

Tips on Running a Collaborative Learning Session

A collaborative learning environment does not use the traditional format where a speaker, standing at a lectern or podium, presents material to an audience seated in rows before the lectern, and then takes questions from the audience at the end. The collaborative setting is more like a book discussion group where attendees gather around a table or sit in chairs arranged in a circle. Although each session should have a clear “leader” to guide the discussion, this leader need not be the same from session to session.

More important than “who leads” in a collaborative session is the “how” of leading. Your goal is to involve as many attendees as possible in the discussion, to encourage respectful attention to opposing views, and to prevent one or two voices from dominating a session.

This does not mean cutting off a persistent voice. In any such setting, some people will speak more than others. But you can encourage those who are not contributing by asking them to read passages from the book, or to read a pertinent Bible passage. You can ask generally that those who have not yet contributed take the next question. You can follow up on someone’s first contribution with a question that allows them to elaborate on their answer (be sure it’s a simple enough follow-up that you don’t intimidate them!).

You may find the following format useful for conducting the session:

1. Greeting and Introductions

Introduce yourself, ask each person to introduce themselves and, depending on the size of the group, perhaps say what they hope to learn or how they heard about the session. The goal is not to obtain answers to these questions but to “lubricate the voices” (get everyone talking from the start). [You may not need the introductions each time.]

2. Opening Prayer

Use a multi-stanza prayer and go around the room having each person say a few lines of the prayer. Again, your goal is to lubricate the voices and let everyone become a participant from the beginning.

3. Ground Rules (remind attendees of this at each session)

- Everyone is invited to contribute.
- Try not to speak twice until everyone has had a chance to speak once—but don’t force anyone to comment until they are ready.
- Respect each other’s opinions and contributions.

4. Session

5. Closing Prayer (then distribute the Session notes for the next session)