Developing Great Discussion Questions

A Resource for INSTE Group Leaders
“Discussion is the procedural glue that holds small groups together. It is the primary method by which we exchange ideas, opinions, and feelings. It serves as a pathway for making group decisions and facilitating interpersonal sharing. Consequently, leading a discussion is one of the most important skills small group leaders must cultivate.”

- Neal McBride in “How to Lead Small Groups, p.89.
Orientation Questions

• It is vitally important to “check in” with students in the beginning of each meeting

• Some good examples of “check in” questions are:
  o What was the high and low point of your week?
  o How was your week?
  o What did the Lord say to you in your studies this week?
  o Please share any prayer requests or testimonies that you have with the group (you may need to put a time limit on this).
Questions are crucial

• **Questions** are the core of good group discussion. They must be clear, relevant, and stimulating. They may be used to open a discussion, gain a deeper understanding by stimulating thinking, or encourage the group to apply the truth to their individual lives.
3 Types of Questions

1. Opening Questions
2. Exploratory Questions
3. Application Questions
Opening Questions

• The purpose of these types of questions is to check the understanding of the students.

• Examples:
  o What is it about human nature that makes it so hard to always tell the truth?
  o What are the distinguishing characteristics from the Gospel of Luke?
  o What are the seven steps to witnessing discussed in this lesson?
  o Why is the Epistle to the Ephesians called a manual on spiritual warfare?

• TIP: The discussion centered on the correcting of the weekly exam will generally fall into this category and will be the bridge to the next type of question.
Exploratory Questions

• The purpose of this type of question is to gain understanding of the topic, verse or facts being considered.

• The goal of these questions is to go beyond initial observation into a deeper understanding.

• Examples:
  o What significance do you see in the fact that each of the four passages on spiritual gifts is different?
  o Why don’t they all list the same gifts?
  o Why should we pray?
  o When you said you didn’t care, what did you mean?

• TIPS: Use these questions to ensure that the understanding of group members is more than just superficial.
Application Questions

• Focused on applying what has been learned both individually and corporately.
• These questions include “what will I do and what must we do?”
• Examples:
  o How has the Spiritual Formation sections of these lessons helped you to develop a consistent prayer life?
  o How has this lesson changed your attitude about witnessing?
  o How are we doing as a group in the area of “one anothering”?
  o How can our church apply the principle that everyone is called to minister according to his/her giftedness?
Application Questions

THESE QUESTIONS OUGHT TO BE THE HEART OF YOUR DISCUSSION TIME!
Questions to Avoid

• Those that can be answered yes or no
• Long wordy questions
• Double subject questions
• Questions within the question
• Either/or questions
• Questions which do not correspond with the level of trust and intimacy in the group
Practice

- Identify each question as good or bad. How could the poor questions be improved?
  - What’s the difference between supplication and petition in prayer and which one do you prefer?
  - How many of you have testified to a Jehovah Witness?
  - Are there key words in these verses?
  - How has studying this lesson helped you in your prayer life?
  - What really impacted you this week in our study of “one anothering”? 
Five Helpful Tips

1. If your group is large, consider asking some questions and have students pair up in order to answer the question in pairs. This will help to foster total participation.

2. Use the questions from the INSTE book itself (Sometimes the book will even say, “you will discuss this in your group meeting”).

3. Ask individuals what impacted them personally from the lesson and why
Five Helpful Tips

4. Be as prepared as possible for each group meeting with several different questions ready to ask.

5. As you get to know the students, try to tailor questions based on student’s experiences and interests.
Listening Skills

Listening well demonstrates to your group members that you care for them. It is impossible to love one another without listening. Here are some things we can do to improve our listening skills.

- Show that you are listening. Tapping a pencil, gazing out the window or thumbing through your INSTE book hardly appears attentive.
- Have good eye contact. 60% of communication is nonverbal (body posture, expression and gestures)
- Learn to concentrate. Don’t let your mind wander.
Listening Skills

• Avoid interrupting. Graciously interrupt only to clarify, not to change the focus of the conversation. Comments like “I know what you mean,” or “My uncle had that happen to him too,” shifts the focus to someone else.

• Clarify messages. Be sure you understand the message before you share your own perceptions. Clarify with statements such as “I heard you say” or “is this what you mean?”

• Develop the gift of brevity of speech. Choose your words well. Give others time to talk.
Why doesn’t INSTE have a “teacher’s edition” textbook?
- Because every group context is so unique. We rely on you to “contextualize” your questions according to your needs and according to the students in your group.
- We want to give you freedom and not give the impression that there is only ONE WAY to do this. The questions that one person would ask are not necessarily the same ones that will matter most to the students in your group.
- To emphasize the relational aspect of the course and not the informational aspect
Traditional vs. Discipleship Model

It is important to arrange the meeting room in order to foster total participation.
Educational principles of the Discipleship model

• The leader is a member of the group.
• The members of the group are face to face, which facilitates dialogue not only with the leader, but also with other members of the group.
• The leader is the guide on the side, not the sage on the stage.
• The students learn to respect and value the opinions of the other members of the group.
• The number of students is limited to 10.
CAUTION

BETRAYAL OF A CONFIDENCE WILL UNDERMINE THE TRUST LEVEL OF THE GROUP
Confidentiality

Confidentiality is the backbone of every small group. Upon this foundation is built the freedom to express personal thoughts, feelings and beliefs. Without it a group quickly deteriorates. Few gifts rival the gift of trust.

It is imperative that what we share in the group stays in the group.
3 Roles of Facilitators

1. Create an inclusive environment
2. Keep discussions constructive and positive
3. Encourage participants

This section is from the Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning from Brown University (Available at the link below)

http://brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/teaching-learning/effective-classroom-practices/discussions-seminars/facilitating
Ways to create an inclusive environment

• Be clear up front about expectations and intentions amongst participants.
• Use inclusive language.
• Ask for clarification if unclear about a participant’s intent or question.
• Treat participants with respect and consideration.
• Develop an awareness for barriers for learning (cultural; social; experiential, etc).
• Provide sufficient time and space for participants to gather their thoughts and contribute to discussions.
• Provide opportunities for participants to share in pairs
Things to Avoid in order to create an inclusive environment

- Use certain conventions or language that will exclude certain groups from understanding the context of the discussion, or make them feel uncomfortable.
- Assume participants all have the same expectations when the group first convenes.
- Over-generalize behavior or have stereotypical expectations of participants (tokenism).
- Use (or allow others to use) disrespectful language or tone, or disrespectful non-verbal communication.
- Convey a sense of self-importance or superiority.
- Allow only the dominant or more verbal participants to take over the conversation.
- Discourage alternate views or counter-arguments.
- Try to be someone else- be yourself.
Keep discussions constructive and positive

- Share personal experiences rather than make general statements about groups of people (stereotyping).
- Ask dominant participants to allow others to speak.
- Give all participants a voice - at the start highlight the value of a diversity of perspectives as an essential part of the process.
- Go over constructive and destructive group behaviors at the start of the course.
- Request that if participants challenge others’ ideas, they back it up with evidence, appropriate experiences, and/or appropriate logic.
Keep discussions constructive and positive

- Try to keep the group on task without rushing them.
- If the group starts to veer in the direction of negativity and/or pointless venting, ask them how they would like to address this.
- Step back when a group is functional/functioning – help participants become independent learners; take control of their learning.
Encouraging participants by

• Asking follow-up questions, and paraphrasing the comments for everyone to ponder. A combination of initiating and probing questions can be an effective approach to bring out participants’ ideas further.
• Asking the contributor for further clarification and/or elaboration.
• Re-visiting past contributions and incorporating them into subsequent discussions.
• Encouraging others to add their reactions or ideas to build on someone’s comment.
• Not being afraid to admit your own ignorance or confusion if you don’t know something – invite others to provide resources, and use the opportunity to discuss with the group how one might go about researching the issue.