Group discussions

Many students stay quiet in group discussions or tutorials. That's especially a problem for new students (if they don't feel used to uni) and international students (if their home uni doesn't ask students to debate material for themselves). That means the first challenge is to be **confident**.

Confident

Australian university discussion is like ordinary conversation. It doesn't have to be formal, or brilliant; it works the same way as a bunch of friends in a cafe. There's no special code – just speak as you usually speak.

- *Be interested* in the topic. If you really enjoy it and want to know more about it, shyness won't be a problem.
- As part of that, *get to know the other people*. They're in the same situation as you, so they aren't judging you. At least, know their names.
- *Do any readings* beforehand. Think about your reaction, how you agree/disagree, how you can use it, and what further questions you'd ask. Discussion's a chance to talk about those things.
- Speaking always feels slightly ragged. Writers can edit and revise until it's perfect, but speakers express and test their ideas spontaneously. Suggesting and exploring points one step at a time is how people learn. In discussion, that's normal. *Nobody expects perfection*.
- *Your ideas are important*. Add your views and information, and respond to others. The only stupid thing to say is nothing.

Like any conversation, everyone still follows a few basic rules. These help keep things **clear**, **cohesive** and **polite**.

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Clear

- If something's unclear, **check**. Don't nod and pretend to understand; don't stay quiet and hope people ignore you.
- A good way to check is to **ask questions**. With questions, you can confirm, challenge anything that sounds strange or wrong, and disagree/give your own view (Box 1).
- If others might not understand your view straight away, **be ready to explain** it. You can say it another way, use examples, or use analogies (Box 2).

<u>Rephrase</u>
"In other words…"
"I just mean…"

<u>Give examples</u>
"For instance…"
"Say, like…"

<u>Use an analogy</u>
"It's a bit like…"
"It works the same way as…"

<u>Confirm</u>
"So, does that mean…?"
"Are you saying…?"

<u>Challenge</u>
"Why do you say that?"
"What's the evidence for that?"
"How do you argue that?"

<u>Disagree/Give your own view</u>
"But isn't [X]?"
"How do you explain [X]?"
  (X = reason or evidence against their claim)

Cohesive

- Each comment should **respond to the previous comment**. That means you need to **listen** respectfully to people and **think** about their comments. Agree, disagree, develop, qualify, apply, question – but respond to what they said.
- Again, **asking questions** is a good way to do this. Ask them to explain more clearly, or justify in the face of counter-arguments (Box 1). This shows you're thinking about the idea, shows you're interested, and helps develop/test it through discussion.
- Discussions usually focus on a specific task, topic or set of questions. Your lecturer or tutor should keep it on track, but always try to be **relevant** to its main aim.

Polite

Many students are uncomfortable saying they disagree. If you're new, it can feel presumptuous. If you're international, it can feel rude. In both cases, don't worry. Sensible disagreement helps you think more actively and is useful for the discussion.

<u>Disagree by agreeing</u>
"I see what you're saying, but…"
"I agree with X, but Y."

- Disagree respectfully. Respect doesn't mean agreeing with someone; it means **taking their idea seriously** – think about it, be interested, value it, and respond to it. Insightful disagreement shows much more respect than mindless agreement.
- Your **reasons and argument** are more important than your opinion. Disagree (or agree) by bringing in your own reasons.
- That means you always **respond to the idea**, never to the person.
- If disagreement still feels rude, **start by finding the things you agree with** – then use that to explain the things you disagree with. You can do this in many ways (Box 3).

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