesis level of thinking, learners put parts together to form a whole. An example of a synthesis level question is what evidence is there that concludes that GMOs are dangerous? The highest level of thinking is evaluation. At the evaluation level of speaking, learners make a judgement and support the judgement with relevant evidence. An example of an evaluation level question is, do you

support the development of new, genetically modified foods? Please explain. Some questions that you can ask your group members could begin with one of the following question starters. Going deeper in your discussions make the concepts that are discussed more memorable and meaningful. The six levels of Bloom's taxonomy helps clarify what it means to go deeper and to think critically.

Language for Group Discussions

The more words you know, the bigger your world is. For example, if you only had one word in your vocabulary for the color blue you'd probably only have one concept connected to that word. You wouldn't have the possibility to communicate the great variety of all the hues of blue. Knowing the terms for these various hues of blue gives you the ability to communicate different moods to describe scenery in more detail and to differentiate small discrepancies between similar objects. The more words you know, the more complex your ideas can be. In addition, knowing more words allows you to speak more fluently and makes it easier for others to understand what you want to say. This specific situation of the group discussion has specific academic vocabulary that's commonly used. In this lesson, I would like to introduce you to three general categories of Academic Vocabulary and how they can help you communicate more fluently and clearly in your group discussions.

One type of academic vocabulary that's risk studying is the New Academic Word List. This updated list was revised in 2013. The new academic word list is a list of the most frequently used words from a corpus of academic journals, non-fiction, student essays, and conversation in academic settings. There are 936 words in this list. By becoming familiar with the words on this list, you will greatly increase your chances of understanding academic texts, lectures, and conversations, and you'll have greater flexibility in how you express your ideas as you respond in academic discussions.

A second important type of academic vocabulary is the multi-word expression. A multi-word expression is two or more words that are strung together to have a single meaning, or single function. Take for example, the expression, high expectations. This expression means to believe that an individual or a group can and will achieve some sort of high standard. To convey this meaning, it will be strange to say, tall expectations, or big expectations, or large expectations. Although tall, big, and large are synonyms, they are very often use interchangeably. In other words, many times multi-word expressions cannot be logically figured out. They need to be memorized and learned. Some say that multi-word expressions are one of the most important components of language. Studies have concluded that multi-word expressions account for at least 20% of all spoken language and up to 66%. These word chunks are used all the time. By learning these expressions, you can improve your comprehension, increase your fluency, and become more native-like in how you communicate in English. Some various types and different terms for the multi-word expressions include idioms, collocations, phrasal verbs, lexical bundles, lexical phrases, phrasal expressions, multi-word units, multi-word chunks, fixed expressions, sentence frames, frozen phrases, routine formulas, chunks and formulaic language. I would like to introduce two specific types of multi-word expressions, academic collocations and sentence frames.

Academic collocations are words that go together to convey one meaning. Like the example we discussed, high expectations. A second type of multi-word expression is the sentence frame. Sentence frames are groups of words that have a single function such as agreeing or disagreeing with someone or paraphrasing what a group member has said or requesting evidence. Sentence frames give structure to the conversation and allow you to have more clarity in a conversation. Can you think of some sentence frames that are commonly used to ask someone to clarify what he or she has just said because it wasn't clear to you? Did you think of some of these? >> So, are you saying that GM foods should be banned? >> What do you mean when you say that GM foods are dangerous? >> You lost me. Could you explain that again? >> I don't know what you mean when you're saying that there isn't enough research. How much research do you need in order to be convinced? >> Can you explain that last part again? >> I'm sorry, I don't quite understand what you're saying. >>

A **third** type of academic vocabulary is the vocabulary that's specific to your field of study. You should make yourself familiar with vocabulary that is central to the themes and concepts in your studies. These are the key terms in your text book and in your lectures. Make your world bigger by extending your knowledge of academic vocabulary.

Agreeing and Disagreeing

When you're having an academic discussion it's like you're building a house together. You're all working together to create a communal space in which you can discuss ideas and achieve common goals. In academics we call this space a discourse community. In a discourse community you collaborate to create a space that's warm and welcoming for everyone. However, there's bound to be disagreement in this process. When you're building a house, you might not agree on the color of the paint. But in a discourse community, disagreements will be over ideas. Disagreement is an essential and healthy part of the discussion process, because hearing a diversity of opinions is good for helping us develop and clarify our own ideas. This is what collaboration is all about. However, when people disagree, they may sound or look confrontational, which brings negative emotion to the community. Collaboration builds up, but confrontation tears down. But, how can we disagree without getting confrontational? Of course, the answer to this question may vary a little from culture to culture, but we'll examine the issue more from an American cultural perspective.

First, present your viewpoint in a logical response backed by evidence or support, instead of a subjective response based purely on emotion. The wrong emotions threaten that warm space of your discourse community. Also remember, if someone disagrees with you, they're disagreeing with an idea, not with you as a person. If you feel yourself getting confrontational, take a step back, breathe deeply, and try to switch to a more neutral frame of mind. When disagreement occurs, check yourself. Think about both the content of what you want to say, the words you choose, and the way you communicate with your body and voice. Think body, voice, content.

When you're disagreeing, don't enter into the personal space of other people. This is interpreted as aggressive. Also avoid aggressive hand gestures and check the micro-expressions in your face. Those are controlled by the small muscles near your mouth and eyes. Next when disagreement occurs we also need to be aware of our voice. When you're disagreeing with someone check your

intonation. Intonation is the melody or music of your voice. Finally, during a disagreement, choose your words wisely. How can we replace their confrontational tone with one of collaboration? One way to disagree is to use one of these firm yet polite statements. Like, I'm sorry but I don't agree, I don't agree that, I disagree with you there, or well, actually. Then you need to back up the statement with concrete evidence. Giving evidence is the best way to show that your disagreement is based on facts and logic rather than purely on opinion or emotion.

Let's listen to the example. >> Everyone loves a good romantic comedy. >> Well actually, for at least a decade now, action movies have earned almost three times more money at the box office than romantic comedies. >> Another way to disagree is to build on your partner's comment before you voice your disagreement. You can do this in two ways, to concede the point, and to acknowledge your partner's viewpoint. Conceding a point means that you find something your partner said to agree with before voicing your disagreement. This helps your partner save face in a conversation. You can concede by saying, though it's true that, I agree that, however, or, I see your point, but I can't agree. >> Everyone loves a good romantic comedy. >> Well, it's true that romantic comedies are popular, but they still don't do as well in the box office as action films. You know for at least a decade now, action movies have earned almost three times more money at the box office than romantic comedies. >>

Or maybe you don't agree with anything your partner said. You just want to acknowledge that his or her viewpoint is valid. You could say, that's one way of looking at it, but, or I understand what you're saying, but. By saying these things, you're creating goodwill and opportunities for future consensus. So let's revisit our main points. When you're in a discussion and you want to disagree, be sure to check your body, voice, and the content of what you say, your words. Ensure that they have a collaborative tone, not a confrontational one. And lastly, I'd like to make one more point. When you're disagreeing in a discussion you sometime reach an impasse. That's a point at which you know no further agreement can be reached. It's like conversational dead end. When this happens you and your conversation partners just have to agree to disagree and get on with the discussion. Just keep the tone of the conversation collaborative, not confrontational. Remember, we can agree to disagree, but we don't have to be disagreeable.

Synthesis in Group Discussions

This lesson is going to look at synthesis. What it is, and how to do it in your discussion. You may know the word synthesizer. This is an electronic instrument that has many different instrument sounds in it. When you use a synthesizer, you are pulling together the different sounds that you want to create a piece of music. If we take a closer look at the word we see syn, which means same or together, and thesis, which means put forward or propose. So a synthesis is a pulling together of elements to create something new. You may think of a research paper when you think of synthesis, because there's a lot of information about how to write a synthesis. In a research paper you gathered together information from various sources, decide what supports your main idea and combine your ideas with supporting facts and data from experts to write your paper. The same kind of process happens in a good discussion. You gather together information beforehand, from various sources, such as class lecture, reading or online data, and form your own ideas about the

topic. Then you bring that whole mix of information to your conversation. As you share your data and your own ideas, you synthesize.

Synthesis should happen during your discussion, and at the end. In a typical discussion, many ideas are put forward. There are exchanges in the conversation. Some people will adjust their comments, and some people will change their minds according to how the discussion progresses. A lot is said, and through it all, there is a natural process of synthesis. Part of this process is editing, both during and at the end of the discussion. Some ideas will be rejected as the discussion unfolds. You don't want to have happen is a conversation that is just summary. Summarizing and synthesizing are both skills that you use a lot in an academic environment, but what's the difference? A summary is a brief version of a longer text, it includes main ideas that are restated. A synthesis is more involved. It involves pulling together information from different sources to support one's own ideas, and in the end create something new. Summary and synthesis naturally happen in an academic discussion, but you want to make sure that your conversation isn't all summary.

Let's take a look. Here is a discussion where people are only summarizing. Each person gives an idea, but there's no building on the other ideas. We just have a string of ideas like a line of bricks, it's shallow. The end result of this conversation will not be a cohesive new idea. It will only be a brief review of main points. In a good discussion, there is back and forth sharing, questioning, agreeing, and disagreeing. You hear a lot of transitions like, I think, I agree and I also want to point out. Let's remember that, I don't see how that's relevant if, what about, I want to add. And I see what you're saying. It looks messier than the previous conversation, but this discussion is more dynamic. There is building on each other's ideas. The group members add information, accept and reject ideas, and work together to create a cohesive response to the discussion questions. Now let's take a look at synthesis at the end of a discussion. Remember, a lot was said during the conversation. The last step is to come to a consensus and develop a coherent and concise response. Try to leave some time at the end of the discussion to reflect. Here, everyone has taken a moment to go back over their notes, and also look back at the discussion questions to make sure they touched on everything. It's time to come to a consensus. Consensus means that everyone agrees on the responses to the questions, but remember, everyone doesn't have to agree with each other. You can agree to disagree. This may sound strange, but the important point here is that everyone is satisfied with the conclusions, and those conclusions may be mixed. Your responses should be coherent and concise. Coherent means relevant, logical, organized, they make sense. And concise means brief but complete. Make sure that your answers are not too long, but thoroughly address the questions. To sum up the main points of this lesson, in a good academic discussion you should pull together information from resources, such as class lectures and your own research. Then you should share your ideas with the group, using this data as support. As you share and listen, you should edit. Decide which ideas are most important. And finally, you should pull those ideas together into a coherent and concise response to the discussion questions. This whole process is called synthesis.

Final thoughts

Have you ever been in a discussion and then you weren't? You're having a good time sharing idea, connecting. And then it was just over. It was like all the ideas were floating out there in the

conversation. And then no one took the time to really neatly organize them in memorable packets so that the information could be easily recalled in a meaningful way later on. Perhaps the conversation ended like this. >> You know what? I'm so done with this. Let's call it a day. >> Such an abrupt ending can be unfulfilling. Frustrating and can take the focus away from what was accomplished in the discussion. What things should be done at the end of a group discussion to get the most out of the discussion? This lesson will present important steps to remember to do when wrapping up an academic discussion. First, it's essential that the content of the discussion is synthesized as you already know. The group needs to identify the key points made and then figure out what brings them all together. By synthesizing the discussion, the ideas are packaged so they are easy to remember. The synthesis of a discussion is often called the take away. It's what can be taken away and easily shared with others. So questions we can ask ourselves when synthesizing ideas from a discussion may be what key idea can we take away? How can we bring all this together? Secondly, reflect on the goal or task your group is supposed to achieve. Was it accomplished? Lastly, if the discussion is part of a process or a project, it's important to discuss what the next steps are and who needs to do what. These are called action points. Action points are the tasks that individual members will need to do as a result of the discussion. For example if the group project was to argue that globalization is not beneficial to humanity in a debate. And the group had just decided on the main points they would use in the debate. The group may agree that the next steps should be to research each of the main points and then define credible evidence. Each main point that needs to be researched would be an action point assigned to an individual. These three steps help the group organize the floating ideas into neat packets. They help wrap up the conversation so the discussion can be meaningful.