

Activity Reflection by Jack Byrd, Jr.

Activity 1.5 The Role of Values in Collaborative Discussion

Background

This activity was conducted in Industrial Engineering 474 (Team Facilitation). The class consisted of 60 juniors and seniors and met a technical elective requirement in the major. Each class period is 50 minutes in length.

Learning Goals

This activity was used to demonstrate what it takes to facilitate a civil discussion. The instructor would do the facilitation for a discussion involving 6 students from the class. The other students in the class were to observe the facilitation and take notes about practices that they would need to follow when they facilitated discussions.

The second purpose of the activity was to demonstrate what it takes to have a civil discussion on a topic where there are likely to be very divergent perspectives.

Activities

Prior to this class, students had completed a reflection assignment on what it means to be civil and constructive in a discussion. Since all of the students had prior experience with group projects, their knowledge of discussion challenges was very deep. They were able to craft explicit statements of what it meant to be civil and constructive in discussions. The instructor put together a composite list of statements from the class to serve as guidance for discussions in this class.

Prior to this class, students were asked to develop 3-5 personal value statements that would be used in their discussions. The instructor provided a list of his own statements as a guide. These were captured electronically and each student could see the values of other students.

The instructor selected 6 students for demonstration based upon diversity and contrasting values. Of the six students selected:

- Two were women
- One was an international student
- Value statements touched on issues such as economic justice, privacy, individual liberty, faith, and personal rights and responsibilities.

The topic of the discussion was Kelly Farm (see What IF...Scenarios). This scenario was chosen because it challenges the personal values the students wrote about. Students were given the scenario in class.

The instructor began the discussion by asking all students to write down comments on the scenario as they related to their values (e.g., this scenario challenges my concept of economic justice in contrast to responsibility for protection of the environment).

The instructor then captured the comments from the demonstration groups on a flip chart. The instructor was careful to demonstrate proper facilitation techniques such as:

- Asking follow-up questions for clarification or to challenge statements based upon false information
- Asking for contrasting statements
- Showing no emotions as statements were presented
- Calling on group members who were reluctant to speak up
- Enforcing proper discussion etiquette.

The instructor then asked the rest of the class what questions they had about the facilitation. Once the questions were exhausted, the instructor did a debriefing of the activity. The instructor emphasized how each discussion to follow should have a value focus. The point was made that civil and constructive discussions must be based upon values to maintain a true sharing of perspectives.

An assignment was given as follows: "How would a values-focused discussion have prevented the bad discussion practices you have or perceived in prior courses?"

Reflections on this Activity for Future Application

- The debriefing could have been improved if students were given things to look for in the discussion.
- The values statement in the scenario did not contain the divergence of perspectives that were expected. Environmental considerations overwhelmed economic justice concerns.
- The international student was reluctant to speak up and needed to be called upon.
- The value statements from the male students needed further clarification by the instructor in contrast to the statements of the female students.
- Using the instructor's values-statements as a model provided some guidance in what students prepared. The students' statements were well thought out and did not seem to defer to the instructor's.
- The class was fast-paced. Having pre-work prior to class was necessary. It might have been better if the scenario were given to the class in advance and comments prepared prior to class. However, this could have been confusing.