

How Good Are Your Discussion Facilitation Skills?

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Successfully leading and guiding student discussions requires a range of fairly sophisticated communication skills. At the same time teachers are monitoring what's being said about the content, they must keep track of the discussion itself. Is it on topic? How many students want to speak? Who's already spoken and wants to speak again? How many aren't listening? Is it time to move to a different topic? What's the thinking behind that student question? How might the discussion be wrapped up?

Most of us are not trained discussion facilitators. We employ strategies discovered largely through trial and error—things that seem to keep discussions on track, moving forward, and engaging students. Unfortunately, many class discussions don't stimulate thinking or push students to a deeper understanding. Sometimes that's because students aren't prepared, aren't interested in the topic, are reluctant to participate, or think listening to their peers is a waste of time. But sometimes the discussion falls short because it wasn't facilitated well.



How effective are your discussion facilitation skills? Do you have any evidence or are you relying on your impressions? Would some feedback be useful? If so, you'll find in the table below and in a downloadable Word doc an empirically developed instrument that can be used to more clearly identify the various skills involved in effective discussion facilitation and to gather student feedback that can help you assess yours.

If you're interested in how the instrument was developed and validated, here's the reference: Finn, A. N. and Schrodt, P., (2016). Teacher discussion facilitation: A new measure and its associations with students' perceived understanding, interest and engagement. *Communication Education*, 65 (4), 445-462. To request information to use the instrument for research purposes, please contact Amber Finn at a.n.finn@tcu.edu

An article highlighting the research appeared in the December 2016 issue of the *Teaching Professor* newsletter

([reprint available here](#)). As discussed in more detail in the newsletter and fully in Finn and Schrodts journal article, survey responses were used to identify five factors involved in effective discussion facilitation. They are listed on the instrument below. [We removed the factors and statistical data from the version in Word so as not to influence student responses]. The two factors that accounted for most of the variance were affirming students' discussion and organizing the discussion.

In summarizing their research, Finn and Schrodts write that, "when instructors provoke and organize discussions using a variety of questions, employ responses that affirm students, and correct discussions to focus on course content, such behaviors are directly associated with student interest and engagement in the course, as well as indirectly predictive of both outcomes through perceived understanding." (p. 459)

The instrument can be used in a variety of different ways.

- You can use it for self-reflection. How would you rate yourself on each item? Are your skills in one factor area stronger than another? Are there skills you'd like to develop further? You can also use the instrument to help monitor how you facilitate a discussion. Read it carefully just before class, pay attention to these behaviors and then rate your skills after class.
- You could share the instrument with a colleague, invite him or her to observe you facilitating a discussion, and then use the instrument to guide a conversation of what your colleague observed during that discussion.
- You can use the Word doc version of the instrument to solicit student feedback. It can be formatted as a checklist. If you are interested in a more detailed response, you can use a Likert-type scale with 3, 5 or 7 points. Be sure to use an odd number so the scale has a mid-point and do not use more than 7 points.
- You can complete the instrument along with students, either predicting their responses or offering your own assessments that can then be compared with theirs.
- If you are short on time or only interested in soliciting feedback on one or two of the factors, you can simply use the questions listed under those factors.

Once you've collected student responses and had them scored, we strongly recommend talking about the results with students. Tell students what you've learned, what (if any) changes you're going to work to implement, and how they might help improve the discussions you're planning for the rest of the course. If you're comfortable in doing so, you can even share the final results.

Please note: The instrument may be used by individual faculty for formative purposes, but not for research purposes without permission of the authors. The instrument is being shared with the agreement of publisher Taylor Francis and permission of communication scholars Amber Finn and Paul Schrodts, who hold copyright for the instrument.

Teacher Discussion Facilitation Instrument

Provokes Discussion

1. My teacher simulates debates during class discussions.
2. My teacher makes controversial or debatable statements during class discussions.
3. My teacher plays devil's advocate during class discussions.
4. My teacher encourages students to challenge other students' points of view during class discussions.
5. My teacher asks the class whether we agree or not with other students' interpretations during class discussions

Organizes Discussion

6. My teacher organizes class discussions to ensure a structured presentation of material.
7. My teacher helps keep class discussions on track.
8. My teacher redirects class discussions if they are getting too far off point.
9. My teacher organizes class discussions so that there is a clear direction.

10. My teacher directs topics and conversations to make sure the course material is covered during class discussions.

Questions Students

- 11. My teacher asks open-ended questions during class discussions.
- 12. My teacher asks probing questions during class discussions.
- 13. My teacher asks leading questions during class discussions.
- 14. My teacher asks students thought-provoking questions during class.

Affirms Students

- 15. My teacher encourages participation during class discussions.
- 16. My teacher is patient during class discussions.
- 17. My teacher waits for students to answer questions instead of immediately sharing his/her opinion or providing the correct answer.
- 18. My teacher treats students with respect during class discussions.
- 19. My teacher creates a relaxed atmosphere for class discussions.
- 20. My teacher communicates appreciation for student contributions during class discussions.
- 21. My teacher values what students say during class discussions.
- 22. My teacher summarizes and draws conclusions during class discussions.

Corrects Students

- 23. My teacher corrects wrong answers during class discussions.
- 24. My teacher helps us understand incorrect answers provided during class discussions.
- 25. My teacher uses constructive criticism during class discussions.

To collect feedback from your students, please use the Word doc below. The document contains the full list all 25 behaviors, but they've been reordered and are no longer grouped by the five factors researchers identified for effective discussion facilitation.

[Download the instrument.](#)

