TEACHING ASSISTANT’S Guide to How to Lead a Discussion Group in the Classroom

The information below was adapted from the UVic TA Manual (the full version can be found at http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/servicesprograms/taprod/documents/UVicTAManual.pdf). Not all suggestions below may be applicable in all departments on campus. Please use the information as a guide only.

Guidelines for developing your discussion seminars:

Attitude
- One of the most important elements in running a successful seminar is the personal approach of the leader; the leader's attitude can affect the dynamics of the group and both the level and quality of participation. A good leader’s attitude includes excitement, enthusiasm, confidence, respect and efficiency.
- Remember the goal of the seminar. The nature of a good seminar discussion is interaction between the members of the group.
- Make sure everyone understands the goals of the class, what is expected of the student, and what the students can expect of you.
- If communication exists and the students understand the expectations and are confident they can meet those expectations, the sessions will be far more relaxed and will invite discussion of interesting ideas.

Trust
- To make a seminar work you must create an atmosphere of trust between you and the students and among the students themselves. Encouraging the students to get to know and use each others’ names also helps. A good leader must:
  o be open to the students’ ideas.
  o listen carefully and actively.
  o be sensitive to students’ feelings.
  o encourage and direct students’ input.
- The leader should facilitate the discussion so that everyone has an equal chance to be heard and the topic stays on track; factual errors are not left uncorrected.

Preparation
- A good discussion needs planning - don't try to 'wing it.' Start the class by reviewing and planning questions around the material to be discussed.
- Be knowledgeable about the material and expect to answer factual questions. During your preparation consider:
  o which points are useful to the class.
  o what information is needed for the course.
  o which perspectives are useful to increase the students' awareness of the material.
  o the goal of each session.
- Arrange the classroom furniture so that students can participate equally and so that small groups can easily move and form if needed.

**Participation Problems**
- The quiet student
  o One way is to break the class up into small groups which will provide a more comfortable situation for her or him to speak in front of fewer people.
- The domineering student
  o As the facilitator, you can ask for those students who have already contributed to hold back until others have had a chance.
- When the flow of discussion stops
  o Wait a few minutes and allow the students to process the information. If the material is covered before the class-time ends, ask the students if there is anything they want to discuss, or give them time to generate questions.

**Evaluating Student Performance**
- Frequently the TA is called upon to give a grade for students' performances and participation in a seminar session.
- Typically, a new TA spends his or her time discussing such evaluations and how to do it with their course supervisor, their TAC (Teaching Assistant Consultant), and other TAs.
- A possible scale for grading participation might be to give 1 point for showing up and allow the students to earn the other 4 points in participation contributions. If the 5-point scale is too restrictive, expand it.

**Summary**
- It is important to summarize the ideas that were raised throughout the discussion at the end of the class.
- This will help the students organize the issues raised and to create a perspective.