

THE ART OF THE DISCUSSION

“Their remarks and responses were like a Ping-Pong game with each volley clearing the net and flying back to the opposition.”
Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Each of us has our preferred presentation styles and our preferred learning styles; for some of us they're the same, for others the two are different. The good news is that at Quest, there are three basic types of formats so there is something for each of our presentation and learning preferences.

- 1. Presentations** defined (again, for our purposes here) as a talk in which a facts and idea are presented and includes defined Q&A pause points.
- 2. Discussions** are exchanges of ideas via conversations or debates about a specific topic, which can be the focus of the full class or one or more parts of a presentation.
- 3. Workshops**, which are groups of people engaging in intensive discussion and/or activity on a particular subject or project.

All formats integrate some form of Q&A to exchange personal anecdotes and expand knowledge. But if you've hesitated to incorporate discussion time into your presentations, take a look at the tips below (Part 3), which might answer provide some ways to handle a more open forum.

First, let's take a quick look at the seven of the benefits of discussions

- 1.** Encourages participation.
- 2.** Increases levels of interest, engagement, and, often, critical thinking.
- 3.** Provides diverse viewpoints.
- 4.** Stimulates interdisciplinary approaches and cross-cultural references.
- 5.** Expands topic references and source materials.
- 6.** Mitigates some fear of sharing.
- 7.** Nurtures a feeling of community.

Now, read the list immediately below. Do any of these common concerns about facilitating a discussion any hit home?

- I've done a lot of research and I won't communicate all information I think is important.
- Someone else will highjack the discussion and I won't be able to control the outcome.
- I'll lose my place and won't be able to get back on track.
- I will lose face if others are perceived to know more.

- I don't think I have enough experience to do this.
- What if no one talks?
- My personal fear is _____

(FYI: Obviously, the more you do it, the easier it gets until it becomes a seamless part of your presentation.)

And, finally, let's look at how easy is to incorporate discussion time(s) into presentations.

Leading a discussion requires skills different from lecturing because your role becomes that of facilitator, or you toggle between presenter and facilitator rather than convey all the facts and information. The good news is that when facilitating a discussion, you don't do all the talking yourself, you don't answer all the questions, and you don't lecture to the group or talk to one person at a time.

Let's move on to some tried and true methods that counter any fear of facilitating discussions.

- **Think out of the box.** Use pre-reads and reporter's tactics (Who, What, Where, When, Why & How). Repeat questions and use people's names.
- You've completed your notes or PowerPoint so now it's time to **review your presentation as a class member**, *not* as the presenter. What questions would you have if you were a listener? At what points do you think others could and would contribute via personal anecdotes, viewpoints, questions, etc.?
- **Create open-ended questions** rather than yes/no ones. Problematize the topic (problem/solution). Ask a rhetorical question or for perspective about the topic. Create a myth/reality scenario for a section of your presentation, then open up the room for an exchange of ideas.
- Allow everyone in the class to **gather their thoughts before speaking** rather than privileging the bold or the entitled, who can otherwise dominate the discussion. "Take a sec to think about this..."
- **Use bridge phrases** to keep the discussion going and people engaged. "You said something interesting; can you expand upon your comment?" "Who else had a similar — or different — experience?" "How could this be different?" "What good could come from this?" "What is meant by...?"
- Point out and **acknowledge differences in discussion**: "That's an interesting difference from what Max just said, Emma. Let's look at where the differences lie." If needed, let each clarify their points before moving on.
Let others answer some of the questions to further engage them. "Anyone want to answer this?"
- **Don't be ruled by the clock.** If people are engaged and on topic, let the discussion continue a bit beyond the time you allocated, even if you won't be able to present everything you planned. After all, you're the only one who will know that you skipped a few slides.

🗨 **Engage people who seem unengaged** — scowling faces, folded arms, avoiding your gaze, closed eyelids — without embarrassing them by asking a simple question of the group: “What do you think?”.

🗨 **Remember**

- o Avoid repetition, debates, discredited or inflammatory phrases.
- o Don't be baited into answering uncomfortable or inappropriate questions.
- o Don't deliberately avoid answering question or appear to be arrogant.

How do I troubleshoot? What if someone does not remain civil, monopolizes the discussion or goes off on a very unrelated tangent? The first is less of a problem at Quest — Questers typically jump in to get things back on track — but all three do happen so it's incumbent upon you to bring the class back with a few key phrases: “Let's hear from someone else.” “Let's keep it friendly.” “Just a reminder, the issue we're discussing is...” (at a moment when the speaker is taking a breath).

Interested in some one-one-one training? Contact Donna Ramer at +1.917.744.2669 or DonnaRamer1@gmail.com. And she usually can be found in the office or classrooms at 25 Broadway.