

# CSE601 - Academic Discussions in Small Group Settings

March 2020

## 1 Introduction

An academic discussion is anything from a conversation between two people about a researchable topic to a presentation at a conference with hundreds of attendees. Discussions are important not only for making decisions, but also for furthering understanding about a topic among all participating parties. This paper will discuss facilitating academic discussions in small group settings, with a small group defined as anywhere from three to five people.

## 2 Before Discussion

Before a discussion takes place is when a facilitator chooses and announces a discussion topic to the participants of said discussion. It is important for a facilitator to give enough notice so that participants with little-to-no prior knowledge can do adequate research on said topic. For example, consider a discussion about the usage of electric scooters in college campus environments. A participant who has not been to a college campus recently will need time to research pros and cons, along with looking for any news articles about the topic.

This is also the time for the facilitator to become prepared for the topic as well. This can include but is not limited to generating questions for driving discussion and preparing sets times for the discussion to follow [2]. For the scooter example, questions such as “Should electric scooters be allowed on college campuses?” and “If so, should it only be rental scooters, privately-owned scooters, or both?” would be valid. A time frame for a one-hour discussion could follow a five-minute introduction, thirty-minute general discussion of scooters on college campuses, twenty-minute discussion on whether they should be allowed on a specific campus or not, and a five-minute summary and conclusion to make sure everyone leaves understanding the outcome of the discussion.

## 3 During Discussion

### 3.1 Introducing the Discussion

Introducing a discussion consists of more than repeating the topic to be discussed. This is also where goals are made and the purpose stated for discussing the topic [1]. For the scooter example, the main goal would be whether electric scooters should be allowed on a specific college campus and under what circumstances. The purpose for the discussion would be the fact that scooter popularity is rising dramatically and an official decision needs to be made on whether they are to be allowed or not.

This is also the place where a facilitator can explain ground rules set when the topic was first announced [2]. An example of a ground rule is only allowing someone to speak again after everyone else in the group has had a chance to speak before them. Another rule is having an object to pass around so that someone that wants to talk must hold the object before being allowed to speak.

One thing a facilitator may consider is assigning a role to various members of the discussion. For example, having one person focus on offering feedback to thoughts brought up by other members. Another role would be assigning a person to keep track of who all has participated prior and to encourage other quieter participants to share their thoughts occasionally [3]. This is not required, but may be beneficial depending on the small group.

### 3.2 Directing the Discussion

When a discussion is underway, a facilitator must not ignore the discussion but must also not dominate it. Open-ended questions are a good way to promote discussion in a group. Using only questions that can be answered with a yes-no format or questions that are rhetorical is not recommended and should be avoided [2]. These questions should be prepared ahead of time by the facilitator and used not only to drive the group towards the final goal of the discussion, but also to keep discussion going when ideas begin to run out for the previous question.

Academic discussions should be kept civil no matter the topic. A discussion about electric scooter use is more likely to remain civil than one about the rights of LGBTQ+ people, but the rules are the same no matter the topic. Participants should be reminded to think before speaking, and find ways to phrase sentences in a way that does not come off as threatening to another participant [3]. For example, if a participant disagrees with an idea brought up in the discussion, it would be better to interject with “I understand what you’re trying to say, however...” or to politely ask for a clearer explanation rather than saying “That’s dumb and I disagree”.

A concept that is difficult for some people to adhere to is allowing silence in a discussion. Silence does not always mean that people are uninterested or have nothing to contribute. Silence allows discussion participants to think over what someone else has said before contributing, which allows them to make sure their words have value and are not attacking another person in the discussion [2][3].

### 3.3 Summarizing the Discussion

When a discussion is concluding, it is the responsibility of the facilitator to conclude said discussion by summarizing what has occurred and stating the final conclusion the group has come to. This is not only to ensure that everyone is informed on this decision, but also to check in with all members to make sure words were not misunderstood [1]. For the scooter example, if a final decision was stated as “Scooters should be allowed on campus, but only privately-owned scooters and not rentals”, then there is room for someone to speak up if they had believed the final decision should include rental scooters or not.

Depending on the situation, a reflection form may be given out after a discussion to see how each participant felt about the discussion. This can be used for a facilitator to get feedback about what went well, what didn’t go well, and if the participants felt satisfied with the discussion. This is up to the facilitator and the nature of discussion, but is something to keep in mind if the facilitator is looking for improvement [1].

## 4 Conclusion

Running a successful discussion can be difficult in some cases, especially when dealing with particularly biased participants or particularly apathetic participants. However, when conducted correctly, academic discussions can result in not only work completed, but also better understanding and more ideas among a group. A facilitator that keeps the points highlighted in this paper in mind has everything required to run a successful small group academic discussion.

## References

- [1] Ernest W. Brewer. *13 proven ways to get your message across: the essential reference for teachers, trainers, presenters, and speakers*. Corwin Press, 1997.
- [2] Stanford University Teaching Commons. Small groups and discussions.
- [3] Martha J Reineke. In-class discussion.