Discussion Leading Insights
from Research and Teaching at UNLV series
September 17, 2014

Maintaining control (over content and process of discussion)
• leader creates an environment of trust in which all explicitly discuss and understand acceptable norms/behaviors, for example:
  o biases are to be expected, and discussed respectfully
  o multiple perspectives are desired
  o all should have opportunities to participate
  o inconsistency with the accepted norms should be respectfully identified and explicitly addressed when they arise
• leader models the accepted behaviors and explicitly indicates when/why s/he employs them
• students can be invited help monitor and maintain the explicitly accepted norms for discussion
• all students can help to monitor the process and content of the discussion, or certain students can be given this task on a rotating basis
• developing a shared agenda for the discussion empowers students to stay on track, and encourages them to help monitor the content and process of the discussion
• it can sometimes be helpful to stop the discussion:
  o to review and confirm everyone is understanding the important points/insights
  o to clarify the purpose/goals of the discussion
  o to allow a moment for silent writing and reflection (especially when conversation becomes strongly emotional)
• it’s helpful to be explicit about why you are curtailing/guiding/reviewing the discussion (for the benefit of the whole group)

The appropriate role of personal experience (and emotions) in a class discussion:
• the role of the personal will vary, depending on the discipline, the topic, and the purpose of the discussion
• it’s helpful to explicitly address and discuss at the outset how personal experience will play a role in the discussion
• individual biases, expertise or areas of weakness are to be expected and can be acknowledged explicitly and respectfully
• remember that even when students have expertise the instructor doesn’t have, it is the instructor’s job to connect the various experiences to the topics/main points of the discussion
• it’s essential to provide a context and framework and to refer back to these to help contextualize students’ accounts of their experience.