

Economics 426

Class Participation

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Students are expected to lead one class discussion during the semester, and to participate when others are leading the discussion. 25% of the overall course grade is based on your class participation: half for your leadership of a discussion, and half for the quantity and quality of your participation throughout the semester.

Our regularly scheduled meetings are on Tuesday from 10:30 AM - 12:20 PM and Friday from 10:30 - 11:20 AM. The student-led discussions will be on Tuesdays, and I will do a conventional lecture on Fridays.

I will lead the classes on Fri Sept 10, Tues Sept 14, and Fri Sept 17. On these dates I will organize the course and talk about chapter 1 of the book. The first student-led discussion will be on Tues Sept 21, and will be based on chapter 2.

From then on, the Tuesday classes will involve student-led discussions. We will cover one chapter per week so the Sept 28 class will be based on chapter 3, Oct 5 will be based on chapter 4, and so on. This will give us enough time to get through all 12 chapters of the book by the end of the semester.

The Tuesday classes are an hour and 50 minutes long. I would like to have a 10 minute break in the middle, so we will have an hour and 40 minutes for discussion time, divided into two blocks of 50 minutes each.

You will have a partner who will help you lead the discussion when it is your turn. The two of you should talk about how you want to divide up the responsibilities. Some teams like to work together all the way through the discussion of an entire chapter, while other people like to have one person do the first 50 minutes and the other do the second 50 minutes. I am fine with either approach.

When it is your turn to lead the class, you will probably have supporting materials such as outlines, lists of questions, graphs, or whatever other materials you find useful. There should be a computer projector available in the classroom that you can use. Please send me copies of all supporting materials after you have finished leading the discussion.

When it is your turn to lead the class on a particular Tuesday, we should have a short chat after the preceding Friday class to talk about topics you plan to focus on, how you intend to run the class discussion, and similar things.

I will say as little as possible on Tuesdays (ideally nothing at all) because I don't want these classes to become lectures. On Fridays I will comment on the class discussion from Tuesday, address unresolved questions, and sometimes introduce new material (economic models and so on). However, when we reach the point where everyone has led the class discussion once, I will start lecturing on both Tuesdays and Fridays.

The rest of this document provides advice about how to lead a class discussion.

The goal of the Tuesday classes is not just to outline the assigned reading. I will assume that everyone has already done the reading to be discussed on a given day, and as a class leader you should assume the same thing. Your goal is to start an interesting discussion among your classmates and keep the class on track.

You should start by presenting no more than 5 minutes of prepared material. The rest of the time should be used for a general discussion in which all students will participate. In your introductory comments you should briefly remind people what this week's chapter is about, and what the main ideas, issues, or arguments are.

You should also come prepared with a number of questions to be discussed by the class as a whole. You might want to share these questions on the screen during your opening remarks, and refer back to them if the discussion starts to lose focus.

There are various ways to move from your opening comments to a general discussion. For example, you can identify a key idea and ask whether anyone agrees or disagrees with it. Of course, the point is not just whether someone agrees, but whether they can give good reasons why. After someone states an opinion, challenge their reasoning or encourage others to do so. Don't simply allow people to say, "I agree" or "I disagree," and then move on to something else (you will run out of topics very quickly if you do!). Another way to start the discussion is to explain and criticize an argument by the author, and ask the other students whether they agree with you or with the author (and why!).

A central purpose of the class discussion is to identify sentences, paragraphs, or sections of the textbook that are not clear, and as a group try to figure out what they mean. When you are the leader, write down some notes about things in the book you don't understand (with page numbers), and ask the other students to discuss what the author is saying. Do the same thing any time you are reading a chapter, even if you are not the leader that week – bring questions to the class about things you would like other people to clarify, and have the page numbers ready.

If everyone comes prepared in this way, the leader can ask people which sections they found confusing, and the class can spend time rereading and discussing those parts in detail. When you are the leader, give people time to look at the book, find the pages involved, and read that section carefully. The goal is for everyone in the class to develop a shared understanding of the book, including the hard parts. If I think something was not clarified sufficiently in the Tuesday discussion, I'll talk about it when I lecture on the following Friday.

You may find that the discussion starts well, but eventually it wanders off in a direction that isn't relevant or productive. It is your job as the leader to steer the conversation back toward the main subject. Also, things sometimes slow down because people have run out of ideas. You should then introduce a new topic for discussion. At this point you will be glad you wrote down a list of topics or questions ahead of time.

An important part of your job as the leader is to separate what is important from what is not. When you are thinking about how to organize the discussion, try to step back from the details and look at the big picture. Ask yourself what are the two or three crucial ideas, and focus on these. It is better to have a deep, thorough discussion of a few central points than a superficial review of many small details.

It is not your responsibility to fill all of the silences that may occur. Your classmates have a responsibility to participate, and you should let them do a lot of the talking. If someone is consistently not talking, ask that person a direct question. Do the same thing if there is a long silence and no one is willing to speak. Everyone in the class should become involved, with no person monopolizing the discussion. Sometimes a few people are very outspoken while others are completely silent. Don't let this pattern continue -- call on the people who are being quiet and get them to participate too.

One thing you can do from time to time is split people up into smaller breakout groups of 3-5 people, and ask each group to spend about 5-10 minutes discussing a particular issue. After the small groups are finished, each group can report back to the class about the conclusions they reached. It is often a good idea for the people who are usually quiet to provide a short report on the ideas that were discussed within their small group.

Another way to get people talking is to ask whether anyone has had personal experiences that are relevant to the topic (maybe from some job they had). You can also describe one of your own experiences and ask whether anyone else has been in a similar situation.

When you are not leading the group, you should contribute your own ideas. Don't make the leader do all the work, and don't be afraid to express an opinion! If you are confused or unsure about something, it is better to raise a question than to be quiet. Even if you are not normally very talkative, make an effort to become an active participant in the class.

Don't be concerned if people in the class do not share your views on every issue. Some of the ideas in the course may be controversial, and open debate is a healthy thing. If someone argues with you, you are welcome to defend your point of view. You are also encouraged to criticize the opinions of your fellow students or those of the instructor. My only request is that you support your arguments with logical reasoning, give equal time to people with different views, and treat others with respect even if you disagree with them.

My most important advice is to do the reading before the class when it will be discussed! When I decide on class participation grades, I will give a lot of weight to whether you

were well prepared and made thoughtful contributions to the discussion, even on the days when you were not personally leading the class.

I will be happy to talk about any aspect of the course, including your role as the leader of a discussion. I will announce some office hours in class, and you are always welcome to send an email (gdow@sfu.ca) so we can discuss questions individually.