

Tips for Facilitating Small Groups

Self Disclosure: Appropriate self-disclosure helps to make you “real” to the new students and establishes a group norm about what is the “right amount” of self-disclosure for the group. If you talk about your own anxiety as a new student, it can make it more comfortable for them to talk about their own fears. Similarly, when you model self disclosure during the reflection activity, what you say about yourself will set the tone for what others say about themselves. Do keep in mind to not monopolize the discussion.

Keep a positive attitude: Some students enjoy reflective activities; others do not. Some people will be tired; others invested. Your attitude will be absorbed quickly by others. If you stay upbeat and interested, others will follow your lead.

Build trust: Trust is an important element in helping people to feel comfortable throughout the day and especially during reflection. You want to create a safe environment by being clear about what the expectations for the reflection activity are, trying to connect with each participant in some way, and managing any group member’s behaviors that detract from the goals of the reflection.

Invite Participation from the Group: Use strategies that invite the group to be involved in the discussion. For example, follow up short responses with another question that gets a person to expand on their answer or ask the group to respond to a point or perspective raised by that person’s quote. Reward those who take risks by speaking up (e.g., have a reward for the person who volunteers to go first; respond to a “basic” question by saying “Good question!”).

Use Good Listening Skills: Active listening is the key to success in group facilitation. Listen for the feelings behind what a person is saying as well as the content of their words. Address the feelings along with the content when you respond to a question or concern. Be sure to keep good eye contact with the person speaking and use body language that shows you are interested in what they are saying.

Open-ended Questions: Phrase your questions in a way that requires more than a “yes” or “no” response. Begin with words like “how” or “what,” rather than “did” or “do.” Follow-up questions can help you learn more about the speaker’s viewpoint, clarify perspectives, or build connections to other topics.

Share the Wealth: It is not unusual in a group discussion to find that some students are quiet, others are talkers, or that still others are disruptive. As the leader you will need to help the discussion be shared among all participants. For example, you may want to invite students who haven’t yet talked to respond to a question or intervene if particular students dominate by letting them know that you’d like to hear from some others first. If students are disruptive to the group, you may need to politely but firmly ask them to stop the disruptive behavior.

Silence is Golden: Silence can be quite powerful. If your group is slow to respond to a question or inquiry, try letting them sit in silence for a bit. In most cases, someone will work up the nerve to break it.

Appropriate humor: Nothing helps to wipe away anxiety more than a few good laughs. Humor can also help keep people engaged. Of course, be sure that humor is not at anyone’s expense--including your own.

BE Yourself! You CAN do this and it will really go well. Your best strategies are to go in well prepared and then be yourself.