How to lead and participate in a text-based discussion

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Resource Toolkit
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Raphael: The School of Athens (1510)
1. What is a text-based discussion?

2. Four steps to leading good text-based discussions

3. Dos and Don‘ts

4. Tips for discussion participants
What is the purpose and aim of leading a text-based discussion?

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- develop a deeper understanding of the text
- reflect critically on aspects of the text
- facilitate group think
- learn to argue through interaction and testing ideas
Do not underestimate leading a discussion.

Leading a discussion is a challenging assignment, because it requires:

- a solid knowledge of the base text.
- a well-founded understanding of the general discussions and positions in the literature.
- the ability to deal with situations and inputs ‘on the fly’ as they arise and remain in the driver’s seat.
- to understand and deal with the personalities and whims of discussion participants.
- to order and synthesise inputs.
A good discussion leader...

... guides, focuses, structures the discussion.

... clarifies confusing points.

... allows discussion participants to express their viewpoints and arrive at their own conclusions.

... manages controversy without offending participants.

... is familiar with the literature that is being discussed.

Leading a discussion is the art of managing spontaneity!
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Elements of a moderated discussion

1. Pointed summary
2. Start the discussion
3. Steer the ship
4. Wrap up
1) Pointed summary of the base text.

The initial summary provides the foundation for the discussion.

Summarise with a purpose, i.e. with a view on the discussion:

- Put the text in a larger context:
  - To what kind of issues does it speak?
  - What is the position of the author(s)?
  - How does it compare or contrast with other literature?
- Highlight the main conclusions and contestable hypotheses.
- Establish relations to other texts and positions.

A text-based discussion assumes that everyone has read the text. There is therefore no need to go over it again, point by point.

*The pointed summary should be short, perhaps between 5 and 10 minutes.*
2) Start the discussion.

The beginning of a discussion sets it off on a particular path that may be difficult to change.

Starting a discussion requires extra thought.

**Do not:** “Let’s discuss” is rarely a good way of sparking a discussion.

**Do:**
- Perhaps use a provocative opening statement
- Perhaps highlight controversial claims in the text
- Perhaps draw on quotes from the text
- Perhaps use an engaging illustrative example
3a) Steer the ship.

Leading a discussion is akin to the art of naval navigation. Act as a facilitator of existing currents and winds, bringing them together to get the ship moving, rather than as a unilateral dictator.

Do not go against the winds. Make deft use of them to move ahead.
3b) Steer the ship.

Tools to help steer the ship:

- Visual aids for illustrations, questions, quotes, ...
- Paraphrasing of comments and asking for clarification
- Drawing people in: asking them directly about their position
- Summarising and synthesising to keep track of what’s been said and consolidate contributions
- Redirecting long-winded talkers with questions and introducing new topics

Do not forget to keep track of the time.
4) Wrap up.

Don’t let the discussion just peter out. Close it with a purpose. Summarise and synthesise.

Some possibilities of wrapping up include:
- What has been learned about the text?
- Does the text appear in a new or different light?
- What are the conclusions you have reached?
- What issues remain unresolved and why?

Not everything needs to end in perfect harmony: consensus is often less important than understanding the reasons behind controversy.
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Do: Consider playing *advocatus diaboli*. Discussions benefit from contrasting viewpoints. Consider adopting a position that goes against the grain and backing it up with good arguments.

Challenge people! Don’t let things get all nice, sugar and spice. That will enliven the discussion.
Do: relate statements and points.

The art of leading a discussion relies on bringing things together. Relate statements to, for example:

- the text
- previous statements
- empirical cases
- other positions in the literature
- ...
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When reading the text...

1. Highlight key passages of the text to refer to for further evidence

2. Prepare a short summary of the key points of the text (with page numbers!)

3. Take notes of aspects of the text to which you could respond

4. Develop a stance towards the text:
   - Do you agree or disagree with the author(s)?
   - Where and why do you dis-/agree?
   - Where are the authors‘ claims contestable?
   - How does the text relate to other texts?
During the discussion

1. Paraphrase mentally what other speakers say to check your comprehension.

2. Evaluate silently for yourself what is being said.

3. Analyse how other participants argue their points.

4. Keep track of the discussion, for example through a mind map or a list of bullet points.

5. Keep an open mind! Listen to new ideas and diverging points of view.
When making a contribution...

... consider the following aspects:

- What is your argument?

- How does your argument relate to the discussion?
  - Are you rebutting or reinforcing a previous point?
  - Are you bringing in a new perspective?

- What is the evidence for your argument?

Don’t be afraid to speak up.
Do: Stay close to the text.

Remember: you are discussing on the basis of the text. Do not let discussions go too much astray. Ground them in the text and the statements found in it.

- Be able to back up your statements with references to the text (page, paragraph).
- Check whether what you are contributing relates to the conclusions and hypotheses of the text.
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Don’t: get hung up on marginal issues
Don‘t: launch *ad hominem* attacks

Even when disagreeing with another person‘s viewpoint, do so in a polite and respectful way. A discussion is not a fight.

"You’re all nuts!"