

Helping Students Understand How to Participate in Discussions

The term, discussion, refers to many different types of interactions, ranging from informal to highly structured exchanges. One reason for ineffective or unproductive discussions is that students may not understand what form of discourse you expect them to produce.

Why not describe the types of interaction that constitute productive or effective discussions in your class? An example of this is the *Discussion Evaluation Form*. The shaded portion of the form indicates specific types of behavior that typify productive and counter productive discussions. It conveys to students a simple model of what discussions should look like, and indicates what they should try to do and avoid doing. Students can use the form to monitor their own behavior and also evaluate the quality of discussion in a group.

Suggested ways to use a *Discussion Evaluation Form*:

- Ask students at the beginning of the course to identify what they believe are positive and negative features of discussions. Incorporate these into discussion guidelines for the class.
- Clarify the role of discussion in the course. How is discussion supposed to contribute to their learning? To what extent is discussion an important feature of the course, etc.
- Ask students to use the guidelines/form to monitor their own participation and/or the quality of group discussions.
- Do not overuse the form. Unless there is a good reason to use the form often, use it judiciously.
- Customize the guidelines/form to focus on what types of interactions are most important in your field and your class. For example, in your class you might ask students to analyze or evaluate ideas, concepts, theories, readings, etc. Your discussion guidelines could emphasize the important qualities of analysis and evaluation—in your field, related to the assigned work in your class, etc.

Example of a DISCUSSION EVALUATION FORM

[The form conveys to students the characteristics of effective discussion. It could be given to students before group discussion to help guide their participation, and used following discussion to evaluate the discussion.]

Name:

Date:

How much did you

- | | | | |
|---------------------------------|----------|-------------|---------------|
| learn from the group discussion | A. a lot | B. a little | C. nothing |
| participate in the discussion | A. a lot | B. a little | C. not at all |
| enjoy the discussion | A. a lot | B. a little | C. not at all |

How effective was the group in allocating time and getting work accomplished:

- A. very B. somewhat C. barely D. not at all

Incidence of Productive and Counterproductive Discussion Behavior- Check any you engaged in and circle any you observed in others.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> asked, gave information | <input type="checkbox"/> monopolized discussion |
| <input type="checkbox"/> asked, gave reactions | <input type="checkbox"/> called attention to self |
| <input type="checkbox"/> asked, answered questions | <input type="checkbox"/> chronic interruptions |
| <input type="checkbox"/> restated ideas/points in articles | <input type="checkbox"/> criticized others (put down) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> restated ideas/points of discussants | <input type="checkbox"/> changed subject often |
| <input type="checkbox"/> asked for/gave examples | <input type="checkbox"/> frequent irrelevant comments |
| <input type="checkbox"/> asked for/gave summary | <input type="checkbox"/> withdrawn, did not participate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> asked for/gave evidence or support for ideas | <input type="checkbox"/> apologetic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> redirected group to return to task | <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER-please specify: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> monitored time | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> encouraged, supported other ideas | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> elaborated on others' ideas | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER-please specify | |

As a learning experience I would evaluate the discussion as

- A. poor B. fair C. average D. good E. excellent

Give reasons for your rating. Be specific, give examples.

What, if any, aspects of your own behavior do you need to change to be a more effective group member?

What, if any, aspects of other group members' behavior need to change to enhance the group's learning?

What, if anything, did the instructor do that facilitated effective, whole-class discussion?

What, if anything, did the instructor do that inhibited effective, whole-class discussion?

What, if anything, should the instructor do or not do that would improve the quality of whole-class discussion?