

Preparing Future Faculty Certificate Program

Leading Discussions in PFF Reading Groups

As you prepare for leading a PFF reading group, you should not only carefully study the readings, you should consider the following guidelines for conducting the group discussion.

1. Before the reading group meeting, the leader should prepare some questions that are open-ended (not questions that elicit “yes” or “no” or very brief responses). These questions should not form the structure of the group’s discussion; instead, they should be used only at the beginning of the discussion or at other points as catalysts to conversation.
2. The role of the reading group leader is to facilitate, not to direct, the discussion. So, toward that end, the leader should attempt to draw into the conversation those people who are more reticent, less vocal, more likely to defer to dominant personalities in the group.
3. As facilitator, the leader should try to draw out the comments of others, perhaps clarifying what others said but doing so in a way that doesn’t become overbearing, domineering, condescending, or expansive. For example, instead of expounding on an ambiguous point made by a participant, the leader could say something like, “I’m not sure I’m clear on what you’re saying. Do you mean... [with *brief* recasting of the point]?”
4. The leader should not spend a long time recapitulating the reading. After all, presumably everyone present has read it.
5. The leader should encourage discussion among participants rather than dyadic back-and-forth between him or herself and individual participants.
6. The leader should have spent time beforehand thinking about the reading so that he or she can focus the conversation on the reading’s most interesting, most provocative, most helpful, or most problematic features.
7. The leader should try to find ways of broadening the conversation beyond the reading. After all, we read these works not just for the content of those individual works but for what they suggest about teaching, research, application in our own lives, and so on. In other words, the readings are springboards to larger issues.
8. The leader should try to cut off—very tactfully and respectfully—those people inclined to ramble on or dominate the conversation. One way of doing that is to find an opening (the speaker takes a breath, for example) and say something like, “That’s an interesting point. I’m wondering if others here see it the same way.”
9. The leader should be comfortable in offering alternative points of view. It isn’t that we’re looking for a debate, but we do want to avoid groupthink. In offering such divergent views, though, the leader must do so tactfully, respectfully, in ways that open up rather than shut down the conversation. One way to achieve that is by using a smile and a

solicitous tone. For example, the leader could smile and say, “Okay, do you mind if I offer another point of view for the sake of argument?”

10. Similarly, the leader should welcome points of view that differ from his or hers and should avoid becoming defensive.