## STRATEGIES FOR STIMULATING DISCUSSION



## HANDBOOK

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U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences

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#### **PREFACE**

The Army trains over a half million Soldiers per year using discussion as an element of most training classes. Little to no guidance, however, is available to military education facilitators regarding how to make discussions effective. As a result, discussions conducted in instructional settings may not effective features for incorporate stimulating, maintaining, or evaluating discussions.

Regardless, numerous military courses incorporate various forms of discussion as teaching methods. Given the importance of engaging in discussions on deployments, as well as in activities at home station and in training, a more active approach to preparing leaders for effective discussion is warranted. The purpose of this handbook is

to provide information and tools that Army facilitators can use to improve the effectiveness of group discussions in a learning environment.



#### INTRODUCTION

Stimulating discussion is both an art and a science. Thus, this handbook is the result of both an extensive literature review and conversations with current military discussion facilitators. This handbook details a number of best practices a facilitator can use to make discussion more effective. Although these best practices are intended for the classroom, many if not all of them can be used in other military settings to improve communication and understanding.

By providing better tools and resources to our military facilitators and leaders, encouraging open discourse about pedagogy and training, and concentrating on improving communication skills, it is the hope of the authors that this handbook will develop reflective leaders capable of collaborative problem solving.



## SECTION 1: ENCOURAGING BROAD PARTICIPATION

It is generally beneficial to have a broad level of participation in discussion. Broad participation tends to maximize the number of different perspectives participants can gain from the group, and it enhances peer learning. Everyone does not need to speak during group discussion, but everyone should feel welcome to participate. The need for broad participation depends on the discussion objectives.

There are four techniques that are useful for encouraging broad participation.

## Technique 1: Creative Structuring

Providing structure for a discussion can encourage greater participation and relieve some of the burden on the facilitator to draw each participant into the discussion. There are two primary methods that can be used to structure discussion.

#### Creating Time for Discussion

Facilitators should be prepared to build in time for classroom discussion. Some topics require more time to discuss than others. Moreover, facilitators should also consider participants' interest and experience with the topic, as well as the learning objective.

Additionally, it can be time-consuming to involve all the participants in a group. Doing so will likely make the level of investigation more superficial. A lottery system can reduce time requirements while increasing participation. The facilitator randomly draws names of participants from a hat each day and those drawn participate in the Critically, the hat discussion. not replenished at the end of each day; thus, every person in the group is eventually called on to participate.

### Creating an Environment for Discussion

Participants should react to and build on previous comments. To encourage this behavior, facilitators can have the participants break out into small groups, or have the participants form a circle where eye contact and non-verbal cues can be easily exchanged while participants engage with each other face-to-face. For this setup, use the techniques detailed in **Section 4**.

#### Technique 2: Tempering Dominant Voices

In group discussions, some people tend to participate more than others. It is important to use strategies that keep certain members of the group from dominating every discussion and draw out ideas from those who are less talkative. Here are some strategies that can be used:

- Establish guidelines and ground rules
   (see Section 2) set the tone.
- Limit the number of comments each participant can make.
- Discourage exchanges between dominant speakers – invite other participants to offer their views.
- Emphasize cooperation over competition – diversity of perspectives is better for learning.
- Know when to cut someone's comment – keep the conversation moving forward by discouraging tangential comments.
- Find a point of connection to a new question or idea. The facilitator may say to the group: "who can help us find the connection, if any, between the last comment and the point in our discussion?"

 If all else fails, confront the individuals in private by asking them to listen more.

It is also important to encourage reluctant participants. There are many reasons why a participant may feel reluctant:

- Introversion
- Fear of looking stupid
- Feeling unprepared
- Fearing a trap
- Feeling unwelcome
- Previous bad experiences
- Maintaining one's cool
- Relying on a talkative facilitator
- Lack of motivation or reward for participating

Identify strategies to increase participation by conversing with the participant and finding the reason for low participation. One way to increase participation is to provide participants with periods of silence in which to think.

## Technique 3: Providing Time to Think

Providing participants with time to organize their thoughts can help them become more confident in participating and can improve the quality of discussion. During this time,

#### Section 1: Encouraging Broad Participation

participants can also briefly write down their thoughts. Participants can reflect on the discussion thus far, considering important points that have been made, potential contradictions that have been identified, or areas that have not been covered. Non-participating participants can be asked their thoughts at the end of this period.

## Technique 4: Keeping Discussion Focused

If the discussion falters or a participant begins to ramble, redirect the focus of the discussion. Although a productive, democratic discussion should be open and fluid, the direction of the discussion needs to be occasionally guided. Allow participants to provide depth, but not to ramble. To facilitate breadth in participation, speakers should offer their honest opinions and supporting arguments, yet not take much time. Discussion can also be guided with questions that encourage critical thinking (see <u>Section 3</u>).



## SECTION 2: CREATING A DEMOCRATIC CLIMATE

## Tools to Create a Democratic Environment

To create a democratic climate, both participants and facilitators must be committed to the learning environment, not just compliant with it.

There are four approaches facilitators can use to create a democratic climate.

## Approach 1: Have Participants Identify Ground Rules

Ground rules can help participants learn what interactions are appropriate and constructive for the group discussion.

Have participants develop the rules so that the participants "own" the rules. Have participants develop a shared concept of what constitutes good and bad discussion, and use that shared concept to lay the ground rules. Consider the following matters when developing ground rules:

- Interruptions and how to handle them.
- Allowing or requiring periods of silence.
- How to move from one speaker to next (e.g., is raising hands required?).
- Should people be called on or just volunteer?
- Should there be limits to the number of comments someone makes at one time?

Ground rules should be written, posted in the room, and provided to all participants. All participants should have a responsibility to monitor group interactions and provide feedback when rules are violated. Consider tying violations to participation grades.

#### Approach 2: Identify and Reward Appropriate Discussion

Motivate participants to contribute to the discussion by grading participation. Be sure, however, to develop a grading rubric that specifically describes behaviors that constitute high quality discussion—simply stating that participation is graded can result in quantity over quality.

Reward discussion that is both high quantity and high quality. Encourage comments that make connections with the comments of others or add a new perspective. This approach will help participants develop a deeper understanding of the topic. Introducing a new resource (e.g., book or article) to share that adds a unique perspective to the topic is also useful for enabling a deeper discussion.

Consider having participants evaluate themselves by having them write their inclass comments on notecards. This approach can increase the participation of lowresponding participants. Also consider having participants evaluate each other the Fishbowl Method (e.g., Attendance and Discussion Participation System; see **Insert 1** and **Insert 2**).

#### Insert 1: The Fishbowl Method

Participants divide into groups of five or six. Each group selects topics to research and discuss. Participants find materials from multiple viewpoints and come up with 8-10 key questions to address during the discussion. One group meets in the center as active participants, while others sit around them to observe and evaluate their discussion using an evaluation form. The facilitator develops the evaluation form using a list of positive and negative discussion behaviors relevant to the topic. Example positive behaviors might be providing a relevant comment or supporting a position with evidence. Example negative behaviors might include distracting or interrupting others. Each group takes a turn meeting in the center, while others serve as evaluators. This method allows everyone to be an evaluator and active participant.

### Insert 2: Attendance and Discussion Participation System

Using the table below, two student evaluators judge the participation of every other student on a given day and all students have an opportunity to serve as an evaluator during the course term. Students earn 0-3 points each class session. Points are totaled and included as part of the individual's grade.

Points	Description
0	Absent from the class or engages in unprofessional conduct, such as using the phone or talking out of turn.
1	Zero straightforward comments or several no-substance comments. See <u>Insert 3</u> .
2	Equivalent of one or two straightforward comments.
3	Equivalent of three or more insightful comments.

#### Insert 3: Types of Comments

#### No-Substance Comment:

- Does not add to the understanding of the topic.
- Exactly repeats what another student said earlier using either the same or different words.
- Content is completely superficial, irrelevant, disconnected, or random.
- Practically says nothing when a detailed response is appropriate.

#### Straightforward Comment:

- Adds to the understanding of the topic.
- Provides enough content to answer the question that was asked. May include some superficial or irrelevant content.
- May use appropriate theory and suggest linkages to what others may have said.

#### Insightful Comment:

- Significantly improves the understanding of the topic.
- Shows substantial depth, fullness, and complexity of thought.
- Makes a creative connection to theory, prior courses, and chapters that takes the class discussion in a new direction.

## Approach 3: Model Democratic Communication

Lectures can come across as authoritarian. By posing questions to the students before and after each lecture, you will be demonstrating to the students that lectures are there to help them understand the subject. Students will begin to see that the

gaining of new knowledge leads to additional questions. Also have students write down and share questions as this will encourage them to think, question, and interact during class. Also consider:

- Introducing alternative perspectives on the topic.
- Providing periods of silence to allow reflection and reaction to materials.
- Introducing periods to identify assumptions that underlie statements in the lecture.
- Inserting brief "buzz groups" into lectures. Students split into small groups of three or four and discuss a targeted question or issue from the lecture. The questions might ask participants to make a judgment about the merits, usefulness, or relevance of a particular aspect of the lecture material.

It is also important to model respectful and effective communication skills. People have a tendency toward defensiveness and poor listening skills, and allowing communication barriers, such as criticizing, ordering, and threatening to impact communication.

Remain open to the ideas and thoughts of others. Accept that one person's knowledge has limits, and that the ideas of others provide value. Promote a positive climate by

#### Section 2: Creating a Democratic Climate

having students focus on examining their own assumptions and evidence.

Additionally, demonstrate effective listening skills. Show attentiveness through body posture and eye contact. The facilitator's body language can have an important impact. Also show reflectiveness through paraphrasing and summative statements. Emphasize the importance of listening by having students repeat the last important point when they start talking.

Finally, avoid using cross-examination tones. Present questions as an invitation to think more deeply about a topic, not as a demand to defend a position. Participants should feel safe in responding to questions.



# SECTION 3: ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Prepare questions in advance that can initiate discussion and encourage the exchange of ideas when discussion slows or gets derailed. These questions should set and maintain an important tone and direction for the discussion.

Reflect on the purpose of the discussion to generate questions. One way to do this is by determining the levels of learning

participants should use during discussion (see the table below).

After identifying the relevant levels of learning, use relevant verbs like the ones in the table below to generate questions.

Questions should be open-ended—they should require answers longer than two words. These answers can then be followed up by asking for more concrete information. Also, avoid assertions phrased as questions. Instead of asking, "do you really believe what you just stated," ask, "why do you think that statement is true?"

Learning	Description	Example Verbs
Remember	Retrieving knowledge from long-term memory	Define, Describe, Identify
Understand	Determining the meaning of instructional messages, including oral, written, and graphic communication	Discuss, Explain, Give Examples
Apply	Carrying out or using a procedure in a given situation	Demonstrate, Relate, Utilize
Analyze	Breaking material into its constituent parts and detecting how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose	Break down, Differentiate, Investigate
Evaluate	Making judgments based on criteria and standards	Assess, Determine, Interpret
Create	Putting elements together to form a novel, coherent whole or make an original product	Develop, Design, Generate

#### Section 3: Asking the Right Questions

Allow participants enough time to think about questions, which will enable the participants to generate deeper and more relevant answers (see examples below). Although long periods of silence might seem awkward, they are useful. Also, do not answer your own questions. Doing so hinders participants' critical thinking, sends a message that their opinions are not valued, and shows them that the answer will be provided to them if they say nothing.

Ask "powerful questions"—ones that:

- Generate curiosity
- Stimulate reflective conversation
- Are thought-provoking
- Identify underlying assumptions

- Generate energy and movement
- Develop deeper meaning
- Inspire more questions

"Powerful questions" are "what," "how," and "why" questions. Also, try to expand the scope of the questions by including broader aspects of the topic. Be aware of the underlying assumptions of the questions and reflect on whether or not they are valid.

Discussion occasionally falters, but certain types of questions can be used to bring discussion back in line. The table below provides some examples.

Question Type	Examples
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Questions that Ask for More Evidence	"What evidence would you give someone who disagreed with you?"
Questions that Ask for Clarification	"Can you provide an example of that?" "Can you explain that further?" "What do you mean by that?"
Open-Ended Questions	Questions that begin with "How?" or "Why?"
Linking or Extension Questions	"How does your comment connect with what was said earlier?" "Does your point challenge or support what was said earlier?"
Hypothetical and Cause-and-Effect Questions	"What might happen if?"  "How might the situation we are discussing be different if?"  "If X were different in this situation, what would be the effect?"
Summary and Synthesis Questions	"What do you think is the most important idea from this discussion?"  "What questions remain unresolved about this topic?"

## SECTION 4: DISCUSSION METHODS

The discussion method the facilitator uses is dictated by the discussion goal.

## Goal 1: Checking Student Comprehension

For this goal, all students need to be observed during discussion. Thus, use methods that keep the group together and encourage all students to participate. The table below presents four possible methods.

Method	Description
Quotes to Affirm and Challenge	Each student brings two quotes to class from an assigned reading: One quote the student would like to affirm and one quote the student would like to challenge.
Hatful of Quotes	The facilitator puts five or six quotes from the assigned reading onto slips of paper. The quotes are placed in a hat and each student draws one quote. Students have a few minutes to think about the quote. Students then takes turns reading and commenting on their quote out loud. Students decide when they want to contribute and can build on previous comments.
Chalk Talk	The facilitator writes a question related to the readings in the center of a board. Students silently write responses to the question, or to others' responses, on the board. Students can draw lines between responses that seem to connect or ones that are very different. People get up whenever they think of something. Long pauses may occur. After a long pause, the facilitator asks if they are done. They then begin to discuss the topic.
Inquiry-Based Question Cluster	In this method, students receive a question cluster before the planned discussion. The basic question reflects an important learning objective from the course, plus a set of interpretive questions, follow-up questions, and an evaluative question. The facilitator directs student-centered discussion to explore the topic. During discussion, students compare/debate various interpretations and engage in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

#### Goal 2: Understanding Diverse Perspectives

An important objective of discussion is having participants learn about and understand different perspectives regarding a topic. In this situation, select a discussion method that facilitates wide participation and encourages divergent perspectives. The table below provides a few examples.

Keep discussion groups at a moderate size to provide both a variety of perspectives and room for everyone to speak. If the discussion group has more than 20 participants, divide it into smaller groups.

Following discussion, have participants share: 1) the most common perspective they

heard, and 2) the most unexpected or unique perspective they heard.

Perspective taking is an invaluable tool when trying to solve complex problems. However, perspective taking is rarely taught, much less practiced. Discussion provides the format for making participants more comfortable with sharing their perspectives and seeking out the diverse perspectives of others. Discussion also provides participants with the necessary practice to become better questioners and seekers of information.

Method	Description
Circle of Voices	The facilitator forms groups, provides a question for discussion, and gives three minutes of silence for participants to organize their thoughts. Each person has one minute to say his or her thoughts, going around the circle in order. Then the discussion opens and participants are only allowed to talk about another participant's ideas that were already shared, unless someone asks a participant to expand on his or her ideas.
Circular Response Technique	Use groups of about 10 participants per group. The groups receive a question or topic. Each participant responds to the person immediately before.
Inside-Outside Circles	The group divides into inside and outside circles. Participants then discuss an identified topic with their paired member of the other circle. After a period of time, one of the circles shifts one step to their left or right and the new pairing has a discussion.

#### Goal 3: Practicing Interpersonal and Cognitive Skills

#### Practicing Interpersonal Skills

Key interpersonal skills such as listening, assertion, conflict-resolution, collaborative problem-solving, and skill selection are very important for Army professionals. If a goal of discussion is to practice these skills, break the class into smaller groups to give each participant more time to practice. The table on the next page describes methods that you can use.

Group discussions can also provide an opportunity to teach about behaviors that are communication barriers (e.g., criticizing, name-calling, diagnosing, threatening). Some of the methods in this book can make these communication barriers apparent. For example, the observers in a Fishbowl discussion would likely give name-calling participants a negative score.

Note that while each discussion method enables participants to practice interpersonal skills, only the Fishbowl method automatically incorporates feedback for participants.

#### Practicing Cognitive Skills

Group discussion is also an excellent tool for developing cognitive skills. Discussion aids in processing information more deeply, which helps students form associations between information learned in class and previously held knowledge. Specifically, students benefit from listening to their peers explain things. Also, students who provide benefit from explanations to others rehearsing the information and becoming aware of the depth of their own understanding.

Discussion can also support higher levels of cognitive development. Use the concepts from <u>Section 3</u> to develop questions and topics for discussion. This approach will guide students toward more advanced levels of learning such as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Also consider modeling critical thinking skills—applying or analyzing issues identified in the readings, evaluating the validity of arguments or the relevance of points, and questioning assumptions.

#### Section 4: Discussion Methods

Method	Description
Structured Buzz Groups	Students are placed in groups of five or less to discuss and agree upon an answer to a controversial question about the topic. If consensus is reached too quickly, the facilitator poses an additional controversial question. Be careful of groupthink when using this method.
Fishbowl	Students are divided into groups of five or six. Each group selects topics to research and discuss. Students find materials for multiple viewpoints and come up with 8-10 key questions to address during the discussion. One group meets in the center as active participants. The others sit around them to observe and evaluate their discussion behaviors.
Circle of Voices	The facilitator forms groups, provides a question for discussion, and gives three minutes of silence for participants to organize their thoughts. Each person has one minute to say his or her thoughts. Then the discussion opens and participants are only allowed to talk about another person's ideas that were already shared, unless someone asks a participant to expand on his or her ideas.
Graffiti Walls	The facilitator provides a prompt and all participants write a response on the board. The group engages in identifying common themes, similarities, differences, unexpected responses, etc.
Inquiry-Based Question Cluster	Students receive a question cluster before the planned discussion. The question reflects a learning objective from the course, plus a set of interpretive questions, follow-up questions, and an evaluative question. During discussion, students compare or debate various interpretations and engage in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.
Simultaneous Reporting	Small groups are formed and each group is given a question or set of questions. Discussions are held regarding the question(s) within each group. The group then writes its answer(s) on a card and all groups report simultaneously. One option is to have each group turn in a paper with its decision and the single most compelling reason for its decision prior to reporting to the large group.
Assign Roles	Assign roles such as: motivating others to contribute, giving direction to the conversation, providing new ideas, bringing in relevant external sources, responding to previous comments, and summarizing existing contributions.

#### Section 4: Discussion Methods

When designing a discussion strategy for practicing cognitive skills, consider students' experience with the desired level of learning Also Section 3. consider importance of structuring the discussion content. For instance, do not divide the class into discussion groups if students are new to engaging in discussion at the desired level of learning. Instead, use the Chalk Talk and Graffiti Wall methods (see **Section 4**) to capture students' initial ideas. Then lead discussion toward the appropriate objective (e.g., analysis) using guiding prompts and questions.

If students are familiar with discussion at the desired level, divide the class into separate groups to allow more students an opportunity to engage in discussion. Consider using the Inquiry-Based Question

Cluster method to guide group discussion and the Simultaneous Reporting method to check each group's progress.

This handbook's methods can be applied outside of the classroom to enhance group problem solving and planning. Applying appropriate discussion strategies in the classroom will model these strategies for students to use on the job. In job settings, if the objective is simply to share information, then just a low level of cognitive processing might be necessary—discussion on how to correctly use a tool would require remembering, understanding, and applying. However, if the objective is to use discussion to analyze a situation for planning purposes or engage in the Army operational design process, high-level cognitive processes such as analyzing and evaluating will be required.



### SECTION 5: EVALUATING DISCUSSION

In addition to considering how students will be evaluated with respect to discussion, it is important to evaluate the discussion itself. There are two key factors to consider in evaluating discussion.

First, it is important to evaluate discussion based on the discussion goals, and there are several ways to do this. One way is to collect anonymous participant surveys that target opinions regarding how effective the discussions were in meeting the goals. Another way is to tailor the evaluations to the specific type of learning that was expected: If the learning outcome is an exam and the discussions did not adequately cover the content of the exam, then the discussions would be evaluated poorly.

Second, it is important to evaluate the quality of the discussion as this provides insight into the discussion skills of the participants. The table below provides nine factors that can be used to evaluate discussion quality. In addition to these factors, any ground rules that the facilitator or class developed for discussion should also be considered.

Factor	(1 - Strongly Agree to 5 - Strongly Disagree)
Hospitality	The atmosphere encouraged students to participate.
Participation	Everyone found ways to contribute.
Mindfulness	Most students paid attention and stayed engaged.
Humility	Students generally valued the ideas of others.
Deliberation	Students used data and evidence to support their arguments. Students were willing to change their opinions based on what they learned.
Appreciation	Students expressed appreciation to others in the group for contributions others made.
Норе	Discussions helped students to understand things better, and to see other perspectives.
Autonomy	Students had independent thoughts and took a stand on an issue when their views differed from the views of others.

#### SUMMARY

By reading this handbook and studying the best practices contained within it, you should be in a better position to effectively facilitate discussion. Participants in your discussions should feel more comfortable sharing their views, even if they go against your views or the views of other participants. Participants in your discussions should also understand how to express their views more effectively. Overall, this will result in better information sharing and less time wasted.

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14. ABSTRACT (Maximum 200 words): The Army's success in countering adversaries requires a capacity to learn and adapt quickly. Passive instruction based on lectures can convey basic facts, but it does not actively engage learners nor does it make use of their prior experience. Engaging in productive discourse can do both. Productive discourse can be applied to many Army learning activities within and outside of a classroom environment. Several large and small group activities are presented to stimulate discussion in classroom learning environments. In addition, strategies are discussed to improve group discussion in military learning environments. The techniques presented emphasize the importance of building on student experience, including diverse perspectives, and reaching synthesis of complex information to create innovative solutions to group problem solving activities. Future research will take the strategies presented in this handbook and apply them to military operational settings for solving complex problems to win in a complex world.

#### 15. SUBJECT TERMS

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