

Teaching Through Leading Discussion Week 1 Teacher's Notes

"Discussion can be a waste of time for everyone and as boring as the worst of lectures"

—Joseph Lowman

Discussion as Instruction: Theory

Each type of instruction has different strengths and weaknesses. For example:

- **Modeling** is good for conveying subjective qualities that are hard to describe in words. But modeling left by itself is easy to misinterpret. The learner may conclude that someone they model is doing things for reasons other than the real ones. Modeling also requires very small numbers of learners for maximum effectiveness. The subjective elements the model seeks to convey (like her urgency for the things of God) are only apparent to those who are personally close enough to appreciate what words and actions mean in the context of the model's life. This makes modeling extremely time-intensive.
- **Lecture** is good for conveying large quantities of information to large numbers of people, but lacks any way to know whether that information is being perceived or is in useable form. Learners may be cataloguing information that they will never be able to apply to life situations. Or, for all we know, they may be learning nothing at all. Yet, when well done, lecture is one of the most persuasive forms of communication. A good lecture can arrest the attention of even very large groups of people. On the other hand, if one lectures in a very small group, it can seem pretentious and unnatural.
- Written outlines or essays can convey large quantities of information to either large or small groups, but are easily misinterpreted unless very carefully written. Such writing is time consuming, but so are all modalities of teaching if done well. In addition, written material has one great weakness: it must be read to be effective. On the other hand, if learners don't understand, they can re-read the piece as often as they like.

These examples illustrate why good teachers rely on a number of instruction modalities rather than just one approach.

We will be discussing one of the most powerful channels of instruction—guided group discussion. Like other methods, this channel has strengths and weaknesses. Compile a list of weaknesses and strengths before going on.

Group Discussion Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths	Weaknesses

We will be referring often in this class to *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching* (Second Edition), Joseph Lowman (San Francisco, Josey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1995) Lowman is a recognized authority on college-age instruction. All page numbers at ends of citations are from this excellent book.

Definition

For our purposes, discussion will refer to leader-guided or moderated group discussion. This will usually follow a pattern where the leader teaches partly by lecture, or at least offers an introduction and conclusion. Guided discussion may involve some peer-to-peer interaction, but most of the interaction will be from learners to the leader or the group in general. The leader offers a short summary and comment to most, or all, sharing.

Technique

Introduction

Some discussions seem to drag in fits and awkward silences, creating tension in the group that further inhibits discussion. Other discussions seem to thrive in eager sharing, with people actually competing to get their point in. Why is this?

The most likely reason for such difference is the introduction. In our introduction, we touch on the skills of public speaking, or homiletics. The leader must stimulate and excite the group about the subject under consideration. During this first part of the meeting, the burden is completely on the leader to:

- Raise the group's consciousness of the issues: Defining what the issues are, and why they are urgent
- Emotionally engage the group with the subject and with the leader
- Achieve arousal: People sit up, furrow their brows, smile, laugh, and in other ways show that they have been impacted emotionally, whether excited, disturbed, insulted (be careful with this one), or inspired.

When people come into a meeting, they are not ready to discuss anything. Most people come to meetings with cold hearts and empty minds. They do not have any thoughts to share, or any desire to speak. Leaders who try to start out with a discussion question are mistaken.

Achieving such arousal is not necessarily a long project. It could be accomplished in a couple of minutes, although you could spend up to 15 or even 20 minutes, if the you feel the need to lay a more complete groundwork. These judgments are based on the subject matter and the audience. Longer introductions have the potential to lay out more elaborate content, but may exhaust the audience attention-span.

To become adept at this part, consider taking a class in homiletics.

Probes

The instructor will normally introduce "probes" or questions intended to prod members toward a particular line of thought. However, discussion is not recitation. Recitation is when the instructor gives students an opportunity to clarify content or the instructor asks questions requiring specific knowledge of study content, frequently from assigned readings (like the teacher in "The Paper Chase"). We are not suggesting such recitation is wrong or harmful, only that such is not what we are studying in this class.

What then, are these questions, or probes, that elicit discussion? Several patterns are successful. Here is a partial list:

- Set up an apparent contradiction in your introduction, and ask the group how it might be resolved
- Ask them how a particular truth might apply either to life in general, or to specific situations you imagine
- Give them a statement from a third party (either imaginary or an authority) and ask them to react to it
- Ask how someone from x, y, or z perspective would answer a particular question
- Ask what whether what you just distilled from a text or narrative is different or the same as something else with which they are already familiar (e.g. Is this teaching about letting each person have their own conviction from Rom. 14 different in any way from relativism?)
- Devil's advocacy: challenge a position they all seem to accept axiomatically with some problems
- Discovery: What do you think is this passage really saying?
- Personal experience: Who wants to share an experience where this truth has made a difference?
- Comparing and contrasting: Lowman says, "Asking students to compare and contrast concepts, theories, and individuals orally in class helps to clarify the relationships within a content area. 172
- As learners answer each question, the leader responds with a short summary statement and a further probe, until moving on to another subject.

Objectives

After learning the particulars in a field of knowledge (such as vocabulary and grammar rules in a language), the next stage in learning is to progressively differentiate and relate the new

particulars to existing particulars. Discussion is particularly suitable for these later stages in learning. [see exercise on Ausubel's stages of learning]

Consider Lowman's 5 types of thinking best developed in discussion:

Personal identification: What would Paul have felt during his imprisonment in Rome?

Objective or critical thinking: What are some problems with the notion of having no consciousness of sin in Heb. 10? Or, How would a Calvinist answer this?

Diagnostic thinking: Ask students to draw conclusions from a data set

Independent thinking: Why did they reach the conclusion they did?

As-if thinking: Challenge them to predict a future outcome based on data

Problem solving: Asking them to propose solutions to the problems under study

Increasing awareness of value controversies: "These both sound good, let's hear more evidence for each."

Finally, consider these qualifications on leaders' questions by Lowman:

Avoid questions that can be answered by short factual statements or yes or no responses. Keep queries short and simple. If students must work to decipher your questions, they are less likely to respond to it. Discussion questions should be easily understandable by students, put forth decisively, and followed by silence. [Lowman 180]

The underlying assumption is that as people struggle with concepts and their own thoughts and feelings, they will become very receptive to new information and ideas that help them resolve the questions before them. Research shows that when learners struggle for answers in a area they retain those answers longer and more accurately. Further, when learners discuss related issues under skillful guidance, they link the ideas in an associational network. Such networks are remembered far longer than isolated concepts. 162

More importantly, such discussion has the potential to develop actual thinking skills that will never result from lecture. While an audience might admire and enjoy a lecturer's thinking, we have no reason to believe they would be able to imitate such thinking on their own in situations not mentioned in a lecture. As Lowman observes, "asking learners to apply in your group what they have learned [through discussion] requires them to demonstrate *understanding*, not merely *memorization*." 162 This is what we want from our people—not just the ability to do what a tape-recorder can do (spit back knowledge) but to creatively handle that knowledge in ways that are useful in ministry and Christian living.

Seen this way, we realize discussion is an essential type of instruction where learners get to try their own wings like baby birds. I believe a guided discussion format is *the best* approach for many Xenos cell groups, small groups, and home churches. Authorities agree that even in large groups of over 100 a skillful lecturer can incorporate periods of interaction with good effect.

However, guidance is essential. Many discussions lead nowhere, and any conclusions reached are not memorable. As Lowman says, "Discussion should be for an intended purpose, not simply to hear students' voices." The notion that any discussion or interaction will naturally lead to advancement in learners' lives is naïve.