



Guidelines for Facilitating Discussion Groups Using CALPRO Research Digests, Research Summaries, and Research Bibliographies

Discussion Groups Contribute to Site-based Professional Development

As part of its research-to-practice initiative to make research accessible to adult literacy educators, CALPRO produces research digests, research summaries, and research bibliographies on topics that are both timely and important to the practice of adult literacy education. When these publications are used as the focus of practitioner discussion groups, they can contribute to the professional growth of staff of adult education agencies and programs. CALPRO offers these suggested guidelines for initiating and conducting discussion groups using the research digests, summaries, and bibliographies, all of which can be accessed, downloaded, and printed from the CALPRO Web site at www.calpro-online.org.

What are the purposes of a discussion group?

A discussion group provides participants an opportunity to engage in a focused conversation about an important topic. With a CALPRO research publication as the stimulus for discussion, participants can look at relevant research in depth and from multiple perspectives, identify aspects of the publication that are most relevant to their own practice, and brainstorm implications for practice in their own agency or program. Used in this way, a discussion group is designed to disseminate knowledge, encourage reflection among participants, and provide participants a forum for considering and implementing change in their practice. It offers a good opportunity to involve staff members in the decision-making process and get their input on changes that ultimately will affect their practice.

How is a discussion group structured?

Discussion groups typically have six to twelve members led by a facilitator. This size group is small enough for everyone to have an opportunity to share insights but large enough to provide a diversity of perceptions and opinions. A group larger than twelve can become unwieldy, and voices can get lost. If more than twelve staff members indicate an interest in participating in a discussion group, the agency may want to consider starting up a second group. Participation in discussion groups is voluntary.

Each discussion group needs both a facilitator and a recorder, usually selected by the program administrator for their skills in moderating discussions (the facilitator) and in synthesizing information (the recorder). The facilitator generally has a working knowledge of group dynamics and a reputation as a good meeting leader. He/she can deal tactfully with dominating group members, keep the discussion on track, and ensure that every participant is heard.

The structure of discussion groups will vary according to the size of the group, the time allotted for the activity, the goals set for the discussion, and the culture of the program. Following is a suggested guideline for a one-hour session that can be adapted according to the needs of the discussion group.

<u>Activity</u>	<u>Suggested Time</u>
1. Review the goals for the discussion group	2-3 minutes
2. Agree on and set ground rules for the discussion (e.g., taking turns, avoiding judgmental responses) or review rules the program already has in place	2-3 minutes
3. Introduce the Topic	2-3 minutes
4. Pose questions and conduct discussion	40–50 minutes
5. Summarize and Identify Next Steps	5-10 minutes

What is the program administrator's role?

The administrator sets the stage for successful discussion groups to take place among staff members. Following are some suggested steps for the program administrator to take.

1. Four to six weeks in advance of the discussion group meeting, announce the purpose and topic of the discussion group as well as the date, time, and location of the discussion group meeting.
2. Invite staff members to sign up to participate in a discussion group by a specified deadline, at least a week in advance of the actual discussion group date. This allows the administrator ample time to determine whether he/she needs to start a second group (if more than twelve persons have signed up) or to postpone the meeting date and continue to promote and encourage participation at a later date.
3. Identify the staff members who are willing to serve as facilitator and recorder and ensure that they have a copy of these guidelines.
4. A week in advance of the discussion group meeting, distribute (or ask the facilitator to distribute) the CALPRO research publication to persons who have signed up to participate in the discussion group. Every participant is expected to have read the publication **prior to** attending the discussion group meeting.
5. Following the discussion group, ask the recorder to ensure that the group's suggestions and recommendations are compiled, word processed, and disseminated to all group members.
6. Share the group's recommendations with all staff members, perhaps at a staff meeting, and engage the full staff in a discussion of possibilities for programmatic changes, as appropriate.

What is the facilitator's role?

The facilitator's job is to draw out and encourage participants to share their thoughts, ideas, feelings, perceptions about the topic and to encourage brainstorming and interaction among participants. Remember that, to lead the discussion group, the facilitator does not have to be an expert on the topic. The facilitator's role is to help structure and encourage dialogue, not give a lecture. Following are some suggested steps for the facilitator.

Before the Discussion Group Meeting

1. Review the publication and consider whether the issues it covers are relevant to your program. Does it focus on research that addresses questions you and your colleagues have been asking?
2. Draft some sample questions for discussion ahead of time. Because the discussion group will last for little more than 60 to 90 minutes, you will have time for only five or six questions. You will be more comfortable, however, if you come prepared with eight to ten questions to select from. The questions should be open-ended (no questions that elicit "yes/no" responses) and should move from the general to the specific. There are two kinds of questions: introductory or warm-up questions and more serious questions that get to the heart of the topic. The first two questions are usually the introductory or warm-up questions, such as the following:

- *What do you hope to get out of your participation in this discussion group?*
- *Why are you interested in this topic?*
- *How familiar were you with this topic before you read the publication?*
- *What about the brief was new to you?*

More substantive probes that get to the heart of the topic include questions such as

- *Why is this topic important?*
- *In what ways is what you've read in keeping with what you expected?*
- *Is there anything in the publication that you disagree with? What and why?*
- *What are some of the implications of the work reviewed in the publication? For example, what changes might be made in your agency or program as a result of information contained in the publication?*
- *Which of the above implications for change do you rate as your top three choices? What is the reason for your rankings?*

3. Set the room up in a U-shape or a circle so that all participants can see each other and the facilitator.

During the Discussion Group Meeting

Be sure to do the following:

- Welcome the group and review purpose or goals for the discussion group.
- Explain what a discussion group is, how it will flow, and make introductions if members do not already know each other.
- Working collaboratively with group members, set the ground rules for the discussion group (e.g., procedures for taking turns, suspending and withholding judgment of other's suggestions).
- Introduce the topic and begin asking questions that you prepared in advance (you may find it helpful to write each question on one flipchart page and unveil each question on the flipchart when you pose that question in the discussion).
- Minimize your involvement (the facilitator should talk only about ten percent of the time).
- Avoid judgments, either negative or positive.
- Make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to voice his/her thoughts and opinions.
- Draw out the reticent or shy group members.
- Keep one person from dominating the conversation; tactfully but firmly give the floor to others in the group.
- Keep the discussion on track, tactfully pulling the group back together and focusing on the topic when the conversation starts meandering off track.
- Ask your question and then wait. Don't be afraid of silence: participants may need time to reflect on the question before they answer.
- Monitor time closely so that the session doesn't run beyond the advertised time.
- Summarize the discussion at the end of the meeting as a wrap-up, identify next steps (if any), and remind participants that they each will receive notes of the discussion within a week or so.

- Take the group's temperature, asking participants to tell you the pluses (+), or positive things, about their participation in this discussion group and then to list the deltas (Δ), or those things that could be improved in subsequent discussion groups.
- Thank participants for their interest and their open, honest responses, give them an avenue to provide further input after this session has ended, and encourage them to participate in future discussion groups.

What is the role of the recorder?

The recorder takes notes to capture the essence of the discussion. It is important that the recorder

- Capture comments exactly as they were stated and not try to put the comments in his/her own words. Recorders may find it helpful to list all comments on a flipchart or to tape record the discussion (If the session is audio-taped, be sure that participants are aware of this and have no objections to being taped).
- Ask for clarification of points to ensure that the discussion is recorded accurately.
- Immediately following the session, review notes for clarity and understanding.
- Transcribe notes as soon as the session has ended, while the conversation is still fresh in your mind (this will avoid memory lapses that may occur if the transcription is put off for several days).
- Prepare a one-page summary of the session for group participants and distribute within a week of the session (do not delay making the summary available to group members).

What other resources are available on the discussion topic?

The California Department of Education (CDE) Adult Education Office provides information, reports, news bulletins, useful resources for program development and implementation, and links to additional resources for instructional support. Visit <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ae/>

CALPRO fosters continuous program improvement through a comprehensive, statewide approach to high quality professional development for the full range of adult education and literacy providers. CALPRO offers publications, online resources, and professional development workshops on a wide variety of subjects. Visit www.calpro-online.org

The Outreach and Technical Assistance Network (OTAN) provides technical assistance, electronic communication, and access to information for adult education providers in California. OTAN hosts an extensive collection of online resources, including an archive of materials related to adult basic education. Visit <http://www.otan.us/index.cfm>

CASAS provides essential tools and resources for assessment, instruction and curriculum management, and evaluation. CASAS also creates accountability reports that can be accessed by individual teachers and schools. Visit www.casas.org

The California Distance Learning Project (CDLP) focuses on testing and supporting new ways to reach and instruct adult learners. CDLP provides resources and technical assistance to individuals and programs wishing to expand their use of distance learning. Visit www.cdlponline.org/