



Introduction

For more than 12 years, I have taught an academic discussion course at Stanford University. I could never find a book that adequately taught students how to participate in and lead discussions. My students had already taken a variety of speaking courses and could traverse a basic conversation. Many had already studied pronunciation and knew the sounds and blends of the sound system. They had studied listening skills and were already entrenched in classes at the university or had numerous opportunities for listening practice with their textbooks, so comprehending the general content they heard was fine. Some had even already taken a presentation course, so they could give a speech in front of the class if given the time to prepare. But my academic discussion course requires a little bit of each of these, so no one book would work. And, I didn't need a big book. I needed a brief book that focused on just the skills and language students would need to use and recognize to be good leaders, allowing enough class time for actual discussion practice. Additionally,

to be a good discussion leader, you need to be a good participant. Therefore, I needed to create materials that allowed students to first become good participants and then good leaders.

In addition to students participating and eventually even leading discussions, students need to realize that speaking in person is not the only type of communicating they will have to do. Many of my students were being challenged by phone interviews for their internships and even more were faced with online interviews using a variety of platforms.

Teaching Speaking Online

In the spring of 2020, students around the world were also taking all their classes online, which changed the way we teach but did not necessarily change our course objectives. When I received the alert on a Friday night near the end of the quarter that the course would finish online, I had one weekend to figure out how my groups were going to lead discussions online. Rather than using the name placards I gave each student to set in front of them in class, students would now have to rely on the Zoom name that appeared on screen. Instead of projecting their PowerPoint to the screen in the classroom and being situated at the front of the room, they would have to share their screens and their Zoom “square” would be wherever it appeared on screen. (At that time, Zoom did not allow users to move “squares.” More

recent Zoom updates allow this so students can “sit” by each other or the teacher can arrange students.)

My students were troopers. We did the best we could. But I realized that students still need to participate in class and in discussions whether they were online or not. The ability to participate and lead on screen is vital to students’ success. Even when we teach in a classroom in person again, the ability to communicate online needs to be content we practice because online conferences, interviews, meetings, classes, and other types of discussions or interactions are likely to continue.

With so many different types of projects and discussions possible, I found one thing that students really worried about most—leading a discussion. It seemed that that was the book to write. If students are taught how to **lead** discussions, they would, by default, also learn and practice the skills and language they needed to **manage** discussions as participants. Thus, *Leading Academic Discussions: What Every University Student Needs to Know* was born.

My next step in the development of this book stemmed from deciding what someone needs to know in order to lead a discussion. When I worked on the first book in this series, *Office Hours: What Every University Student Needs to Know*, I discovered that an office hour meeting has five **moves** and that each of those moves contains certain language the participants use to accomplish the goal or objective of that particular move. For example, Move 4 in an office hour, Negotiating

Academic Business, includes asking for help, asking for advice, clarifying, and making excuses (among others). Knowing the moves and the appropriate language can lead to a successful office hour interaction. There are certain words and phrases one needs to ask for help (and successfully get it). There are ways to make an excuse that are better received than others. Could the same be true of a discussion? Are there moves? Is there certain language associated with each move? Can knowing this language lead all students to being better leaders and better participants? The short answer is yes, although it was less obvious what those moves are and certainly more overlap or blending of the moves.

In summary, this book evolved from years' worth of handouts, interviews, and focus groups with students, conversations with colleagues, scripts of discussions from corpora, recordings of group discussions from my classes, information from former students about their discussions and meetings in their academic and professional settings, and observation of discussions in a variety of departments across campus. Most recently, it included information from my students about what they were experiencing with interactions in their classes once they were all online. After reviewing my notes, I outlined six moves that leaders need to navigate through in a discussion and some language they need to both deliver (as a leader) and understand (from the participants) to lead a successful academic discussion or professional speech event whether that be in person or online. As the six moves took shape, this book

evolved. I hope students and instructors will find it useful on campus. However, meetings and discussions in professional settings are likely to mirror these same six moves, so I believe this book can propel students into leadership beyond academia and into the workforce, no matter what field they choose. If you like this book, you can thank the many students who took my Academic Discussion class at Stanford University because they kept telling me to write this book.

Let the discussion begin!

A Note about Using This Book

This book will teach you about discussions. You will learn the characteristics of a discussion, different types of academic discussions, and the roles people play in those discussions. You will also study some of the factors that might change the dynamic of a discussion, such as gender or content. Then the book will introduce you to the six “moves” that discussions include and the language you will need as you go through each of those six parts—both as a participant in the discussion and as a leader of a group.

While discussions are heavily reliant on words, they are also influenced and affected by other verbal cues, such as pronunciation, stress, pitch, or tone. Speakers need to both notice and use these cues to make their messages clear to other participants. Discussions are more than words and verbal cues. There are other factors that do not involve words at all, yet these

other types of communication also influence the communication. Therefore, a section on non-verbal communication, such as gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact, among others, has been included.

To be a good discussion leader, you must also be a good participant. Even if you never need or want to lead a discussion, you will need the language and knowledge in this book to be a good participant. You will learn that even if you are not the appointed leader, most participants often serve as a leader at different points during a discussion, and they may not even realize it. You also want to develop leadership skills for use beyond the classroom. To help you develop these skills, this book includes *So You Want to Lead a Discussion* boxes, which are designed for students to notice features of participants'—and their own—speaking styles and goals. By observing and analyzing them, you can improve your skills as a participant in academic discussions and become good leaders in academic and professional settings. If students do not aspire to being TAs, discussion leaders, or project leads, this content can be skipped.

The book includes several group activities and rubrics that instructors may use to provide grades or feedback. Robert's Rules of Order, which are formal rules often adopted by organizations, businesses, and governments, are included for your reference. Consider implementing these during one of the discussions in class to try the language and style.

Six video clips of mock discussions (available for free online) accompany this book (www.press.umich.edu/elt/compsite/leading). The word *mock*, by definition, lets you know that these clips are not authentic classroom discussions, but they are included for analysis and critical thinking. The scripts are included with activities that focus students on using the language taught in the book, noticing the moves of a discussion, thinking about better ways to say things, recognizing pronunciation features, observing the different roles participants play, evaluating wording or structure, and/or simply learning new vocabulary and idioms.