

FACILITATION TIPS





Facilitation Tips*

This section contains suggestions and advice for making the Health Literacy Study Circle+ a success. It contains information about the qualities of effective facilitators, helpful advice for moderating group work, and practical solutions to typical challenges.

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Leading a Study Circle

Once a study circle is underway, the study circle leader (i.e., facilitator) is the most important person in terms of success or failure. The leader guides the group toward reaching the goals that have been set by the organizer and the participants. It is the leader's responsibility to stimulate and moderate the discussion by asking questions, identifying key points, and managing the group process. While doing all this, the leader must be friendly, understanding, and supportive.

The leader does not need to be an expert or even the most knowledgeable person in the group. However, the leader should be the most well prepared person in the room. This means thorough familiarity with the reading material.

The most difficult aspects of leading discussion groups include keeping discussion focused, handling aggressive participants, and keeping one's own ego at bay in order to listen to and truly hear participants. Some experience leading small group discussion or meetings is helpful. The following suggestions and principles of group leadership will be useful even for experienced leaders.

HOW TO BEGIN

"Beginning is half," says an old Chinese proverb. Set a friendly and relaxed atmosphere from the start. The goals of the study circle should be discussed and clarified. It is important that participants "buy in" right from the beginning. If you have set up some ground rules for discussions, you should review these at the initial meeting, and you should feel free to note when those rules are being "broken." Remind participants that your role as leader is to ensure that the discussion keeps moving and that everyone has a chance to participate.

Start each session with a brief review of the prior session's activities. You may want to ask that participants volunteer to do this, or you can do it yourself. Recapitulation of the main points will help to make clearer the relevance of the current session. Allow a few minutes for any questions or comments left from the previous session.

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MANAGING THE DISCUSSION

Keep discussion focused on the session's topic. Straying too far could cause each session to lose its unique value. A delicate balance is best: don't force the group to stick to the topic too rigidly, but don't allow the discussion to drift. Most people do not regard a "bull session" as a valuable use of their time.

Do not allow the aggressive, talkative person or faction to dominate. Doing so is a sure recipe for failure. One of the most difficult aspects of leading is restraining domineering participants. Don't let people call out and gain control of the floor. If you allow this to happen, the aggressive will dominate; you may lose control, and the more polite people will become angry and frustrated. Don't be afraid to be firm about saying, "I think you're referring to X...maybe we can talk more about that at a break. Right now, we need to move on."

Draw out quiet participants. Do not allow anyone to sit quietly in the corner or to be forgotten by the group. Create an opportunity for each participant to contribute. The more you know about each person in the group, the easier this will be.

Be an active listener. You will need to truly hear and understand what people say in order to guide the discussion effectively. Listening carefully will set a good example for participants and will alert you to potential conflicts.

Stay neutral and be cautious about expressing your own values. As the leader, you have considerable power with the group. That power should be used only for the purpose of furthering the discussion and not for establishing the correctness of a particular viewpoint. If you throw your weight behind the ideas on one faction in the study circle, your effectiveness in managing the discussion will be diminished.

Use conflict productively and don't allow participants to personalize their disagreements. Do not avoid conflict, but try to keep it narrowly focused on the issue at hand. Since everyone's opinion is important in a study circle, participants should feel comfortable saying what they really think – even if it's unpopular.

Don't be afraid of pauses and silences. People need time to think and reflect. Sometimes silence will help someone build up the courage to make a valuable point. Leaders who tend to be impatient may find it helpful to count silently to 10 after asking a question.

Do not allow the group to make you the expert or "answer person." The point of a study circle is not to come up with an answer, but for the participants to share their concerns and develop their understanding. Don't set yourself up as the final arbiter. Let the group decide what it believes and correct itself when a mistake is made. Asking, "What do the rest of you think?" when you're stumped will almost always take the heat off you.

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Helpful Hints for Facilitators

Study circles require a facilitator who can help focus and structure a discussion and, at the same time, encourage group ownership. The facilitator's main task is to create an atmosphere for democratic deliberation, one in which each participant feels at ease in expressing ideas and responding to those of others.

The study circle facilitator does not “teach” but instead is there to guide the group's process. He or she does not have to be an expert in the subject being discussed, but must know enough about it to be able to ask probing questions and raise views that have not been considered by the group.

Above all, staying neutral and helping the group to do its own work are central to good study circle facilitation. This takes practice and attention to one's own behaviors. Make sure to ask for the group's help in making this work well for everyone.

THE IMPORTANCE OF NEUTRALITY*

- Act as if you are neutral; practice neutrality.
- Encourage and affirm each person.
- Explain your role.
- Be aware of your own “unconscious” behaviors.
- Resist the temptation to step out of the role of facilitator.

*Thanks to the RKI Facilitators' Working Guide.

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TIPS FOR FACILITATING DISCUSSIONS

The facilitator does not need to be an expert on the topic being discussed, but should be prepared for the discussion. This means understanding the subject, being familiar with the materials, thinking ahead of time about the directions in which the discussion might go, and preparing questions to help further the discussion.

- Be prepared.
- Set a relaxed and open tone.
- Welcome everyone and create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere.
- Well-placed humor is always welcome, and helps to build the group's connections.
- Establish clear ground rules.
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- One person speaks at a time.
- Monitor and assist the group process.
- Keep track of how the group members are participating – who has spoken, who hasn't spoken, and whose points haven't been heard.
- Consider splitting up into smaller groups to examine a variety of viewpoints or to give people a chance to talk more easily about their personal connection to the issue.
- When deciding whether to intervene, lean toward nonintervention.
- Don't talk after each comment or answer every question; allow participants to respond directly to each other.
- Allow time for pauses and silence. People need time to reflect and respond.
- Don't let anyone dominate; try to involve everyone.
- Make sure the group considers a wide range of views. Ask the group to think about the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of looking at an issue or solving a problem.

Remember: a study circle is not a debate, but a group dialogue. If participants forget this, don't hesitate to ask the group to help re-establish the ground rules.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DEALING WITH CHALLENGES

Most study circles go smoothly because participants are there voluntarily and have a stake in the program. But there are challenges in any group process. What follows are some of the most common difficulties that study circle leaders encounter, along with some possible ways to deal with those difficulties.

Problem: Certain participants don't say anything or seem shy.

Possible responses: Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact – it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for nonverbal cues that indicate participants are ready to speak. Frequently, people will feel more comfortable in later sessions of a study circle program and will begin to participate. When someone comes forward with a brief comment after staying in the background for most of the study circle, you can encourage him or her by conveying genuine interest and asking for more information. And it's always helpful to talk with people informally before and after the session.

Problem: An aggressive or talkative person dominates the discussion.

Possible responses: As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to handle domineering participants. Once it becomes clear what this person is doing, you must intervene and set limits. Start by limiting your eye contact with the speaker. Remind the group that everyone is invited to participate: "Let's hear from some folks who haven't had a chance to speak yet." If necessary, you can speak to the person by name: "Charlie, we've heard from you; now let's hear what Barbara has to say." Be careful to manage your comments and tone of voice—you are trying to make a point without offending the speaker.

Problem: Lack of focus, not moving forward, participants wander off the topic.

Possible responses: Responding to this takes judgment and intuition. It is the facilitator's role to help move the discussion along. But it is not always clear which way it is going. Keep an eye on the participants to see how engaged they are, and if you are in doubt, check it out with the group. "We're a little off the topic right now. Would you like to stay with this, or move on to the next question?" If a participant goes into a lengthy digression, you may have to say: "We are wandering off the subject, and I'd like to give others a chance to speak."

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Problem:

Someone puts forth information, which you know to be false. Or, participants get hung up in a dispute about facts but no one present knows the answer.

Possible responses: Ask, “Has anyone heard of conflicting information?” If no one offers a correction, offer one yourself. And if no one knows the facts, and the point is not essential, put it aside and move on. If the point is central to the discussion, encourage members to look up the information before the next meeting. Remind the group that experts often disagree.

Problem:

Lack of interest, no excitement, no one wants to talk, only a few people participating.

Possible responses: This rarely happens in study circles, but it may occur if the facilitator talks too much or does not give participants enough time to respond to questions. People need time to think, reflect, and get ready to speak up. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle until everyone has a chance to respond. Occasionally, you might have a lack of excitement in the discussion because the group seems to be in agreement and isn’t coming to grips with the tensions inherent in the issue. In this case, the leader’s job is to try to bring other views into the discussion, especially if no one in the group holds them. “Do you know people who hold other views? What would they say about our conversation?”

Problem:

Tension or open conflict in the group. Perhaps two participants lock horns and argue. Or, one participant gets angry and confronts another.

Possible responses: If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas is what a study circle is all about. Explain that, for conflict to be productive, it must be focused on the issue: it is acceptable to challenge someone’s ideas, but personal attacks are not acceptable. You must interrupt personal attacks, name-calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. You will be better able to do so if you have established ground rules that disallow such behaviors and that encourage tolerance for all views. Don’t hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if group members bought into the ground rules, they will support you. As a last resort, consider taking a break to change the energy in the room. You can take the opportunity to talk one-on-one with the participants in question.

Working on Common Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges

Marcelle E. Dupraw and Marya Axner

*Ed. Note: This article first appeared in the Study Circles Resource Center's publication, *Toward a More Perfect Union in an Age of Diversity*. Because of the increasing cultural diversity in all communities across the United States, we include it here as good background for any study circle facilitator.*

We all have an internal list of those we still don't understand, let alone appreciate. We all have biases, even prejudices, toward specific groups. In our workshops we ask people to gather in pairs and think about their hopes and fears in relating to people of a group different from their own. Fears usually include being judged, miscommunication, and patronizing or hurting others unintentionally; hopes are usually the possibility of dialogue, learning something new, developing friendships, and understanding different points of view. After doing this activity hundreds of times, I'm always amazed how similar the lists are. At any moment that we're dealing with people different from ourselves, the likelihood is that they carry a similar list of hopes and fears in their back pocket. – From *Waging Peace in Our Schools*, by Linda Lantieri and Janet Patti, Beacon Press, 1996.

We all communicate with others all the time – in our homes, in our workplaces, in the groups we belong to, and in the community. No matter how well we think we understand each other, communication is hard. Just think, for example, how often we hear things like, “He doesn't get it,” or “She didn't really hear what I meant to say.”

“Culture” is often at the root of communication challenges. Our culture influences how we approach problems, and how we participate in groups and in communities. When we participate in groups we are often surprised at how differently people approach their work together.

Culture is a complex concept, with many different definitions. But, simply put, “culture” refers to a group or community with which we share common experiences that shape the way we understand the world. It includes groups

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that we are born into, such as those defined by gender, race, or national origin. It also includes groups we join or become part of. For example, we can acquire a new culture by moving to a new region, by a change in our economic status, or by becoming disabled. When we think of culture this broadly, we realize we all belong to many cultures at once.

Our histories are a critical piece of our cultures. Historical experiences – whether of five years ago or of ten generations back – shape who we are. Knowledge of our history can help us understand ourselves and one another better. Exploring the ways in which various groups within our society have related to each other is key to opening channels for cross-cultural communication.

SIX FUNDAMENTAL PATTERNS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

In a world as complex as ours, each of us is shaped by many factors, and culture is one of the powerful forces that acts on us. Anthropologists Kevin Avruch and Peter Black explain the importance of culture this way: “...One’s own culture provides the ‘lens’ through which we view the world; the ‘logic’... by which we order it; the ‘grammar’... by which it makes sense.” In other words, culture is central to what we see, how we make sense of what we see, and how we express ourselves.

As people from different cultural groups take on the exciting challenge of working together, cultural values sometimes conflict. We can misunderstand each other, and react in ways that can hinder what are otherwise promising partnerships. Oftentimes, we aren’t aware that culture is acting upon us. Sometimes, we are not even aware that we have cultural values or assumptions that are different from others’!

Six fundamental patterns of cultural differences – ways in which cultures, as a whole, tend to vary from one another – are described below. The descriptions point out some of the recurring causes of cross-cultural communication difficulties. As you enter into multicultural dialogue or collaboration, keep these generalized differences in mind. Next time you find yourself in a confusing situation, and you suspect that cross-cultural differences are at play, try reviewing this list. Ask yourself how culture may be shaping your own reactions, and try to see the world from others’ points of view.

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Different Communication Styles

The way people communicate varies widely between, and even within, cultures. One aspect of communication style is language usage. Across cultures, some words and phrases are used in different ways. For example, even in countries that share the English language, the meaning of “yes” varies from “maybe, I’ll consider it” to “definitely so,” with many shades in between.

Another major aspect of communication style is the degree of importance given to non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication includes not only facial expressions and gestures; it also involves seating arrangements, personal distance, and sense of time. In addition, different norms regarding the appropriate degree of assertiveness in communicating can add to cultural misunderstandings. For instance, some white Americans typically consider raised voices to be a sign that a fight has begun, while some black, Jewish and Italian Americans often feel that an increase in volume is a sign of an exciting conversation among friends. Thus, some white Americans may react with greater alarm to a loud discussion than would members of some American ethnic or non-white racial groups.

Different Attitudes toward Conflict

Some cultures view conflict as a positive thing, while others view it as something to be avoided. In the U.S., conflict is not usually desirable; but people often are encouraged to deal directly with conflicts that do arise. In fact, face-to-face meetings customarily are recommended as the way to work through whatever problems exist. In contrast, in many Eastern countries, open conflict is experienced as embarrassing or demeaning; as a rule, differences are best worked out quietly. A written exchange might be the favored means to address the conflict.

Different Approaches to Completing Tasks

From culture to culture, there are different ways that people move toward completing tasks. Some reasons include different access to resources, different judgments of the rewards associated with task completion, different notions of time, and varied ideas about how relationship building and task-oriented work should go together.

When it comes to working together effectively on a task, cultures differ with respect to the importance placed on establishing relationships early on in the collaboration. A case in point, Asian and Hispanic cultures tend to attach more value to developing relationships at the beginning of a shared project and more emphasis on task completion toward the end as compared European-Americans. European-Americans tend to focus immediately on the task at hand, and let relationships develop as they work on the task. This does not mean that people from any one of these cultural backgrounds are more or less committed to accomplishing the task, or value relationships more or less; it means they may pursue them differently.

Different Decision-making Styles

The roles individuals play in decision-making vary widely from culture to culture. For example, in the U.S., decisions are frequently delegated – that is, an official assigns responsibility for a particular matter to a subordinate. In many Southern European and Latin American countries, there is a strong value placed on holding decision-making responsibilities oneself. When decisions are made by groups of people, majority rule is a common approach in the U.S.; in Japan consensus is the preferred mode. Be aware that individuals' expectations about their own roles in shaping a decision may be influenced by their cultural frame of reference.

Different Attitudes toward Disclosure

In some cultures, it is not appropriate to be frank about emotions, about the reasons behind a conflict or a misunderstanding, or about personal information. Keep this in mind when you are in a dialogue or when you are working with others. When you are dealing with a conflict, be mindful that people may differ in what they feel comfortable revealing. Questions that may seem natural to you – What was the conflict about? What was your role in the conflict? What was the sequence of events? – may seem intrusive to others. The variation among cultures in attitudes toward disclosure is also something to consider before you conclude that you have an accurate reading of the views, experiences, and goals of the people with whom you are working.

Different Approaches to Knowing

Notable differences occur among cultural groups when it comes to epistemologies – that is, the ways people come to know things. European cultures tend to consider information acquired through cognitive means, such as counting and measuring, more valid than other ways of coming to know things. Compare that to African cultures’ preference for affective ways of knowing – that is, knowledge that comes from the experience of something – including symbolic imagery and rhythm. Asian cultures’ epistemologies tend to emphasize the validity of knowledge gained through striving toward transcendence.

Here, in the U.S., with all our cultural mixing and sharing, we can’t apply these generalizations to whole groups of people. But we can use them to recognize that there is more than one way to look at the world and to learn. Recent popular works demonstrate that our own society is paying more attention to previously overlooked ways of knowing. Indeed, these different approaches to knowing could affect ways of analyzing a community problem or finding ways to resolve it. Some members of your group may want to do library research to understand a shared problem better and identify possible solutions. Others may prefer to visit places and people who have experienced challenges like the ones you are facing, and get a feeling for what has worked elsewhere.

RESPECTING OUR DIFFERENCES AND WORKING TOGETHER

In addition to helping us to understand ourselves and our own cultural frames of reference, knowledge of these six patterns of cultural difference can help us to understand the people who are different from us.

An appreciation of patterns of cultural difference can assist us in processing what it means to be different in ways that are respectful of others, not faultfinding or damaging.

Anthropologists Avruch and Black have noted that, when faced by an interaction that they do not understand, people tend to interpret the others involved as “abnormal,” “weird,” or “wrong.” This tendency, if indulged, gives rise on the individual level to prejudice. If this propensity is either consciously or unconsciously integrated into organizational structures,

then prejudice takes root in our institutions – in the structures, laws, policies, and procedures that shape our lives. Consequently, it is vital that we learn to control the human tendency to translate “different from me” into “less than me.” We can learn to do this.

We can also learn to collaborate across cultural lines as individuals and as a society. Awareness of cultural differences doesn’t have to divide us from each other. It doesn’t have to paralyze us either, for fear of not saying the “right thing.” In fact, becoming more aware of our cultural differences, as well as exploring our similarities, can help us communicate with each other more effectively. Recognizing where cultural differences are at work is the first step toward understanding and respecting each other.

Learning about different ways that people communicate can enrich our lives. People’s different communication styles reflect deeper philosophies and world views, which are the foundation of their culture. Understanding these deeper philosophies gives us a broader picture of what the world has to offer us.

Learning about people’s cultures has the potential to give us a mirror image of our own. We have the opportunity to challenge our assumptions about the “right” way of doing things, and consider a variety of approaches. We have a chance to learn new ways to solve problems that we had previously given up on, accepting the difficulties as “just the way things are.”

Lastly, if we are open to learning about people from other cultures, we become less lonely. Prejudice and stereotypes separate us from whole groups of people who could be friends and partners in working for change. Many of us long for real contact. Talking with people different from ourselves gives us hope and energizes us to take on the challenge of improving our communities and worlds.

Cultural questions – about who we are and how we identify ourselves – are at the heart of (study circles), and will be at the heart of your discussions. As you set to work on multicultural collaboration in your community, keep in mind these additional guidelines:

Learn from generalizations about other cultures, but don’t use those generalizations to stereotype, “write off,” or oversimplify your ideas

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about another person. The best use of a generalization is to add it to your storehouse of knowledge so that you better understand and appreciate other interesting, multifaceted human beings.

Practice, practice, practice. That's the first rule, because it's in the doing that we actually get better at cross-cultural communication.

Don't assume that there is one right way (yours!) to communicate. Keep questioning your assumptions about the "right way" to communicate. For example, think about your body language; postures that indicate receptivity in one culture might indicate aggressiveness in another.

Don't assume that breakdowns in communication occur because other people are on the wrong track. Search for ways to make the communication work, rather than searching for who should receive the blame for the breakdown.

Listen actively and empathetically. Try to put yourself in the other person's shoes. Especially when another person's perception or ideas are very different from your own, you might need to operate at the edge of your own comfort zone.

Respect others' choices about whether to engage in communication with you. Honor their opinions about what is going on.

Stop, suspend judgment, and try to look at the situation as an outsider.

Be prepared for a discussion of the past. Use this as an opportunity to develop an understanding from "the other's" point of view, rather than getting defensive or impatient. Acknowledge historical events that have taken place. Be open to learning more about them. Honest acknowledgment of the mistreatment and oppression that have taken place on the basis of cultural difference is vital for effective communication.

Awareness of current power imbalances – and openness to hearing each other's perceptions of those imbalances – is also necessary for understanding each other and working together.

Remember that cultural norms may not apply to the behavior of any particular individual. We are all shaped by many, many factors – our ethnic background, our family, our education, and our personalities – and are more complicated than any cultural norm could suggest. Check your interpretations if you are uncertain what is meant.

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