Discussion Guidelines

Here are some things to keep in mind for our discussions:

1. Be prepared to present your ideas forcefully and to support them with as much care and persuasion as you can. At the same time, be equally prepared to listen to the comments of your classmates. Keep an open mind and do not hesitate to incorporate ideas of other students when you find them persuasively.

2. Don’t wait too long to get involved in the discussion. The longer you wait to participate, the harder it is likely to seem to become involved.

3. Try to be alert to ways to keep the class discussion moving forward. Although this may take some practice, try to find opportunities to build on the comments of others. Comments such as “I do see what Robert is getting at, but I’m still troubled by......” or “Joanna’s point also suggests another way of thinking about the problem...” In this way, discussion moves forward like a “team sport” instead of being a series of “power serves” which can often detract from a meaningful discussion in which everyone participates.

4. Remember that each member of the group has a responsibility to help with the discussion. Even if you are not an extrovert by nature, your opinion is important and you should look for opportunities to participate just as others should make space for your comments.

5. Do not hesitate to admit confusion, to ask for clarification, or simply to be wrong. Most of us do not like to do any of these things, but bear in mind that it is in the process of discussion that thinking and learning goes on. We are not only interested in conclusions. We are interested in developing the ability to reach them, intelligently and systematically. As Majone puts it in his book about evidence, argument and persuasion:” In free debate, persuasion is a two-way interchange, a method of mutual learning through discourse. Real debate not only lets the participants promote their own views and interests, but also encourages them to adjust their views of reality and even to change their values as a result of the process.”

Martha Paas from her class
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