

Reflective Discussion: Why, Who, When, and How

by David J. Voelker

Why use reflective discussion:

- build community
- enhance capacity for open listening
- develop empathy
- cultivate personal reflection
- address feelings and values relevant to learning

Who to engage in reflective discussion:

- students
- colleagues
- community members

When to use reflective discussion:

- as new classes, committees, or groups are forming
- in the midst of a semester or long-term process
- as a class or other group is disbanding

How to use reflective discussion:

- Limit the group size to about thirty or fewer participants.
- Choose an “object” (a very brief reading, poem, song, film clip, photograph, etc.) that is: 1) thought-provoking and open to a variety of interpretations; and, 2) connects with some issue or value that your group has a shared interest in.
- Prepare a plan to kick-start the discussion, such as an opening go-around with introductions and an initial (very brief) response to the object of discussion.
- Plan a few additional questions to help gently lead the group into deeper discussion, especially if the discussion becomes overly fixated on some small issue and seems “stuck.” Have a couple of questions that focus on specific sentences or aspects of the object.
- Briefly go over the general principles (see below) of reflective discussion with the group before you start. Remind participants to set aside any “expertise” about the object, so that everybody is on equal footing in the discussion.
- Resolve to provide only unobtrusive guidance to the group, rather than steering the discussion toward some particular conclusion or resolution that you favor. (This is harder than it seems!)
- Organize the group into a circle. Ask everyone to completely silence and put away their electronic devices. Make a list of the names of everyone in the circle, so that you can call on people by name.

- Be comfortable with periods of silence. Give people time to think. Whenever possible, rely on the group to move the discussion along, but pose questions when necessary.
- As needed, gently remind the group about the basic principles of the reflective discussion.

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For related resources, see <http://davidjvoelker.com/reflective-discussion/>.



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