

General Suggestions for Leading a Session of the Carolina Summer Reading Program University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Goal-setting.

Please remember: All new students are expected to participate in the Carolina Summer Reading Program but it is not a required part of the first-year academic curriculum. The goals of the Summer Reading Program are:

- to enhance students' participation in the intellectual life of the campus through stimulating discussion and critical thinking around a current topic
- to enhance a sense of community between students, faculty and staff
- to provide a common experience for incoming students.

The strategic and tactical suggestions below are designed to advance one or more of these goals. Sit down in the days before the session to set your goals. If you have goals for your session additional to those above, note them down – it will help you in developing your discussion strategy. As you develop your plan, please keep the expectations for these sessions and the hoped-for learning outcomes in mind.

Expectations of Discussion Sessions

- Students will engage in intellectual discourse, where diverse perspectives are welcomed and encouraged.
- Discussion leaders will “lead” discussion rather than serve as “conversation cops.” Discussion leaders will be active participants in the discussion.
- While study questions are provided as a guide, discussion leaders are encouraged to formulate their own questions.
- Students are encouraged to come up with their own questions related to the book.
- Discussion sessions will have a positive tone and allow for students to gain comfort in discussing a complex set of issues in a group with whom they are not familiar.

Learning Outcomes

1. Students will have a greater understanding (personal definition) of their “place” in society. (Identity)
2. Students will be challenged to understand why they think and/or feel the way they do about the book. (Critical Thinking)
3. Students will learn to use active listening techniques while engaging in group discussion. (Practical Competencies)

4. Students will articulate their personal perspective on a particular subject, recognizing there are multiple perspectives. (Practical Competencies, Appreciation of Human Difference)
5. Students will understand and appreciate their differences and similarities. (Appreciation of Human Difference).
6. Students will gain an appreciation of civility. (Civil Responsibility)

Designing a strategy for the discussion session.

In the days before the discussion session, design your strategy. Remember that you and the participants will have at least two things in common: the text of the book, and the materials posted on the Summer Reading Program website. How will you use these materials to achieve your goals?

- Examine the list of questions suggested by the Summer Reading Program committee to see if there are avenues of inquiry that particularly appeal to you. Based on your reading of the book, list the questions and issues that you feel are important and identify themes or threads that suggest a questioning strategy for the discussion.
- You will certainly have themes of your own as well. If you teach, you might consider how you would connect these themes to themes in your courses.
- Develop an activity around each overarching theme. For most of us, the activity will be a group discussion. Remember, however, that you can be imaginative in mixing up the pace of the session. You can ask the students to work in small groups, you can ask them to play roles, you can ask them to choose sides for a debate, or you can ask them to write and share a paragraph in response to the theme in question.
- Develop a schedule. Some activities will logically precede others.
- Plan for flexibility. Given our goals, it will be important that we have time in our sessions for the students to raise their own issues. Your strategy should be flexible enough to welcome such “digressions”.
- If you have a co-facilitator, share your plan and decide how you will share the responsibility for facilitating the discussion. For example, you may prefer to pass the lead back and forth on a regular basis (without regard for the underlying plan) or divide the discussion into segments based on your respective interests in the focus for each section. You might decide that you will share the lead equally, without dividing up responsibility for different parts of the discussion.

Tactics.

Once you’ve listed the activities you’d like to pursue, put together the pieces necessary to implement each activity in the session.

Ice-breakers: Your plan should include time for introductions and establishing ground rules at the beginning and a wrap-up at the end. Use the introductions as a warm-up for the

discussion. For example, the students can introduce themselves and share what they thought were the most memorable parts of the book or important questions that the book raised for them. Help students set the ground rules for the discussion (although you can suggest some rules yourself, it is more effective if students generate them). Sample ground rules might include:

I will:

- be critical of ideas, not people.
- encourage everyone, who is interested and willing, to participate.
- listen to everyone's ideas, even if I don't agree.
- try to understand all sides of an issue.
- seek the best answer to a question rather than try to convince others.
- try not to let my previous ideas or prejudices interfere with my thinking.
- listen carefully to the points that others make.
- stick to the subject.
- avoid overly long stories, anecdotes, or examples.
- provide encouragement and approval to others.
- be sympathetic and understanding of other's views.

Group discussion activities: these will require a set of questions that will prompt the participants to explore the theme you've chosen. It is useful to keep in mind the two basic types of "core" questions:

Convergent questions require simple recall from the text and are useful for establishing a common understanding of the "facts." **Divergent questions** have no single, "correct" answer—they require critical examination of the issues at hand, the assumptions on which arguments are based, and the logic with which they are argued. Convergent questions are best regarded as "foundation work" and should be used sparingly. Divergent questions stimulate discussion and planning should focus primarily on these items.

Good discussion leaders are good listeners. They respond to all student contributions, rewarding responses and encouraging participation. They make few declarative statements during discussions and usually respond to student questions with other questions, using them as building blocks in the architecture of the discussion. They also employ **redirection** skillfully, asking several students the same question, inviting students to respond and evaluate each other's contributions. This technique distributes responsibility for the flow of the discussion and promotes a richer variety of responses.

In these interactions, the discussion leader uses various facilitating questions to prompt, clarify, and extend student contributions. Unlike the base questions for discussion that are planned ahead of time, facilitating questions are employed as needed in the midst of fast-moving discourse. Examples of facilitating questions include:

- Prompting questions—help students organize their thoughts and make connections with other ideas and elements of the text.
- Justifying questions—require that students provide evidence for their opinions or arguments.
- Clarifying questions—check on comprehension, verify understanding.

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Carolina Summer Reading Program

- Comparative questions—require drawing parallels, contrasts with other readings, theories, studies, etc.
- Connective questions—establish links with material or concepts from students' experiences, other readings, etc.
- Extension questions—help students explore the implications of their responses (require elaboration, additional explanation).

Good discussion leaders are also aware of the importance of particular interpersonal skills in promoting discussion. Effective leaders use body language to communicate empathy, interest in the students, and engagement in the discussion itself. Positive body language includes strong eye contact, an open posture, and appropriate facial expressions. They also employ “active listening” techniques such as making reflection/mirroring statements, giving “I’m listening” cues, summarizing and paraphrasing responses, using silence strategically, and making empathetic statements.

Small-group discussions: these will require that you divide the participants into small groups, and that you give each small group a set of transparent instructions on what to achieve. For example, you may give all small groups the same question to answer, and the instructions to report their conclusion to the large group once the small-group work is completed. Alternatively, you could give each small group a different question.

Role-play: for these, you will need a short script for each player indicating his/her motivation. Then the players can address a common question from their different perspectives.

Ideas to keep in mind:

- Arrange chairs in circle, if possible. This allows everyone to have eye contact with everyone else and makes it difficult to avoid being part of the discussion.
- Discussions usually work better if students are asked to consider some questions in pairs or small groups, since they are less inhibited when talking to their peers.
- Students are often most interested in discussing their own identity and how the book relates to them as individuals.
- Ask students to relate to the topic directly, encouraging them to bring their own experiences to bear.
- Give students a quote from the book and ask them to respond.
- Allow questions to grow organically from the discussion
- Don’t be surprised when a question misfires. Ask it again in a different way.
- Remember to go beyond your own “comfort level” when waiting for a response--you’ll find students will produce thoughtful responses if you give them sufficient time.
- Summarize—or ask the students to summarize—the discussion from time to time during the session (since this provides a sense of accomplishment and helps prevent a return to old issues).