

Learning Through Discussion (LTD)

Improving critical thinking skills occurs best not by just learning about them, but by actually using them, and by using them in reading and writing and face-to-face discussion with other critical thinkers. The **Learning Through Discussion** method (LTD) will develop not only our critical thinking skills, but skills of cooperation, interpersonal communication, respect, leadership, and democratic participation. This method will also lead to greater understanding of the readings and course concepts. It will require each student to prepare for each day's discussion by reading and rereading, to actively participate in each discussion, to evaluate his own contribution to the group and to evaluate the contributions of others.

The Eight-Step Process:

1. Checking in	2-4 minutes
2. Vocabulary	3-4 mins.
3. The author's message	4-6 mins.
4. The reasons/major elements of the argument	5-8 mins.
5. Application to other readings	10-12 mins.
6. Evaluation of author's argument/presentation	10-12 mins.
7. Application to self	10-15 mins.
8. Evaluation of group and individual performance	7-10 mins
Total Time	50-60 minutes

Step 1: Checking In (2-4 minutes)

Purpose: to develop rapport and a sense of community.

- Get to know each other.
- Find out how everyone is doing and how the assignment went.
- Keep it short, 20-30 seconds for each member.

Step 2: Vocabulary (3-4 minutes)

Purpose: To make sure everyone knows the key terms from the reading.

- Check each other's understanding of the words.
- Share your discoveries about the words.
- Play a quick game.

Step 3: The author's message (4-6 minutes)

Purpose: To get a general understanding of the author's purpose and main point.

- Discuss/agree on the author's main idea.
- Don't evaluate yet, just get at what he said and what he meant.

Step 4: The reasons/major elements of the argument (8-10 minutes).

Purpose: To understand how the author supports his thesis.

- Major details/reasons
- Minor supports
- Discuss any double meanings or ambiguities in the author's use of the words, in order to establish as clearly as possible what the author means.
- Don't evaluate yet, just get at what he said and what he meant.

Step 5: Application to other readings (8-10 minutes)

Purpose: To understand the larger social/environmental context of the issue and to begin to see its relevance to your own life.

- How the author's ideas compare to other similar topics/arguments you have read or heard about.
- Related arguments or information on the topic are not in his argument.
- Don't evaluate yet, just get at what he said and what he meant.

Step 6: Evaluate the author's argument and presentation (10-15)

Purpose: To make good critical judgments and to determine if the author has a logical and reasonably well-supported argument.

- Apply the ARQ Critical Questions:
- Values, Descriptive assumptions, types and quality of evidence
- Presence or absence of fallacies
- Overall strength/weaknesses of argument
- Do not agree or disagree with the argument--yet.

Step 7: Application to Self (10-15 minutes)

Purpose: To relate the issue to your own experience and to argue well for a position or view.

- Agree or disagree with the author
- Offer your own argument/view of the issue
- Relate your view to those of others in the group

Step 8. Evaluation of group and individual performance (7-10 minutes)

Purpose: To determine how well both the group and individuals functioned to develop a full understanding and critical analysis of the reading.

- Did the group adhere to time limits?
- Were contributions focused?
- Did the leader keep everyone on topic?
- Was the discussion orderly, cooperative, and respectful?
- Did each member contribute productively?
- Did the group accomplish its objectives?

Criteria for Developing an Effective Discussion Group

1. **Each member must attend regularly and come prepared to discuss the material.**
Group members must agree to hold each other accountable for coming *prepared* to explain the material. Failure to prepare harms group cohesiveness and effectiveness.
2. **Group Discussion is a cooperative learning experience.**
Members are not competing for grades, but cooperating and helping one another to learn.
3. **Everyone is expected to participate and interact.**
We come prepared. We share. We interact.
4. **Group sessions and the task of learning should be enjoyable.**
We engage in mutual inquiry, in a friendly, non-threatening environment. The only failure is non-participation. It is the natural condition of man to explore, intellectually, the meanings of the world. And it is intrinsically rewarding, if one does not fear failure, or truth.
5. **The material must be adequately and efficiently covered.**
Adequately: The process and schedule is adhered to, or adjusted to meet the needs of the tasks and objectives at hand.
Efficiently: Participants stay focused, tailoring their contributions to the schedule and avoiding personal digressions.
6. **Daily evaluation of the group process and of each individual's contribution is essential.**
 - o The group evaluates together the day's process and learning.
 - o Each individual evaluates, publicly, his own contribution.
 - o Each individual's contribution, whether negative or positive, is evaluated publicly, honestly, and constructively, by other members of the group.
 - o The goal is always improved learning for all in the group.
 - o Evaluation allows students to:
 - express that they are being helped, encouraged, supported, hindered, intimidated by others.
 - Discover how they are perceived by others as helping or hindering.
 - Enhance group membership through developing solutions to the interpersonal problems that all groups develop.

Four types of statements that help or hinder group facilitation

(which the group needs to spot and perhaps deal with):

1. **Conventional Statements:** are "prework" social statements that the group might start with (EXAMPLES: "Who's playing UCLA tonight?" "I have three midterms this week." "I'm shy and don't like talking in groups.") A few such statements are OK to warm up, but too many conventional statements distract from the goal of LTD.
2. **Assertive Statements:** are also "prework" statements that are designed to assert an opinion but not facilitate discussion (EX.: "This class sucks! That article was boring! I don't believe that crap.") Such statements offer no evidence, do not facilitate anyone's deeper understanding of issues, shut down communication, and are not helpful to the group's analytical learning goals.
3. **Speculative Statements:** ask "work" questions that generate discussion and exploration of ideas, leading to deeper analysis and understanding (EX.: "I'm not sure I really understand the author's reasons for supporting the new immigration bill." "Is his information accurate?" "Do you guys think racism plays a factor in people's position on immigration?")
4. **Confrontive Statements:** are also "work" statements which lead to discussion and development of deeper understanding. They are often attempts to respond to/answer Speculative Statements. (EX.: "Well, what I think the author is saying is..." "It's very hard to prove that racism motivates anyone's position on immigration, even if they have lousy arguments. They would have to say something clearly prejudicial of the race or group." "The writer's evidence seems weak because...") Confrontive statements clarify and synthesize material and are attempts to get at truth. They are often made with apprehension, because the group member may not be certain they are "right" or accurate, but such attempts should not be "shot down." If another member disagrees, he can offer his confrontive analysis in a respectful way.

Group Members' Roles and Skills

A sequence of task roles in a given discussion:

1. **Initiating**
Someone, anyone, needs to get the ball rolling, and anyone can get it rolling again if a lull develops.
2. **Giving and asking for information**
Students are required to state the general message/ideas in the reading. It may be volunteered by one of the group, but if not, it may have to be solicited by the group leader.
3. **Giving and asking for information for reactions**
When one member shares information, other members must respond to that sharing if learning is to take place. If each member just shares his information, and no one reacts to another's statement, no learning will take place, and members may be waiting for their turn, rather than listening.
4. **Restating and giving examples**
One member may simply restate what another member has said, thereby demonstrating whether the first member's statement has been understood. Providing good clarifying examples is invaluable to having your contribution understood.
5. **Confronting and reality testing**
One form of reality testing is to restate the idea just stated, and then diplomatically correct any inaccuracy in it. Unclear or inaccurate statements must not be ignored or learning will not occur.
6. **Clarifying, Synthesizing, and summarizing**
Especially when an idea or topic is complicated, and there are a number of statements made, someone may need to summarize the points made, and then synthesize the restatements.

Overall task roles required in the LTD method:

7. **Gatekeeping and Expediting**
Gatekeeping is making sure the contributions are spread around--everyone contributes.
Expediting is keeping the group on track and moving along through the steps of the process in a timely manner.
8. **Timekeeping**
Someone must keep the group on time through the steps of the process, until the group is able to pace itself automatically.
9. **Evaluating and Diagnosing**
All members must participate in Evaluating, and should be *silently noting during the ongoing discussion* what they will share when the group reaches the final stage in the process.

Nonfunctional Roles that inhibit learning

1. **The silent one.**
LTD must be comfortable for everyone. Active and silent members must work together to determine the reasons for the silence and find ways to help the silent one become productive in the group.
2. **The overparticipant.**
The group's job is to help those who talk easily and frequently to do so pleasantly and to limit comments to the matter at hand, and to speak briefly. Sometimes the frequent contributor needs to wait before speaking to give those who formulate their thoughts more slowly a chance to contribute. The dominant overparticipant tends to control the conversation and be emphatic about his point of view being the right one. The repeater keeps explaining the same thing in different ways, rather than providing an example to illustrate his point first time.
3. **The wanderer**
speaks too soon with a germ of an idea that hasn't been thought through. Sometimes another member can ask the wanderer if "this is what he means..."
4. **The tangent person**
is stimulated by a contribution to begin sharing a related idea without sticking to the problem the group is working at. If a tangential idea seems important and becomes the focus, then some other part of the process will have to be shortened in order to finish on time.

5. **The story teller**
can be very entertaining and create a group warmth or bond, but if the stories are too long or too frequent, the leader needs to diplomatically limit them and get the group back to task.
6. **The insecure talker**
contributes but may be hesitant or ramble, feeling he needs to say something but isn't confident. This type of contributor should be encouraged and complimented for insights and maybe asked to prepare a specific point for the next day's discussion.
7. **The lone dissenter**
can obstinately insist he is right. His idea and reasons should be explored by the group, but then the group needs to move on.

Steps in Preparing for Discussion

Each participant must read the selection ahead of time two or three times as necessary and outline or take notes on each step of the process as he read:

1. **List all the words of which you are unsure.** Look them up and write down their definitions.
2. Write down **your understanding of the author's purpose and main point** or conclusion.
3. Identify and write down the the **major subtopics or supports or reasons** for the author's main point.
4. **Design a question you might ask** about each subtopic or support.
5. Write a statement about **how the author's ideas relate to or support--or contradict--other concepts**
6. Write down **how the material relates to your life/experience.** Write a general statement of **your reaction and evaluation** regarding the author's argument
7. **Evaluate your own understanding** of the assignment, and **your preparation** for the group discussion.

Successful LTD members are committed not only to their own learning but to all group members' learning. That is why in-depth preparation of the assigned material is so imperative.

Active Listening

Good listening in the group is equally as important as speaking. Listen carefully and empathetically. Watch yourself to see if you "tune out" or "turn off," and if you do, ask yourself why. There are a variety of possible reasons:

- When we *compare* ourselves to others, we tend not to listen.
- When we try to *second-guess* what others are saying, we tend not to listen.
- When we *rehearse* what we are going to say next, we are not listening well.
- When we *judge* people negatively ("right-wing," "stupid," "uncool," or some other secret attitude) we tend not to listen.
- When we tend to *adopt* what other people say in order to talk, we tend not to listen.
- When we *give advice*, we tend not to listen.
- When we *placate* (be nice, always agree, never get involved, we tend not to listen.

Active listening requires **courage**: it carries a strong element of personal risk. If you listen with **empathy** (as you should) to understand the point of view of the other person, and see things their way, you risk being changed yourself. That might be threatening to you. But you must be willing to accept the other person and their right to their point of view, whether you agree or not, rather than shutting down yourself or shutting their ideas out. Members who stop listening short-change the group's learning and harm the group's cohesiveness, and it is usually noticeable to others if you have stopped listening.

Group Maintenance Roles for Members

These roles facilitate the group's process and individual satisfaction:

1. **Encourager**
Praises, agrees honestly; accepts others' ideas.
2. **Harmonizer**
Mediates disagreements; relieves tension.
3. **Compromiser**
Comes half way; yields status; admits error.
4. **Expediter**
Encourages and facilitates the participation of others.
5. **Observer**
Records group process' feeds back to group when needed.
6. **Evaluator**
Commentator evaluation. Example: "It might be better if we accepted one definition of this term just for the purpose of this discussion; we seem to be bogged down by definitions."
7. **Follower**
Goes along with the group; *actively* accepts the group's decisions; listens attentively.

Role of the Group Leader:

- The leader ideally *desires* to fulfill the role and its responsibilities.
- The leader guides the group's process.
- The leader will be responsible for evaluating individual participation using a checklist or other rubric provided by the professor.
- When learning LTD, the leader will not actively contribute, but observe and take notes on the process.
- The leader may participate in all-leader groups with the professor as leader, to learn the role.
- The leader is expected to discuss any difficulties with the professor.
- Leaders should compile a list of phone numbers of the group so all member can call one another if having difficulty with the assignment.
- **Grading Checklist:**
 - **10 = A+** Outstanding work.
 - **9 = A** Very excellent work. Students use group to help deepen, extend, and integrate their own and others' work. Others learn from the A student's contributions.
 - **8 = B** Solid, respectable work. Accurate and detailed, but doesn't see extensions, implications.
 - **7 = C** Work is O.K.; knows the general message but not with clarity or depth. Misses details or subtleties. Not really on top of material.
 - **6 = D** Barely passing, doesn't really know the work.
 - **5 = F** No participation; unprepared.

Role of the Professor

- Resource Expert, visits each group at least once a session.
- Not expected to rescue the group every time it encounters difficulty.
- Group trainer
- Trainer of leaders and resource to leaders

You may be asked to complete this page after a group discussion.
Please provide some written remarks as well (honestly and respectfully).

Postmeeting Reaction Sheets (PMRS)

I. Reactions to Group Meeting

Name: _____

Date: _____

Instructions: Mark an X on the line above your response to the following questions.

1. I felt that the group meeting today was:

_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Excellent	Good	Average	Not So Good	Bad

2. I felt that my participation in the group was:

_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Very Good	Good	Average	Not Very Good	Bad

3. My feelings during the meeting were mainly:

_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Very Enjoyable	Pleasant	So-So	Unpleasant	Quite Unpleasant

4. I felt that I learned from the discussion:

_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Very Much	Quite a Bit	Some	Little	Not at All

Remarks:

Source of this material:

Rabow, Jerome et al. **William Fawcett Hill's Learning Through Discussion**, third edition. Waveland Press, Inc., Long Grove, Illinois. 1994

Member Role Inventory

Indicate which of the following roles you played some of the time today,
and which of the roles the group sometimes played today.

Me	Group	Name: _____ Date: _____	Me	Group	
√	√	Positive Roles	√	√	Positive Roles
		Initiating			Gave examples
		Gave information			Asked for examples
		Asked for information			Gave clarification, synthesis, or summary
		Gave positive reactions or opinions			Gave comment on group's movement or lack of it
		Gave negative reactions or opinions			Asked for comment on group's movement or lack of it
		Asked for positive reactions or opinions			Sponsored, encouraged, helped, or rewarded others
		Asked for positive reactions or opinions			Standard setting
		Gave confrontation or reality-tested			Physical movement of objects
		Gave restatement of others contributions			Relieved group tension
		Asked for restatement of others' contributions			
√	√	Negative Roles	√	√	Negative Roles
		Acted with aggressiveness and hostility			Sought sympathy
		Made self-confessions			Pleaded for a pet idea
		Acted with defensiveness			Horsed around
		Was competitive			Was dominating
		Withdrew from participation			Did some status seeking

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