

---

# Preface

"I think you are confusing *studies* with school. *Studies* can be gained from books and other places also," said Bethany to James. Sean added, "I agree with Bethany. If you look at the second to last sentence, he makes fun of *schoolmen*." The students in this European history class were engaged in a lively discussion of what they believed Francis Bacon meant by *studies* in his essay, "Of Studies." The text was dense and less accessible than much of what they had read in the past. After 20 minutes of swimming around the surface, they finally began to dive in. For the next 40 minutes they wrestled with ideas in the text, challenging and questioning the meaning of Bacon's words and their own ideas. The closing question—"What do you think Bacon would think of our schools today?"—yielded perhaps the most animated discussion of the day. Some students built arguments for Bacon being appalled at what they called our "focus on the superficial" whereas others suggested that he would be stunned that schools were open to everyone without regard to wealth or gender.

Later that day, Ms. Suarez, who had been facilitating, and Ms. O'Malley, who had been observing, reviewed the classroom conversation about "Of Studies." Ms. O'Malley was interested in having such conversations in her own classroom but had no experience with them, either as a teacher or as a student. Her questions came quickly, ranging from "Well, I don't think my students will listen to each other. How do I get them to listen?" to "What do you do if the conversation goes completely in a different direction than you planned?" Ms. Suarez answered each question, describing how she prepared for discussion and how she and the students had been working on their skills in different areas of discussion throughout the year. Ms. O'Malley responded, "Yes, I understand everything you're saying, but it seems like it's just instinct for you. It's not for me. What I want to know is how do you do that?"

We have worked with many teachers on leading discussions and have fielded the question of "But how do you do that?" many times. In this book, we will answer that question as completely as we can. This book is written for those who value collaborative inquiry, open-ended questions, and student-centered classroom discourse. Leading

## x ● Leading Student-Centered Discussions

student-centered discussions is something that seems natural for some people and not so natural for other people. Like much of teaching, the role of the teacher in leading a discussion is more than simply following a set protocol or asking a series of questions. Also like much of teaching, leading a discussion can seem to fall somewhere between science, art, and magic, as the facilitator is faced with a constant stream of decisions based on ever-changing student behavior.

Part I of this book describes the science of leading a discussion: What are the basic elements of student-centered, text-based discussions, and how do you plan for such discussions? This section is designed for teachers who are new to this type of classroom discussion or for teachers who have been leading discussions by intuition. Part II delves into the art and magic of leading discussions: What is it that great facilitators do that makes them great, and how do you decide what to do during discussions as the conversation develops? Teachers already familiar with leading discussions might choose to start with this section. Part III offers numerous strategies to address the questions: What do you do when the discussion isn't going well, and how do you continue to improve as a facilitator?

In our experience as teachers, principals, and consultants, we have worked to improve our own facilitation, as well as to help other teachers learn to facilitate discussions. In this work, we have discovered that there are two distinct phases of learning to lead discussions. The first involves learning the fundamentals, which include choosing a text, writing questions, and setting up the classroom. These elements are mostly concrete and easy to grasp, although not necessarily easy to implement. The second and the most critical phase takes place once a teacher has gained some experience with these basic skills and activities. At this point, many facilitators continue to struggle to get students to have thoughtful, energetic, carefully considered conversations. Just as fishing is more than baiting the hook and casting, there is more to facilitating a discussion than basic skills. An expert fisherman knows where and when to cast, as well as what bait to use. Similarly, successful seminar facilitation is built on the excellent decision making of the facilitator.

As teachers who are interested in fostering stimulating dialogue in our own classrooms and the classrooms of others, we have tried to help teachers move beyond the basics and toward an understanding of how they can support students in using talk to come to a better understanding of a text, themselves, and each other. Both authors have had success (and many failures) in their own classrooms getting students to do so, as well as some success teaching others to foster talk in their classrooms. However, we have struggled to understand why some teachers are less able than others to foster this kind of talk consistently, even after they have

demonstrated some mastery of the basic skills. To return to the fishing metaphor, we used to wonder what separates master fishermen from those who can bait and cast wherever they want—yet catch no fish.

We eventually came to the conclusion that identification of issues and decision making were at the heart of successful seminar facilitation. However, we were not sure what those issues or decisions were. We have attempted to be more explicit about a process that is often implicit and even intuitive for some teachers and a total mystery to other teachers. This book describes what we have learned about making that process explicit and using it to help all teachers become skillful facilitators.

Whatever your experience level with facilitating discussions, we hope that we begin to answer that question of “But how do you do that?” in a way that helps you combine the art, science, and magic of discussion in your own classrooms and schools. After reading this book, you should have a better understanding of the entire process of a student-centered, text-based discussion, including the basic skills, as well as what you need to balance as a facilitator and how to achieve that balance. Finally, we hope that you may be able to apply this decision-making framework to other aspects of your teaching in support of students’ learning. With those goals in mind, let us begin our journey together.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We owe much of our learning about leading student-centered discussions to the National Paideia Center and to the thoughtful educators who guide the center’s work, including Terry Roberts, Laura Billings, Cheryl Treadway, and Robin Tilley. In addition, we are indebted to our colleagues on the National Paideia Faculty for sharing their ideas, commitment, and skill as facilitators of both students’ and teachers’ learning. These colleagues are too numerous to name here, but we would like to extend a special thank you to Amy Bender for her detailed feedback on an early draft of this book and to Alice Hart for her feedback on our ideas as a veteran facilitator and principal.

The rest of our learning about student-centered discussions we owe to the teachers and students with whom we have worked. In particular, we thank some of the best seminar facilitators we know: Hunter Credle, Tom Higginbotham, Shoshana Rosenbaum, and Susan Snyder, with whom we have also had the pleasure of participating in many a faculty seminar. We also owe special thanks to the teachers and students across the country who have taught us much about what it means to facilitate and participate in rich, respectful, text-based discussions, and why it is worth doing.