

Classroom Learning Communities (LCs)

EXAMPLE: SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS IN AN INTRO COURSE

Note: This is an example of a ‘classroom learning community’ in which first semester students enrolled in “Transformation of Modern Europe” (the introductory course to the liberal education major, Studium Individuale) are in smaller groups during class time and run their own discussions. This document contains the following materials:

- Description from the syllabus
- Discussion hosting guide distributed to students during the first week of the course

Session Description from Syllabus:

The course is designed in a specific format: the fourteen sessions on Tuesday afternoons form the core sessions. Each session addresses the great historical transformation, e.g. secularisation, the rise of market economies, the emergence of modern democracy. In a short introduction, the teacher will highlight the contemporary relevance of the issue at hand. Thereafter, students will discuss, in groups of 8-10, the respective transformation on the basis of an assigned analytical reading. Each student in the small group will take a turn as the ‘discussion host for each session’. Please see the discussion hosting guide for more details.

DISCUSSION HOSTING GUIDE

In the first half of each session in weeks 3 - 12 (aside from our mid-semester review session), we will work in four subgroups aimed at facilitating student-led, discussion-based learning.

Each of these small group discussions will be ‘hosted’ by one of you. By the end of the semester, everyone will have been a host to your respective subgroup. Each small group has 8-10 members. A teacher or tutor will accompany each group, but the topics for discussion will come almost entirely from the students. You can find a schedule allocating hosting responsibilities on myStudy. Feel free to swap dates with other members of your subgroup. Our learning objectives for these small group discussions are:

- to gain a deep understanding of the text and the transformation;
- to apply the analytical concepts of ideas, actors, and institutions;
- and to practice the skill of participating in, moderating and guiding discussions.

Importantly, while the host has a special role during their week, **everyone is expected to prepare for and engage in the conversation every week**. Just as you would want your classmates to be ready to answer and discuss your questions when you are host, you should prepare to do the same for your classmates when they are the hosts.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR HOSTS

You should prepare to host the small group discussion based on the 'analytical' reading. This reading is usually between 15 and 30 pages long. Note that there is always a second, 'canonical' text for each session. This second canonical text is discussed in the plenum, NOT in the small groups. Here are a few tips for when it's your turn to host:

- Guide the discussion: you are NOT asked to act as a teacher or instructor. This is also NOT a presentation. Rather, you should structure the discussion by raising relevant questions and pointing to important aspects of the text.
- Manage timekeeping: make sure that no one unduly overuses their speaking time and that your small group stays within the time limit for each part of the discussion.
- Make sure that everyone can equally partake in the discussion: invite those who have not said anything to pose a question or add a comment.
- Offer thoughts and questions that can take the conversation further, especially when you feel that the discussion reaches premature conclusions or is 'running in circles'.

STRUCTURE OF THE DISCUSSION

The 55 minutes that are allocated for each group discussion are divided into three distinct parts. Each of these parts takes a different approach to engaging with the theme of the session.

PART 1. UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT (20 minutes)

This is the first and most fundamental part of the discussion on which the second and third steps rely. The group is asked to distill the major points that are made by the text so that you reach a common understanding. Identify what is of central importance, and what might be of secondary importance. Distinguish between the main argument and examples that are given.

HOST'S RESPONSIBILITY:

- You should have gained a thorough understanding of the text, its main points and its argument or point of view. For this, you might need to read through parts of the text twice or look up additional information.

- We suggest that you develop some focused questions (between three and four) for this section. You can take inspiration in developing these questions from the ones that are provided in the syllabus.
- During the discussion, you are to ensure that the group stays close to the text. Please do not shy away from, if necessary, calling the fellow students to “stick” to the text.

PART 2. ANALYSING THE TRANSFORMATION (20 minutes)

In this part of the discussion, you are meant to analyse the information in the reading in the context of the relevant cultural, economic, or political transformation of modern Europe.

Some possible questions you could raise are:

- Which new ideas, beliefs, or values came about, and which were questioned and left behind?
- Who were the key agents/actors for the transformation?
- What were the key institutions which emerged out of the institution?
- Whose lives were positively affected by the change? And who was possibly excluded, left behind or made less free by these transformations? (For example, non-citizens, some religious minorities or women were excluded from some human and civic rights and from many of the benefits of scientific and economic development.)
- Lastly, you can address connections of this specific transformation to ones that were discussed in previous sessions.

HOST’S RESPONSIBILITY:

- You are NOT expected to know all possible dimensions of the transformation at hand. Rather, you are to offer thoughtful questions as conversation starters and to structure the discussion.

PART 3. THE IMAGINED FUTURE AND CONTEMPORARY REALITY (15 minutes)

The last part of the small group discussion is imagining the ideal future towards which the actors and institutions of the transformation were trying to shape the world. For example, to what vision were early scientists, industrialists, or political reformers striving? What set of problems or situations did new institutions seek to resolve or manage?

You may want to end your discussion by posing some questions as a group about the extent to which Europe has attained this envisioned future and/or to what extent these actors, institutions and ideas continue to shape our world.

HOST’S RESPONSIBILITY:

- Prepare a question or two that helps foster discussion about how actors imagined the future during this particular transformation of modern Europe. If there were competing visions, try to identify who supported which and how they were different.
- Prepare another one or two questions that help evaluate the contemporary relevance of the given transformation. To give an example: you might discuss the way in which the

ideas of ‘nations’ and ‘the people’ have regained importance in various, be it leftist and rightist, secessionist movements (e.g. in Catalonia).

A SUGGESTED PLAN

We intend this ‘hosting’ also to be a valuable learning experience in a supportive environment. Still, we are aware that hosting a discussion can feel like a daunting task. We therefore offer support along the way and recommend the following plan:

By two Mondays before you host: Have already read the analytical text once, taken reading notes, and jotted down possible questions for each of the three above discussion sections.

By Wednesday before you host: Re-read your notes and drafted questions. Return to the text if any point or term is unclear. Add or revise questions. Reach out to your teachers if you are having problems.

By 10:00 on the Thursday before you host: Share your proposals for questions and content of parts 1 - 3 with the teacher by 10:00 on the Thursday previous to your host session. The syllabus indicates who is the contact for each session.

By Monday before you host: Review any feedback sent from your instructor. Rewrite questions accordingly and finalize them.

Tuesday that you host: Relax! Pose your questions and listen closely to your peers. A teacher or a student tutor will be there to support you.