

Discussion meetings manual

An alternative to regular work groups for courses with more than 60 students.

Discussion meetings are a form of teaching that has been recently developed with the aim of creating a discussion environment in which students can be expected to engage in discussions among each other about the course material, without a teacher being present throughout the meeting. It allows for one teacher to ensure that a large group of students all express their thoughts on the course material, in the timespan of a regular two hour session.

Discussion meetings are supplementary to lectures and enable the students to fully understand the literature through carefully analysing and discussing the material among each other in a partly autonomous fashion.

When to use this method?

- When you are dealing with a number of students that is too large to contain within one or two work group sessions.
- When you feel that lectures alone are not sufficient for the students to internalise the material.
- When you want to ensure that the *students* have a discussion, and take charge of this discussion. (It avoids the situation where the teacher gradually turns the workgroup meeting into another lecture.)
- If you want students to learn-by-doing the different roles in a typical conference (i.e. presenter, discussant, moderator).

The organizational set-up

The discussion meeting takes place in the time of a regular lecture: two hours, divided into two parts: the first 45 minutes are for the students to discuss the literature in groups (ca. 20 students per group). The second part of the discussion meeting involves a plenary session in which the findings of the first part are to be discussed.

Before the first discussion meeting can take place, the participants should already have been divided into groups. Ideally, this is communicated in such a way that students can identify their fellow group members at the lecture preceding the first discussion meeting (i.e. apart from posting the groups on Canvas, you might distribute print-outs).

Each discussion meeting, there are 1 or 2 articles (or book chapters, etc.) to be discussed. (This manual assumes you work with 2 articles). For each discussion meeting, each group has a number of tasks assigned to specific students. For each article, there are two students in each group who are charged with presenting the contents of the article and setting out its main argument, then there are two students who are charged with providing feedback on this presentation and add their thoughts on the strength of the article's argumentation, and at the same time there are two students charged with moderating the meeting and keeping

the time schedule. Finally, there are two students who are charged with taking notes and preparing a summary of the key points that the group raised in discussing the article.

Each task is carefully described, so that students know what is expected of them and know what to expect from each other. By assigning tasks, you assure that a discussion will take off, even without your presence. You also assure that a large group of students will have an active part in the discussion, since in each group you assign 14 individuals with a task every week (Those who are not given one of the tasks mentioned above, in fact also are given a task, we call them the 'debaters'!).

Logistics

Location - Discussion meetings require a seminar room for each of the groups' separate discussion sessions (the 1st hour of the meeting), the following plenary session (the 2nd hour of the meeting) obviously requires a nearby (!) lecture hall large enough to contain all groups.

Task Agenda – Students need to know to what group they have been assigned and what tasks are assigned to them in what week. You can use the accompanying Excel sheet format. Preferably, the Task Agenda is made *after* the first course week, so that no-shows will not contaminate the Agenda. Tasks are always given to two individuals, to allow for the students to collaborate but also to avoid the problem of absenteeism.

Task descriptions

Presenting article A: the student prepares for this meeting by carefully studying both articles and especially pay attention to article A. Before the discussion meeting, the student will have made a summary of this article and share it during this meeting. Two students are co-responsible for this task: collaborate! The students has 5 minutes to summarize the article: the moderator will be strict.

Feedback article A: the student prepares for this meeting by studying both articles, but specifically focusses on article A. The student is the 'first responder' to the presentation of article A by giving feedback to complete and/or criticize the presentation and/or the article. The student sets the tone for how his group will discuss this text. Two students are assigned this task, and it's ok to disagree: the collective wisdom of the group will emerge during the discussion. (The feedback session will take a maximum of 15 minutes for each article, make sure not to take up more than 5 minutes so that there is plenty of time for the others students to contribute.)

Presenting article B: the student prepares for this meeting by carefully studying both articles and especially pay attention to article B. Before this discussion meeting, the student will have made a summary of this article and share it during this meeting. Two students are co-responsible for this task: collaborate! The student has 5 minutes to summarize the article: the moderator will be strict.

Feedback article B: the student prepares for this meeting by studying both articles, but specifically focusses on article B. The student is the 'first responder' to the presentation of article A by giving feedback to complete and/or criticize the presentation and/or the article. The student sets the tone for how his group will discuss this text. Two students are assigned this task (per text), and it's ok to disagree: the collective wisdom of the group will emerge during the discussion. The feedback session will take a maximum of 15 minutes for each

article, make sure not to take up more than 5 minutes so that there is plenty of time for the others students to contribute.

Moderator + timekeeper: the student prepares for this meeting by studying both articles thoroughly. At the meeting the student checks if everyone is present (use an attendance list and do a head count) and start the discussion meeting by stating the tasks. The student is the leader of the debate and keeps track of time. The student has to make sure everything is discussed before the plenary meeting starts. Stick to the following time table: 15:00 - a word of welcome, present yourselves, the summarizers, the 'first responders' and recorders/representatives, circulate the attendance list and do a head count (5 min.). 15:05 - Summary A (5 min.) 15:10 Feedback A (15min.) 15:25 Summary B (5min.) 15:30 Feedback B (15min.). There are two moderators/timekeepers to every meeting. At the beginning of the plenary meeting, the student hand the attendance list to the teacher.

Recorder + representative A: the student is responsible for making notes (handwritten or on a laptop) during the discussion about 'article A'. In the plenary session, the student will be the first representative of his group and will give a short overview (max. 5 minutes) of his groups' discussion of article A. What did his group feel was the article's essence? What gave rise to debate? Etc. the student has to make sure his group feels that its discussion of the text is properly conveyed.

Recorder + representative B: the student is responsible for making notes (handwritten or on a laptop) during the discussion about 'article B'. In the plenary session, the student will be the first representative of his group and will give a short overview (max. 5 minutes) of his groups' discussion of article B. What did his group feel was the article's essence? What gave rise to debate? Etc. the student has to make sure his group feels that its discussion of the text is properly conveyed.

Debaters: the student comes prepared to the discussion meeting: the student has read both articles thoroughly and thought about differences and similarities between them. The student listens critically to the summaries provided of the articles and then the student contributes to the discussion that ensues both during the first hour and during the plenary session. The debaters' job is to help make the discussion meeting into something more than just a summary of the articles. In short, (s)he stirs up the debate!

See the Excel sheet for a format to make the division into groups and tasks. The above task descriptions are also mentioned in that Excel sheet.

What does the teacher do?

During the first hour, the teacher walks in on the group discussions at her/his pleasure. (S)he does not intervene and is not a participant in the discussions. (Of course, (s)he may make notes quietly and gets to know the dynamics in each group, identifying dominant and quiet types). In the second hour, the teacher welcomes all students in the lecture hall and receives the attendance list from the group moderators. (S)he will ask for the recorders of article A to give their summary of how their group understood and appreciated and criticized the article. This may bring different thoughts to the table, some of which are great for discussion, and some of which are simply mistaken, and will be corrected by fellow students or the teacher. It is therefore in this second hour that the teacher ensures that the students will have a proper understanding of the literature. As the weeks progress, the group discussions

probably become more lively, and students might prefer to take more time for their group discussion, also because some may start finding the plenary session boring. It is up to the teacher to make sure the plenary session is more than just asking students to repeat the same things about the same articles. A key to fostering different opinions about the literature lies in selecting contentious literature.

Another important thing is that the teacher should explain in some detail how Discussion Meetings work. Students are not used to walking into a classroom and start having an academic discussion without a teacher being present. It is an unnatural thing to do! It also helps to point out that this is not only a way to help them understand the literature, but also a way to help them have academic discussions and to familiarize themselves with how things work in conferences in academia and beyond.

Grading

NAV/NVV. Participation is mandatory. Each student is allowed to be absent at one discussion meeting, provided that (s)he lets the teacher know beforehand.

Culture

Discussion meetings rely on the students' capacity to take charge of their own learning. It relies on the *corrigerend vermogen* of the students' collective intelligence. Instead of listening to what the teacher says and readily assuming that this must be true, students now are more likely to stop and think about what is being said. "Is my fellow student making sense?" "This fellow student understood the article in a way that is different from how I understood it; should I change my mind or should I correct her/him?"

It is important for the students to realize that during the first hour, it is up to them. The teacher may walk in on their discussion for a few minutes, but will be a fly on the wall. This also means that logistical issues need to be addressed by the students, with a coordinating role for the moderators. Are both presenters of Article B absent? They can solve it. Is the moderator confusing different roles and making a mess of things? Let them learn that they have been assigned tasks which can be done well, or poorly. One student makes a mistake, and all students learn from it.

This is a mindset that is different from what many of us are used to, both staff and students. But when it works, it is very rewarding!

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