



Guidelines for Group Participation 1

University of Southern California

Encourage Everyone to Participate

- Restate what someone has said if it is not clear to you or to the class.
- Plan to bring out all ideas and facts supporting all sides during the discussion, and then try to put them together in a way that makes sense.
- Use what students say, perhaps reshaping it, to direct or divert the conversation.

Try to Understand All Sides of the Issue

- Seek out differences of opinion, look for contrasting points of view: they enrich the discussion.
- Be sympathetic and understanding of students' views.
- Encourage students to seek the best answer rather than try to convince other students.
- Avoid disrupting the flow of thought by introducing new issues; instead, wait until the present topic reaches its natural end. If you wish to introduce a new topic, warn the students that what you are about to say will address a new topic, and that you are willing to wait to introduce it until everyone has finished commenting on the current topic.
- Encourage students to change their mind when the evidence clearly indicates that they should do so.
- Look at process as well as analysis – this helps students understand what is happening in the discussion and know that everyone has responsibility for the group process.

Listen Carefully to What Students Say

- Content, logic, and substance: is the student sensitive to the strengths and weaknesses of his/her presentation?
- Nuance and tone, including the speaker's degree of authority or doubt and degree of emotion or commitment: is the student involved with or removed from the subject matter?
- How the comment relates to the overall discussion: does it build on previous points and strengthen the flow of the discussion?
- Opportunities for moving the discussion forward: do students agree or disagree with what has been said?

2 Guidelines for Group Participation

Prevent Discussion from Deteriorating into a Heated Argument

- Diffuse arguments with calm remarks:

1. "Let's slow down a moment;"
2. "Hold on. Give Russ a break. It's not helpful when five people jump all over what their classmate says;"
3. "It seems that we need to identify those areas we can agree upon and those areas where we disagree. Let's start with those things we all agree with;"
4. "This isn't getting us anywhere. Those who want to continue on this point can do so later, outside of class. Let's move on to a new topic."

Think About and Watch Students: Their Eyes, Their Bodies – What are They Experiencing?

- What is the mood of the class as a whole?
- What is left unsaid?

Sources

Christensen, Chris. (1995). *The Art of Discussion Leading* (video). Cambridge, MA: The Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University.

Davis, Barbara Gross. (1993). "Leading a Discussion." *Tools for Teaching* (pp. 63-66). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.