

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE: HOW TO FACILITATE BOOK DISCUSSIONS TO DIALOGUE ISSUES

Source: Juliann Schaffer, MCC AmeriCorps*VISTA, Alma College 2005-2006

Issue(s) Being Addressed:

Book discussion groups have proven to be very popular and effective opportunities to explore difficult topics in a “safe” and supportive environment.

Actions to Consider:

The role of a facilitator in a book discussion is to create an atmosphere where everyone can express his or her thoughts and feelings. The goal is for participants to listen to and learn from different perspectives. The main goal of the facilitator is to maintain safe, respectful group processes. The facilitator will realize that once discussions begin, his or her role is to maintain discussion goals, as topics have a tendency to get off topic.

It has been discovered that having two facilitators works best for book discussions. This allows for one to focus on emotional or group process and the other to pay attention to content and keep the group on track. The facilitators should be able to model differences in perspectives based on their different experiences.

The facilitator is there to maintain that the conversation is open and should help set ground rules, which can be done by presenting the group with the following agreements:

- Listen to each other with respect
- Use “I” statements
- Speak about your own reactions, feelings, and experiences, not those of others
- Do not debate someone else’s experiences
- Do not interrupt others while they are speaking
- Do not dominate the conversation

An effective way to encourage participants to have an open dialogue is to create a safe space or environment for book discussion to take place.

- It is suggested to not have book discussions in public places like the library or at a coffee house, but instead in a room that has a door or a secluded place where others won’t interrupt.
- You can also break the group down into pairs for a limited amount of time. People often feel safer in one-on-one interactions. This also allows for everyone to have an opportunity to speak what is on his mind.

Every book discussion will be different but it is good to remember the following tips:

- Gradually move the group from discussing the book to their personal experiences
- If the discussion lags ask questions from specific sections of the book
- Allow for moments of silence
- Do not simply go from one person to the next. When you hear something that may be a good point for the group to discuss, ask that person to say more
- End the discussion by going around the group and asking, “What’s the next step?” This question may vary with the topic of the book but the general idea holds.

Outcome Achieved:

Facilitators of book discussion groups should be able to provide a safe space for participants to dialogue issues. These book discussions will hopefully lead to additional discussions in smaller groups and get others thinking about topics they might not have addressed.