

Making Discussions Work

I was asked to teach a lesson on how to “extend” discussions: how to make discussions grow longer, deeper, or more interesting when the members of the discussion group aren’t pulling their weight.

The truth is, this is a weird thing to have to explain: in *normal* circumstances, when someone doesn’t want to talk, you excuse yourself from the conversation and find someone else to talk to unless you have a very good reason to remain.

Of course, one thing that makes the situation “not normal” is that we’re in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom. People speaking a foreign language may or may not be willing to take risks, but usually in a required EFL class, or feel comfortable expressing themselves. Meanwhile, you may find that your preparations were not sufficient to keep the conversation going for the length of time assigned.

What can you do about it? Well, here are some techniques to consider and try. Some of them work better earlier in the discussion, while others work better in the middle or later on. They’re grouped, in this handout, in three sets, according to when they’re most effective in a discussion.

Early

Suggest a Goal

Give the group a goal at the start of the discussion. Tell people, “Today, I’d like for us to talk about [something], and come to an agreement about what we think about it.”

Start with a basic goal you’d like to achieve by the end of the discussion: *“Today, I’d like for us to come to a conclusion about whether we think the university is correct to have curfews on students living in the dormitory.”*

Follow up by reminding people that a goal exists for the discussion, when people get off topic.

Talk About Experiences

Sharing experiences can give insight into a topic, and also into the diversity of experiences related to that topic. This one doesn’t require your group to be cooperative! This can help people be willing to share their own stories. Don’t share anything too extreme or uncomfortable: your purpose is to get people talking about their experiences about the topic, and to make them interested and comfortable.

Start with your own experience: Tell a brief (1-2 minute) story about your own experience, or the experience of a friend, related to the topic of the discussion.

Follow-ups:

- **How about you? Do you have any experience...** like that?
- **Have you ever...** had an experience related to this topic?
- **How did your experience affect your opinion...** on this topic?

Solicit Opinions

Before you even start in on your topic, ask a question to get the group warmed up. Start with an easy one—preferably a Yes/No question—and then follow up with a question or two asking for more detail:

Example (for a discussion about whether Student Exchange Programs are effective):

Start by asking: How many of you have traveled overseas?

Follow-ups:

- **When did you...** go there?
- **Did you...** meet any local people while you were there?
- **What was...** the hardest part about going abroad?

Lay a Trap

Express an opinion that you think is commonly shared, for the purposes of getting easy consensus on the topic. Then smash the consensus with a thoughtful question or two. This is one way to play **Devil's Advocate**.

Example (for a discussion of the recent rise of feminism in South Korea)

Start by asking: What do you think about the alarming speed that the divorce rate in South Korea has increased?

Follow ups:

- **What would you say if I said...** that the quick rise in the divorce rate is a good thing? That it's an improvement in the lives of women who were once stuck in unhappy marriages?

Middle

Accentuate Disagreement

If some people in your group disagree about something, that's a signal to you that there's something worth talking about. Disagreement—*not* agreement—is what makes a conversation both *interesting* and ultimately *worthwhile*. (Talking with someone you agree with about everything might be a relief at first, but in the end it just becomes boring. Human beings need some disagreement in their lives.)

Start by highlighting disagreement: So, Soobin and Jaehyung, you disagree strongly on this subject. Who agrees with Soobin? Who feels more like Jaehyung? Let's look closely at this disagreement.

Follow up with clarification questions:

- **What do you think about...** Soobin's reasoning, Jaehyung?
- **Is it possible that...** you're both partly right?
- **So, does either of you...** have any evidence to back up your opinion?

Explore Other Perspectives

People often say that “there are two sides to every story,” but that’s a simplification: usually there’s more than two sides to every story. You can go beyond the simple *pro* and *con* positions by asking more interesting questions.

Start by summarizing the two positions, and highlighting that they’re not the only possible ones: So, some people think we need stricter punishments for criminals, and some people think the punishments are strict enough already. But is it possible strictness isn’t the most important aspect of disciplining criminals?

Follow up with exploratory questions:

- **Does anyone know...** about any other systems used to punish criminals in other cultures?
- **What do you think about...** the idea of restorative justice?
- **Do you remember...** the statistics in the article I posted to Blackboard?

Rotate the Question

If everyone in the group shares the same opinion, and you happen to have the same opinion, then this is a useful technique: you should “rotate” the question. That is, “turn the question around” and imagine how it looks from a different point of view. After all, most people in your group are South Korean university students under the age of 26. It shouldn’t be hard to think of some different perspective from which your opinion looks ridiculous.

Start by highlighting the agreement, and your demographic similarity: Well, we all agree, but we have a lot in common, and I think lots of people might not agree with us.

Follow up with a complicating argument:

- **For example, I think...** a lot of senior citizens would argue that Jochiwon should not allow any night clubs to open!
- **I suspect that...** night club owners probably would have trouble making enough money to stay in business in this city.
- **If you were...** a high schooler’s parent, would you want a night club to open here?

Redirect the Downside

In a high-stakes debate, consider a way in which the downside might apply to those who hold the strongest opinions.

Start by highlighting this change: “Okay, so if you think school uniforms are good for students, shouldn’t *universities* also require their students to wear uniforms?”

Follow up with... questions that further explore those blind spots.

- **Don’t you think...** that university students deserve the same benefits?
- **What’s the difference...** between schools and universities?
- **Could it be that...** we have a double standard between kids and adults, regarding this?

Remap the Question

Sometimes **rotating** the question (as above) just isn't enough. Some people will refuse to see the question from another perspective unless you help them make the leap. One thing you can do is "remap" the question in a way that forces the people to rethink their attitude by revealing what's hidden by their blind spot. This helps the other people see their blind spot a bit better. It doesn't always work, but it can.

For example, imagine your classmates insist that divorce is *always* a bad thing.

Start by framing a situation testing the limits of this attitude: "Imagine you're married to someone who is physically and psychologically abusive to you and your children, and someone tells you that it doesn't matter, divorce is still bad. How would you feel?"

Follow up with... questions that further explore those blind spots.

- **Do you think...** that you would stay in a marriage with an alcoholic?
- **What do you think about...** the effect on children of parents in unhappy marriages?
- **How would you feel...** if you discovered that your brother, sister, child, or parent was in an unhappy or abusive marriage, or has a spouse who often cheated on him or her? How about if *you* were in the unhealthy marriage?

Follow the Implications

Consider the implications of what people are saying. If you can find a way to follow the implications of what people are saying to an interesting contradiction, do so!

Start by tracing out the implications of a statement: It's interesting that you think abortion is murder. I guess you think women who have abortions should go to jail for the same length of time as murderers? No? But why not... if it's murder?

Follow-Ups:

- **Are you sure...** that you mean what you're saying?
- **Is there maybe another word we can use...** instead of murder?
- **Maybe we need to talk about...** what we mean when we say "murder"?

End

Build Consensus

This is pretty simple—you look at the discussion and try to find the things people agreed about. However, if your group mostly agreed in the opinions, you should go beyond this to discuss what else is part of that consensus: what do the students in the group share in common, and who *might not* share the consensus?

Build it using questions: "So, is it fair to say we all agree that... [_____]? Does anyone disagree?"

Closing Question

Toward the end of the discussion, it's good to ask a related question that hasn't been mentioned yet—something for the students to think about after they leave the class and consider later on.