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GUIDELINES FOR THE SEMINAR TEACHING METHOD

by

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Discussion: Characteristics, Purposes, Limitations

I. Characteristics of Discussion

- A. *"Thought in process."* Participants in discussion should be willing to pool their information and join in a cooperative search for the best solution to the problem before the group. They are, theoretically at least, willing to follow wherever the evidence leads them. Debate, on the other hand, occurs between individuals who have supposedly examined the evidence and arrived at different conclusions. The reformer seldom has time for discussion; he thinks he has found the right answer and wants others to adopt it as quickly as possible.
- B. *Informality.* Discussion aims at organized informality. The degree possible for any occasion depends on such factors as the seating arrangements and the size of the group or audience. The speakers should use the language of conversation.
- C. *Opportunity for general participation.* The discussion method assumes that each individual may have something of value to contribute. If the group is small, all who wish to may speak. If the audience is large, only a small percentage of its members can get the floor. However, it should be remembered that active listening is participation.
- D. *Purpose.* Discussion is talk with a purpose. Conversations that leap from one topic to another are pleasant and may have social values for those who take part in them, but they are not included in our definition of discussion.
- E. *Planning and leadership.* Except for occasional conversations that happen when alert and interested minds meet, discussion meetings require a leader and a plan. The chairman should not put his trust in the possibility of spontaneous combustion.

To summarize, discussion is a planned, but relatively informal, meeting in which those who attend are invited to join in thinking aloud about a topic or problem of mutual interest, under the guidance of a leader or moderator.

II. Purposes of Discussion

Each discussion should have a specific objective which can be classified under two main headings: (a) training the individual and (b) considering mutual problems.

- A. *Training the Individual.* Discussion provides valuable training for the individual to the extent that it serves one or more of these purposes.
 - 1. *To overcome timidity or stage fright.* The person who has never spoken out in a meeting may be encouraged to ask a question or say a few words in response to an inquiry. This may be a first step towards voluntary participation and making a speech on more formal occasions.
 - 2. *To develop a direct conversational manner of speaking.* We converse more frequently than we speak in public. Moreover, developing skill in conversation is excellent preparation for public speaking.
 - 3. *To learn to listen accurately.* Good listening is just as important in discussion as good speaking. Many misunderstandings would be avoided if the persons concerned listened to what was said and reported it accurately.

4. *To learn how to give and take criticism.* We need to learn the difference between refuting an argument and making personal remarks about its proponent. Of equal importance, is the ability to take criticism. We should at least learn to keep silent if we cannot make the answer "that turneth away wrath."
5. *To stimulate the desire for good evidence and straight thinking.* The tests for determining the strength of the evidence and reasoning apply in discussion as well as in formal argumentation and debate.

B. *Considering Mutual Problems.* The various types of discussion meetings are designed to serve one or more of the following purposes.

1. *To exchange information.* The first step towards understanding a problem should be the pooling of available information. Group discussion should only be used if a number of the members have information to share. Those who plan the meetings should make sure that adequate information is available. They may do this by distributing printed materials, or by inviting people who understand the problem to participate in the discussion.
2. *To form attitudes.* A major function of the church and the school is to change some attitudes and create others. Thus, we may profitably discuss freedom of speech, for example, even though there is no case that requires decision. The assumption is that attitudes thus formed will influence, perhaps determine, action when the occasion arises. Sometimes the discussion topic does not require group judgment or group action. Such questions as, "What should be my attitude toward cooperatives?", "What factors should I consider in choosing a profession?", or "When is a book worth reading?" are examples. In such cases, each individual is free to act as he thinks best.
3. *To evaluate possible solutions.* This is the third step in analyzing a problem. Sometimes at this point there is general agreement that one course of action is best. But discussion of vital questions does not usually result in such unanimity. Honest, intelligent people often draw widely different conclusions from the same evidence. In such cases, it is important that the strength and weaknesses of all solutions be thoroughly explored before action is taken. We prefer intelligent and orderly discussion to any other method for reaching group decisions.

III. Limitations of Group Discussion.

Group discussion has these fundamental weaknesses which may also be found in some public discussions.

- A. *Discussion is a slow process.* It should not be used when immediate action is required. In such cases, even the most democratic organizations give their leaders broad emergency powers.
- B. *Group discussion is inefficient for new problems.* If group members know little about a topic, they should not begin discussion until they have a background of information. They should read, attend lectures, listen to public discussion.
- C. *Discussion is a poor method for considering questions of fact.* So, for that matter, is debate. The group should not spend its time guessing about facts, someone should look them up and report them.
- D. *Discussion seldom provides an orderly analysis.* The informality makes a careful statement of the issues or a sustained presentation of an argument difficult. The listener is not usually offered a clear cut alternative on which to base his decision.

IV. Common Faults.

These faults occur with such frequency as to warrant special attention.

- A. *Lack of immediate preparation.* Discussion participants do not have the incentive to prepare as thoroughly as they would for a speech or a debate. Each counts on the others to present information he lacks and to carry on until the discussion reaches a point on which he wishes to speak. Invitations often stress the fact that "there are to be no speeches. We're just going to talk things over informally." The result is often impromptu thinking as well as impromptu speaking, and our first thoughts are not always our best thoughts.
- B. *Concealing real differences.* The idea that conflict is bad often leads discussion groups to avoid sore spots on which there are vital differences of opinions. But this does not resolve the conflict. On the contrary, says John Dewey, "...it keeps the realities of the situation out of sight... In consequence, the triumph of the views of one or of a faction is a sham victory. It has been gained by failing to bring underlying conflicts out into the open..."
- C. *One-sidedness.* In spite of carefully laid plans, discussions are often dominated by advocates of one point of view to the comparative neglect of others. Moreover, discussion is easier to "rig" than most other meetings. A half-dozen individuals, acting in concert, can take over almost any discussion, except the debate.

Leading Discussion

I. Qualifications of the Discussion Leader

- A. *Ability to think and act quickly.* The unexpected is always happening in a discussion meeting, and the leader must be able to adjust his plans on a moment's notice. The person who insists on following a preconceived plan should not try to become a decision leader. The leader must also be able to make quick decisions and to reverse them with equal firmness if he finds that he was wrong.
- B. *Ability to get along with others.* The leader tries to get people to think together instead of listening passively to each other. The conference chairman often has the added task of composing differences and soothing ruffled tempers. These tasks are difficult enough when the leader is well liked and emotionally stable. If he is inclined to "fly off the handle" he will be in continual trouble.
- C. *Respect for the opinions of others.* The leader must be a good listener, genuinely interested in what others know and believe. The individual who believes people should be told what to think and do is irritating enough as a group member or forum speaker. Certainly he should not be the leader. Nor should the leader show impatience when the discussion moves slowly and the members prefer a plan of their own to his. If he shows he doesn't like what the group members are doing, they will respond by not liking him.

- D. *Willingness to remain in the background.* The leader who cannot resist the temptation to parade his own knowledge, or to point out mistakes of others, will be about as popular as the quarterback who elects himself to carry the ball whenever there is a good chance for a touchdown. This does not mean that the leader should let others take control of the meeting. He keeps attention focused on what others know and think about the topic. Whenever possible he asks the group to decide matters of procedure, but he guides the progress of the meeting none the less. The prospective leader's knowledge of the discussion process, his attitude on the topic, and his skill in speaking should also be considered.
- E. *Knowledge of the discussion process.* This is the most important qualification of the successful leader. He must also know the objectives and the procedures agreed upon for the discussion he is to lead.
- F. *Knowledge of evidence and reasoning.* The fact that discussion is often as informal as conversation does not justify assertions without proof or conclusions not warranted by the evidence. This is another way of saying that the leader should have a good working knowledge of evidence and argument.
- G. *Knowledge of the topic.* The leader should have a general knowledge of the topic but he should represent the interested layman who raises pertinent questions, not the expert who answers them. If he has stated or published his conclusions on the problem, he may be open to a charge of prejudice. In this event, he can better serve the group as a source of information or as an advocate for his point of view.
- H. *Freedom from prejudice.* It would be impossible to find a leader absolutely free from prejudice on the controversial topics considered in discussion meetings. The practical question is whether these prejudices exist to a degree that would make the proposed leader unacceptable to the group. Individuals should not lead public discussions on topics touching their personal or professional interests. A football coach is prejudiced on the values of football; a professor, on faculty salaries; a labor leader, on strikes. While these persons may lead discussions within their own groups, they should participate in public meetings as sources of information or spokesmen for their point of view.
- I. *Skill in speaking.* The group discussion leader does not need to be an accomplished public speaker; indeed, as we have said, he should resist the temptation to make speeches. But he should have some proficiency in clear and direct conversation, which is not a simple thing. It requires, among other things, ability to speak the language of the group, to use short sentences and familiar words, and a voice that can be easily heard.

II. The Leader's Part in the Meeting

- A. *Getting the Meeting Started.* The leader should set a good example by the precision and brevity of his opening remarks. They should include: a statement of the topic, an explanation of the procedure so each person will know when and how long he may speak, and in the case of public discussions, introductions of the speakers or panel members, stating their knowledge of the topic and what point of view they represent. If the meeting begins with talks, the leader then introduces the first speaker; if it begins with conversation, he asks a question that he hopes will start the discussion.

- B. *Keeping the Discussion on the Track.* Discussion tends to wander off the main road and into bypaths. Sometimes these excursions are interesting and fruitful; sometimes they lead into unrelated fields. The leader constantly wonders how closely he should hold the discussion to the prearranged plan. If those present feel that he is too "bossy" they will resent his directions; if he lets the discussion go too far afield, he isn't really a leader. The problem is to find the golden mean. The leader should be slow to announce that the discussion is off the subject. Rather, he should raise the question and let the group members decide whether it is and what they want to do about it.
- C. *Making Occasional Summaries.* Internal summaries may be used to check needless repetition, to get the discussion back to the problem, or to record points of agreement and disagreement. They should be brief and in the language of the group. The leader should not, of course, play up one point of view or assume agreement where none exists. He can guard against prejudiced or inaccurate summaries by asking those present to check him and supply missing items.
- D. *Encouraging General Participation.* Although only a few members of a public discussion audience can be given opportunity to speak, it is important that anyone with something to say be encouraged to say it. The leader, who begins the forum period by asking "Does anyone have anything to say?", is not making it easy for anyone to speak. If he says it as though he does not really expect anyone to respond, no one will. But if he says, "I know a great many of you want to speak, who will be first?" the forum is more likely to get off to a good start. Sometimes he plants the first question to make sure there will be one.

Usually the leader should not, without previous arrangement, put questions to individuals in the group. They may have nothing to contribute and resent having to say so. He may, however, encourage timid members to speak by asking for information he knows they possess. He should ask for comments from those who have not spoken and recognize them in preference to more vocal members.

In opening the forum period, leaders sometimes ask only that audience members question the speakers. This implies the listener-learner relationship instead of cooperative thinking. The listeners may have additional information or opinions that they want to express. The invitation should be broad enough to include these types of participation.

- E. *Keeping the Discussion from Becoming One-Sided.* In spite of careful planning, it sometimes happens that one point of view is more skillfully presented than the others, or is upheld by a majority of the speakers. Then, the minority, feeling themselves outnumbered, are likely to increase the one-sidedness by keeping silent. The leader should do his best to correct this situation. He may even find it necessary to abandon his role as leader and question the majority's views or present the other side as well as he can on the spur of the moment. This is a makeshift expedient, but justified if it keeps the discussion from becoming a propaganda meeting.
- F. *Testing the Information and Reasoning.* The leader should not be concerned about the conclusions reached through discussion, but he should be constantly concerned about the quality of the evidence and reasoning. He can best guard against faulty reasoning and poor evidence by raising questions such as those in the following list. Also included in this list are questions directed at other situations needing attention:

1. *To call attention to a point not yet considered:* "Has anyone thought about this phase of the problem?"

2. *To question the strength of an argument:* "What reasons do we have for believing this argument?"
3. *To get back to causes:* "Why do you suppose Doakes takes this position?"
4. *To question the source of information or argument:* "Who gathered these statistics that you spoke of?" "Who is Mr. Gish whose opinion has been quoted?" "Do you know that as fact, or is it your opinion?"
5. *To suggest that the discussion is wandering from the point:* "Can someone tell me what bearing this has on our problem?" "Your point is an interesting one, but can't we get back to our subject?"
6. *To suggest that no new information is being added:* "Can anyone add anything to the information already given on this point?"
7. *To call attention to the difficulty or complexity of the problem:* "Aren't we beginning to understand why our legislators haven't solved this problem?"
8. *To register steps of agreement (or disagreement):* Am I correct in assuming that we all agree (or disagree) on this point?"
9. *To bring the generalizing speaker down to earth:* "Can you give us a specific example on that point?" "Your general idea is good, but I wonder if we can't make it more concrete. Does anyone know of a case...?"
10. *To handle the impatient, cure-all member:* "But would your plan work in all cases? Who has an idea on that?" "Hadn't we better reserve judgment until we all know more about this problem?"
11. *To suggest that personalities be avoided:* "I wonder what bearing this has on the question before us?"
12. *To suggest that some are talking too much:* "Are there those who haven't spoken who have ideas they would like to present?"
13. *To suggest the value of compromise:* "Do you suppose the best course of action lies somewhere between these two points of view?"
14. *To suggest that the group may be prejudiced:* "Is our personal interest in this question causing us to overlook the interests of other groups?"
15. *To draw the timid but informed member into the discussion:* "Spelvin, here, lived for quite a while in China. Suppose we ask him whether he ever saw...?"
16. *To handle a question the leader can't answer:* "I don't know, who does?"
17. *To encourage a speaker to talk with the group, not at the leader:* "Don't you think you'll be heard better if you face the rest of the group?"
18. *To cut off a speaker who is too long-winded:* "While we're on this point, let's hear from some of the others. Can we save your other point until later?"
19. *To take the play away from a verbose member:* "You've raised a number of interesting points which should keep us busy a good while. Would anyone else like to comment on them?"
20. *To help the member who has difficulty expressing himself:* "I wonder if what you're saying isn't this...?"
21. *To encourage further questions by friendly comment:* "That's a good question. I'm glad you raised it. Anyone have an answer?"
22. *To break up a heated argument:* "I think we all know how Jones and Smith feel about this. Now who else would like to get in on it?"

Leaders sometimes phrase their questions so that a simple "yes" or "no" answer will suffice. In most cases, this type of question tends to stifle discussion; when a man says "yes" he may not be inclined to say more. Occasionally such questions may be used to get

an expression of opinion that can be used as a basis for discussion. Questions that are too broad baffle the members. Start with "what" to get facts and opinions, "who" or "where" to get sources, "why" for reasons or causes, and "how" or "when" to get down to specific cases.

III. Handling Special Situations

A. *What About the Overly Talkative Member?* There are three types: (1) the individual who talks easily and knows a great deal about the topic, (2) the long-winded member who doesn't realize how long he has spoken, and (3) the irrelevant member who tries to make a speech on his pet theme.

The best way to handle such situations is to prevent them. The rules of the game should be made clear before the meeting begins. The leader should stop the first member who attempts to speak overtime. He should ask the irrelevant members to connect his speech with the issue under discussion. The person who speaks not too long but too often usually responds to an indirect suggestion about the desirability of hearing from those who have not spoken. The leader, like the judge or umpire, must enforce the rules without favoritism.

B. *What About Personal Remarks?* The best solution is to create an atmosphere in which personal attacks will seem out of place. An occasional comment of this sort should probably be ignored. The group will usually deal with a member who persists in attacking individuals rather than arguments. One leader of considerable experience remembers only two occasions when he had to make direct rulings that speakers were out of order. One persisted in questioning the good faith of an opponent; the other referred to the race of an audience member who had cross-examined him quite effectively. Discussion audiences often express surprise that speakers who oppose each other vigorously seem to respect, even to like, each other. It is sometimes difficult to get active opponents in a controversy to appear on the same platform. Once there, they usually carry on the discussion in the spirit set by the leader's opening statement.

IV. The Leader's Preparation

A. *Making an outline.* The leader should come to the meeting with a plan or outline. Such outlines usually consist of a series of questions, arranged in logical or psychological order. The experienced leader includes more questions than can be discussed in a single meeting, knowing that some which seem important to him may not appeal to the group. He knows, too, that the discussion may take an unexpected turn, compelling him to make up a new plan on the spur of the moment. Even so, the making of an outline is valuable preparation for the meeting.

B. *Planning for general participation.* If group members know the procedures, and each other, little advance preparation is needed. Someone will begin talking as soon as he gets the chance. But if the members don't know what is expected of them, they are likely to do nothing for fear of doing the wrong thing. In such cases, the leader may well take steps to avoid that awkward pause after his opening

statement when everyone waits for someone else to break the ice. He may distribute brief items about the topic and have them read at the beginning of the meeting. He may ask two or three members to be ready to volunteer questions or brief comments if the pause develops. Once the conversation starts and the members are convinced that their experiences and opinions are really wanted, group participation is assured.

C. *Getting discussion started.* A discussion group is seldom equipped with a self starter. The leader should consider how he can get the general discussion started in the first few minutes. What he says, and how long he speaks, depends on the familiarity of the group with the topic and with discussion procedures. Certainly, he must state the topic; he probably should add two or three sentences about its nature and importance. If the members are quite unfamiliar with the problem, the leader, or someone else, should sketch its history. If members don't understand the discussion method, the leader should explain it so they will know what is expected of them, and when. Leaders are more likely to talk too long in getting the meeting started than too briefly.

Evaluating Discussion: Criteria of a Good Discussion

I. Attendance Records

We have said repeatedly that size may not be an important measure of a meeting. An average attendance of twenty would be plenty for a discussion group; it would indicate failure if the management had planned a series of public forums. Whatever the size, if the attendance steadily decreases, the series can hardly be called a success.

II. Nature and Extent of Participation

The experienced leader, or the trained observer on the discussion team, can judge whether the group members participate freely, keep their contributions relevant, and sustain their interest throughout the meeting. Someone can keep a chart showing how many members speak, the number of participations for each, and whether there is genuine group discussion or a series of person-to-person dialogues. The observer can analyze group contributions and pass judgment on their quality. He may conduct a self-evaluation period at the close of the discussion.

III. Changes of Attitudes

One criterion of a good discussion is the behavior of group members towards those holding other hostile opinions. Is there an increased willingness to listen to the other fellow's point of view? Is there a decreasing tendency to indulge in personalities and name calling? Is there less inclination to be dogmatic? Is there increased skill in making relevant contributions to the discussion?

The leader may also seek information on change of attitudes towards the problem. For his purpose, this need not be done with scientific precision. He may ask members to indicate on an unsigned ballot whether they have formed new attitudes, shifted attitudes previously held, or strengthened their individual beliefs.

IV. Individual or Group Action

The test is whether the discussion has changed individual behavior, or culminated in group action. The results, in either case, may not be immediately apparent. If the group discusses the advantage of home ownership, it may be months or years before a convinced member may be able to buy a home. On the other hand, a discussion of the values of church membership may result in immediate action. A committee or business meeting usually deals with questions requiring group decisions. Here the leader may inquire whether the discussion provided needed information or was otherwise helpful in formulating a solution to the problem.

V. Post-Meeting Conversations

Participants report that the best discussion often takes place after the meeting has adjourned, when people gather in small groups and continue talking until the janitor turns out the lights. If the topic still is talked about weeks or months later, the meeting was a success. If, when the meeting adjourns, the members seem only interested in getting home and speak only of matters unrelated to the topic, the attendance will likely be smaller next time. To get the full value of these post-meeting conversations, the leader may, before adjournment, ask those present to evaluate the discussion and suggest topics for future meetings.

VI. Expressions of Outside Interest

A meeting attended by a small group may set off a whole chain of events. Other groups may discuss the problem; it may be the subject of newspaper editorials or letters to the editor; a minister may preach a sermon on it; or students may choose it for class debates. Such developments would indicate the success of the original meeting.

VII. Evidence of Reader Interest

When their interest is aroused, members of discussion groups are likely to want further information about the problem. Evidence of this interest may be obtained from libraries and book stores. The directors of radio and television discussion programs regard the request for transcripts of the broadcasts as evidence of their effectiveness.