

Preparing Students for Groupwork That Features Group Discussion

From *Designing Groupwork: Strategies for the Heterogeneous Classroom*
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EPSTEIN'S FOUR-STAGE ROCKET

This is the original task designed by Epstein (1972) to improve discussion skills of any age group. There are some minor adaptations of the original version in the material presented.

Pretest

Explain to the class that in order to prepare for the groupwork they need to learn what it takes to have a good group discussion. Divide the class into five-person groups. Give the groups a highly interesting task to discuss. (Two sample discussion tasks are given after this discussion.) The teacher circulates, listening, observing, and taking notes on examples of good and bad discussion technique. The groups are allowed to discuss for five minutes.

Practicing the four stages

After the pretest, hold a group discussion on what makes for good discussion and what the barriers are. Tell the class that they are going to practice four skills that are necessary so that a discussion can take off like a rocket (use an illustration of a rocket with four stages) by following the instructions given below.

Stage I, Conciseness- "Getting quickly to the point and not beating around the bush."

Select a timekeeper who will watch the clock and keep time for the group. Keep on discussing the subject for five minutes. The timekeeper makes sure that each person talks for only fifteen seconds.

Stage II, Listening- "Paying attention to what is being said."

Select a new timekeeper. Keep on discussing the same subject for five more minutes, again making sure that each person talks for only fifteen seconds. This time, however, each person must wait three seconds after the person before has spoken before he or she may speak.

Stage III, Reflecting- "Repeating out loud to the group something of what the person before you has said."

Select a new timekeeper. Keep on discussing the same subject, making sure that each person talks for only fifteen seconds and that he or she waits three seconds after the person before has spoken before he or she speaks. In addition, everyone who speaks must begin by repeating to the group something that was said by the person who spoke immediately before. This is called reflecting. The person who had spoken before has to nod his or her head to mean yes if he or she thinks this reflection is right. The new speaker may not continue until he or she correctly reflects what the person before has said.

Stage IV, Everyone contributes- "All the people in the group have to speak"

Select a new timekeeper. Keep on discussing the same subject for five more minutes. All previous rules apply, as well as a new one. No one may speak a second time until everyone in the group has spoken.

After each stage ask each timekeeper to report on how well their group did on the skill being practiced. The timekeeper may have other observations to make about how difficult it was and what happened. Remind the class why each skill is important.

Posttest

Select a person as observer who has not yet had a chance to play a role like timekeeper. Hold five more minutes of discussion without having to observe the rules but trying to use the skills of *conciseness, listening, reflecting, and contributions by everyone*. Observers will note down every time they see good examples of each of these behaviors. You may want to create a scoring sheet.

After the posttest, ask observers to tell what they observed. Also ask the whole class what were some of the differences between the pretest and the posttest.

Note: Unless the class has had some previous experience with discussion, you will find that they will finish discussion tasks very rapidly. You will need to have alternative questions or tasks prepared.

IMPROVING GROUP PROCESS SKILLS

The Four-Stage Rocket may be enough to get the groupwork started. However, there are additional skills, especially for group projects, that become more important as groups attempt longer-term, more ambitious projects. One can develop lists of constructive and destructive behaviors for improving group process skills.

Constructive behaviors are ways that help to get the group's work done. A skillful group member

- Has new ideas
- Requests or provides information Explains ideas
- Puts ideas together
- Asks if everyone is ready to decide what to do.

Especially *constructive behaviors* are those that assist with the smooth operation of the group. A constructive group member

- Asks quiet group members what they think
- Listens with interest to what other people say
- Praises good ideas and suggestions
- Is willing to compromise.

Destructive behaviors are common problems that arise in groups and often result in hurt feelings and a poor group product. A destructive group member

- Talks too much
- Listens very little
- Insists on having his or her ideas accepted
- Fails to do something about the destructive behavior of others
- Criticizes people rather than their ideas
- Lets other people do all the work.

Choose a small number of these behaviors that you think are of critical importance based on what you think the group will need or problems that you have observed during discussions. It is always better if the class members can select behaviors that need work on the basis of their own experience. Explain to the class that this exercise will help them with these particular skills.

Divide the class into discussion groups after you have presented to them the set of behaviors they are going to be working on. Always use the same label to refer to the selected behaviors. Select one observer for each group who will write down every time one of these particular behaviors occurs. Draw up a scoring sheet. Take observers aside in advance and make sure they know how to observe these

particular behaviors. Give the groups a discussion topic that they can work on for five or ten minutes.

Stop the discussion and ask observers to report what they have seen and scored. Pull out from the discussion some good strategies that have been used or alternative strategies to deal with problems that have arisen. The same basic format can be used for any number of skills that you think require practice.

SPACE SHIP

The object of this activity is to select seven persons to go into a space ship for a voyage to a new planet. You have just been alerted that a giant meteor is on collision course with the planet earth and will smash into the general area of the United States. Therefore, it is very likely the end of human civilization as we know it. The space ship has the capacity to set up life on a new planet. Eleven persons have been chosen by lot to go on the ship; however, an error was made, and now it turns out that there is only room for seven. Your group must decide which seven persons will go to start life on the new planet. Remember, only seven persons can fit in the ship. You must have an agreement of the entire group before a selection can be made.

1. A 30-year-old male symphony orchestra violin player.
2. A 67-year-old male minister
3. A 23-year-old engineer and his 21-year-old wife (they refuse to be separated)
4. A 40-year-old policeman who refuses to be separated from his gun
5. A male student of your own age from your school
6. A 35-year-old male high school dropout, recently arrested for armed robbery
7. A 32-year-old female sixth-grade teacher
8. A 40-year-old female doctor (medical)
9. A 50-year-old female artist and sculptor
10. A 25-year-old male poet
11. A 1-year-old female child

ALLIGATOR RIVER

Once there was a girl named Abigail who was in love with a boy named Gregory. Gregory had an unfortunate accident and broke his glasses. Abigail, being a true friend, volunteered to take them to be repaired. But the repair shop was across the river, and during a flash flood the bridge was washed away. Poor Gregory could see nothing without his glasses, so Abigail was desperate to get across the river to the repair shop. While she was standing forlornly on the bank of the river, clutching the broken glasses in her hand, a boy named Sinbad glided by in a rowboat.

She asked Sinbad if he would take her across. He agreed on the condition that while she was having the glasses repaired, she would go to a nearby store and steal a transistor radio that he had been wanting. Abigail refused to do this and went to see a friend named Ivan who had a boat.

When Abigail told Ivan her problem, he said he was too busy to help her out and didn't want to become involved. Abigail, feeling that she had no other choice, returned to Sinbad and told him she would agree to his plan.

When Abigail returned the repaired glasses to Gregory, she told him what she had had to do. Gregory was so mad at what she had done he told her that he never wanted to see her again.

Abigail, upset, turned to Slug with her tale of woe. Slug was so sorry for Abigail that he promised her he would get even with Gregory. They went to the school playground where Gregory was playing ball and Abigail watched happily while Slug beat Gregory up and broke his new glasses.

Rank these characters from "best" to "worst" Abigail, Gregory, Sinbad, Ivan, Slug. Give reasons for your decisions.

(Simon, Howe, & Kirschenbaum, 1972, pp. 292-293)

Four Stage Rocket

