**Want Better Group Discussions? Here’s What You Can Do**

Discussing course content with your classmates requires a different kind of conversation than the casual exchanges that occur between students. It’s harder to talk when you don’t know much about the subject or it’s not easily understood. As result, you may find discussions with classmates frustrating. You feel yourself getting more confused and less certain about the answers to questions or problems.

It helps to understand how discussions work and what comments you can make to help the group. You already know that those participating in group discussions can ask and answer questions; they can offer opinions, others can agree or disagree with those opinions, and group members can do more. The list below offers a collection of different types of comments you can make, and the descriptions highlight what those comments contribute to the discussion.

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| **Analyze** | Make direct references to the content; point things out. |
| **Recall** | Remind others of relevant information that helps to answer the question or solve the problem. |
| **Repeat** | Restate something that’s already been said but use different words to clarify the comment. |
| **Extend** | Suggest further analysis by building on or adding to what others have said. |
| **Claim** | Make a statement that proposes an idea, answer, or solution. |
| **Reason** | Defend a claim by offering evidence that supports the idea, answer, or solution. |
| **Question** | Ask a question about something confusing, not known, or of interest. |
| **Affirm** | Make statement that agrees with what someone else has said. |
| **Focus attention** | Direct the group’s attention to the task or to content relevant to it. |
| **Teach** | Explain something to someone who doesn’t understand or misunderstands it. |
| **Drive discussion** | Keep the group on track; move the discussion forward. What does the group need to do next? |
| **Agree** | Help the group come to consensus after disagreement; get as many group members as possible to agree on the final answer or solution. |
| **Disagree** | Respond to a claim by proposing a different idea, view, or perspective. |
| **Other** | Make a comment that’s off topic, unrelated to what the group is supposed to be talking about. |

All these comments have value—yes, even off-topic comments, provided they don’t sidetrack the group. Sometimes the group just needs to take a break and a deep breath. Some comments, if made too often (e.g., affirming) or not at all (e.g., disagreeing and questioning), erode the quality of the discussion. Others, such as reasoning and driving the discussion, add depth and structure to the exchange.

A good way to become aware of these various types of comments is to listen for them during a discussion, preferably one you’re observing. Following that, it’s useful to start listening to the comments you make. Finally, keeping the above kinds of comments in mind, you can consider which ones might help the group at this point in the discussion and then see what happens if you make those kinds of comments.

**Roles**

When you make the same kind of comments or a combination of them, that can become your role. You regularly ask questions, try to explain things, or recall course content, and the group starts depending on you to perform this role. Here’s a list of some of these roles.

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| **Analyst** | Interprets the content, identifies main points, and describes relevant details |
| **Reasoner** | Shares reasons that justify claims; offers evidence that supports or disputes a particular claim |
| **Generalist** | Makes a variety of different kinds of comments but none often enough to be considered a specific role |
| **Solver** | Offers lots of claims, ideas, and possible solutions but does not support them with reasoning |
| **Observer** | Keeps track what’s happening in the group; recalls useful information presented earlier in the discussion or covered previously in the course |
| **Discussion driver** | Keeps the group moving forward, provides leadership |
| **Affirmer** | Rewords previous claims and agrees with statements made by others |
| **Knowledge facilitator** | Offers explanations that help others understand |
| **Questioner** | Asks for explanations and poses questions that may clarify confusing issues |
| **Minimalist** | Makes few contributions of any sort in the group |

This particular collection of roles was observed in student lab groups. The roles that most helped groups find their way to good solutions were the reasoner and the discussion driver. Unfortunately, the most common roles observed were the analyst and the minimalist. Analysts merely point things out. They don’t make claims or offer reasons that help the group arrive at a decision. Minimalists don’t participate, and that’s not helpful.

You may have preference for one or several of these roles, but people aren’t born into roles. Any of these roles most people can take. If you observe what’s happening in the group, you can figure out which roles in the group are or aren’t being filled and then take those missing roles.

You can learn from and with each other in discussions, but rarely is the process neat and orderly. Yes, teachers can simply give students answers, but that doesn’t teach them how to find solutions when there’s no teacher around. Careful use of these comments and roles will get your group to the right answers and solutions, and you will have found your way there on your own.

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These types of discussion comments and roles were reported in this open-access research article. Clarifying details have been added to some of the descriptions on the handout.

Paine, A. R., & Knight, J. K. (2020). Student behaviors and interaction influence group discussion in an introductory biology lab setting. *CBE—Life Sciences Education, 19*(4). <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.20-03-0054>