

Discussion Leading Insights

from Research and Teaching at UNLV series

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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:
 - biases are to be expected, and discussed respectfully
 - multiple perspectives are desired
 - all should have opportunities to participate
 - 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:
 - to review and confirm everyone is understanding the important points/insights
 - to clarify the purpose/goals of the discussion
 - 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.