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Labor Education for Women Workers

Wertheimer, Barbara Mayer

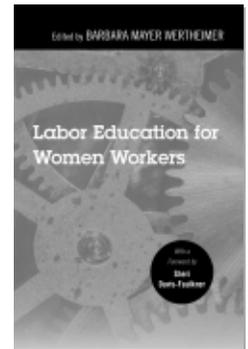
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CHAPTER 9

Discussion Method

By MARJORIE B. RACHLIN

The skills involved in leading a discussion with a group of working adults are different from those called on when presenting a lecture, a panel, or a movie, although each of these teaching methods often is followed by discussion. The emphasis in a discussion session is on the participants' ideas and experiences. Their comments on the subject are guided by the discussion leader to deepen understanding of the topic.

One of the basic principles behind use of discussion method follows from this: students can discuss only those aspects of a problem that they know something about. Sometimes this knowledge comes from experience, but often the instructor must provide information and ideas—through a speaker, panel, movie, or lectures—before the discussion takes place.

A good discussion helps people think through the implications of an idea, a fact, or a visual presentation such as a movie. For example, most of us know that women workers in the U.S. earn on the average 59 percent of what male workers earn. What is the significance of that statistic for union men and women? "Why is this so?" asks the discussion leader. Once the whole problem of segregated or women's jobs has been raised and discussed, the question becomes "Is it true in your experience?" This question asks group members to consider whether the statistic has any relevance to them—bringing the subject close to home and transforming a dry statistic into concrete reality. Finally, "What can be done to change this situation?" makes the group consider the various ways in which it can take action. With this question the discussion leader is asking the group to see the problem as important enough to involve itself in doing something about it. As this brief example illustrates, discussion helps a group to think about the ramifications of a problem or an issue, to see how it is relevant to its own experience, and to consider whether group members want to change their approach or take action as a result of this new understanding. The

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example above is based on a discussion of a "fact," but a discussion following a role-playing situation would take a similar tack.

An instructor or leader may decide to use discussion for various reasons. Discussion is useful to deepen intellectual understanding of an issue; deal with attitudes and values; gain consensus on a policy or action; and build group solidarity.

Discussion's intellectual value relates closely to the way an adult's mind works. For a person with considerable experience gained through years of living and working, any new idea or fact must be added to a mosaic of past ideas, attitudes, and information. This new idea or fact may encounter resistance—it does not fit. Perhaps it seems irrelevant. Or the idea may be accepted at face value but its implications may not be clear. People do some of this refitting on their own, but group discussion can encourage thinking.

While discussion is a good technique when the goal is to understand an issue or a problem, it is even more useful when the subject touches attitudes or values. Since attitudes and values are emotionally charged, many people simply turn off a lecture or a panel presentation if they disagree, or they feel that "the other side" should have been presented. In a discussion setting, however, participants express their own thinking and hear how others in the group look at the problem. They are often more open to ideas from their fellow workers, their peers, than from the instructor up front. Discussion is part of most successful efforts to change or open people's minds.

In a committee, executive board, or other "action" group, discussion is used to bring about agreement or consensus on a program or policy. Interchange among the participants allows a thorough exploration of varying views. By the time agreement or compromise is reached, most people have participated and they understand each other. Each individual is likely to feel more committed to the program and to the group itself.

The value of discussion in building group solidarity is often overlooked. It is particularly helpful when the group comes from the same local (a stewards' group) or international (a bargaining group) and will be working together over a period of time. Good discussion assumes that "we all have this problem and we all must solve it"; it promotes group solidarity far more than a speech or voice from the front of the room.

There are particular advantages to using discussion with women's groups. Women have long been taught to follow the voice of authority, from the days when father or husband ruled their lives to today, when most bosses at work are men. Discussion helps establish the idea that the instructor or leader has neither all the knowledge nor all the answers. In a good dis-

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discussion participants listen to each other, pick up from the previous person, reply or add to those remarks. Since women in our society are brought up to value men's opinions on issues and problems more highly than women's, they sometimes tend to ignore other women's ideas. A discussion can help change this if the instructor takes everyone's contribution seriously and helps participants listen and respond to one another.

Discussion will also bring out women's particular concerns and perspectives, which may differ from those commonly accepted in a male-dominated culture. Women with young children, for example, may have priorities different from those of male workers. Such women may care less about wages or overtime than about a foreman who will permit them to come in late or take time off if a child is sick. As women become more visible in the labor movement, it is important that they be encouraged to articulate their concerns. Instructors will also learn from such discussions.

For discussion to flow, the instructor must develop both a tone and a setting in which participants and leader feel comfortable with each other. The group should be small, preferably no more than twenty. People should be seated around a table, in a circle or some variation of the U-shape so they can see each other's faces.

Since speaking out in a strange group may seem risky, the instructor's first job is to help people feel at home, to get them acquainted. The traditional method of name, local, how long have you been an officer, or how did you get interested in (the union, the subject at hand) takes but a short time, during which the instructor should make sure that each person introduces herself to the group, not to the instructor.

When the group is new and does not come from the same local or union, it may be useful to put people in pairs or threes, ask them to talk to one another briefly and have each person introduce someone else to the group. This gives each participant at least one "buddy" with whom she has had a personal experience. Whatever method is used, the instructor needs to begin the process of developing a friendly group out of a collection of relative strangers.

From the start, the instructor must set the tone for her own participation. She should tell the group that this is a discussion where each person's input is valuable—and live up to that statement. The leader is a resource for information that the group does not have, and she should supply this—but she should be careful not to answer general questions or to comment at length on every point. Problems or questions should be thrown back to the group—"What do you think of that?" or "How would that work with your members?" In this way the group works together to reach a conclusion about the issue.

Planning the Discussion

In planning the discussion, the instructor needs to define her major purposes and the facets of the subject she wants to cover. In a session on national health security, for example, she may wish to bring out problems and details of the legislation. Discussion here should probably be supplemented by some sort of presentation—lecture, movie, videotape, or reading.

This is a different aim—and a different type of discussion session—than the instructor would have in a class designed to encourage women to run for office in their local unions. Here a major goal is to help group members give each other confidence by discussing problems that they learn are almost universal, and by determining how to handle them. Role playing or case studies could be useful for this session, where a lecture would not be suitable.

Once the instructor has developed her goals and subject matter, she should consider carefully what she knows about the students/participants. How much will they know about this subject? What are their experiences in this area? What problems interest them?

For example, what age is the group? Young women tend to be somewhat more liberated in their attitudes toward work and home than many older women (but you can never be sure). Women with husband, children, and family concerns will usually be very conscious of their dual roles and responsibilities. Even if they themselves are unwilling to move much beyond traditional patterns at work or in the union, this group will almost always be concerned about opportunities for their daughters.

What occupation or industry do they come from? What jobs do they hold? Clerical workers, for example, often see their jobs as dead-end, and increasingly are interested in upward mobility into professional jobs; blue-collar women are more likely to see mobility in terms of other blue-collar jobs in their factory, though they are beginning to look at training opportunities in the skilled and apprenticed job areas. Industry or occupation also affects women workers in many of the ways familiar to union educators—the unemployment problem looks different to women in the acting-TV-arts professions, where women are accustomed to the continual search for the next job, than it does to women in a factory affected by imports or by cyclical layoffs.

Time spent thinking about group members and getting acquainted with them helps the discussion leader decide how best to tackle the subject, what questions or problems should be raised, what issues may bring disagreement within the group that will need to be resolved. Of course, once

an instructor has led discussions on a topic a number of times, she has also found out a lot about how different groups perceive them and knows what to expect.

Preparing an Outline

In preparing an outline for the session, the instructor must first decide whether she will start “cold” by throwing out a question to the group, or whether she will start with some sort of presentation. In workers’ education we often start with a short lecture, a speaker, a film, or a panel. An article assigned to the group to read ahead of time might also be the starting point. A questionnaire, provocative quote, tape recording, short role play, or use of a case problem are other starters.

Whatever method the instructor chooses, she should know what will be in her opening presentation in order to prepare suitable questions for the discussion that follows. Read over the assigned article carefully, talk over with the speaker what her major points will be, look at the videotape beforehand.

In preparing to use a film, for example, the discussion leader must first look at the film to determine whether it deals adequately with the subject. With most films, the leader can choose from perhaps four or five possible directions for the discussion that follows the film. Previewing provides the opportunity to decide what angle of this film to use as the focus. This angle should be emphasized in introducing the film and raised again shortly after the lights go up. For example, when using *The Emerging Woman*, a discussion leader might want to focus on problems of women workers in the 1900s or on the history of black women workers, or on the role of women as workers and mothers—and this by no means exhausts possible emphases. After previewing the film she can match her approach to the interests of her group, preparing a set of discussion questions that focus on the aspects she considers most useful.

Use of discussion method can, however, proceed without an introductory lecture or presentation. Decide in advance what major points to cover, where to start, and how to proceed through those points. Here questions should be framed with care. Participants should be asked their opinion, their assessment, or their experience. Questions that require a factual answer (how many U.S. women are working today?) will get only a little participation and stimulate only mild interest, since many in the group will not know the answer. On the other hand, the question “Why are so many more women working today?” will elicit a number of responses and let people feel they have made a contribution to the subject right from the start.

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To illustrate, an outline on the subject of women in non-traditional jobs follows the text of this chapter. It was prepared for a group of active women from a cross-section of unions and occupations. The aim was to encourage women to enter non-traditional jobs and to form support groups for women in those jobs. (Alternatively, this session could have emphasized what needs to be done to enter non-traditional jobs, or the need for training and vocational counseling for women, in which case the outline would be different.)

This sort of an outline is a personal product. Another individual might feel more comfortable starting with a brief explanation of the job market in this country, since many people do not realize the extent of job segregation. With a group of women who have little union experience—or with a group including men—this might be the best approach. The order in which the leader uses her questions and the time spent on each will of course vary. The sample outline deals with a specific women's problem, but here, as in most discussions of women's issues, several more basic questions arise from women's ambivalence and conflicts about their new roles, and the new image they see for themselves. It is useful to be aware of these, whether they surface directly or are unspoken:

How has woman's role changed? Is this change desirable?

How does the change affect personal relationships with men? Work relationships?

Are family, husband, children threatened by these changes?

Are women as competent as men? Do they make as good leaders in the union?

Will men support women's drive for better jobs and union leadership, or will women progress only through their own power?

Although it is the leader's job to see that the subject is discussed thoroughly and fruitfully, this is not her only function. She must encourage participation from the group, so that each member is involved and "part of the action." The leader introduces the topic so people understand it; draws out facts, ideas, experience; sees that various aspects of the issue are discussed; helps people generalize from and evaluate experience; supplies information the group needs—facts, statistics, considerations not raised by the group; summarizes from time to time (the blackboard helps); keeps discussion fairly well on the track and moving along; encourages everyone to participate and discourages those who monopolize the session; summarizes at the end, giving a feeling of conclusion and accomplishment.

In structuring the discussion so that the group can see how it is moving from point to point, many discussion leaders use the blackboard. Writing and organizing comments on the board, then summarizing them and

throwing out a question that leads the discussion on, will help everyone follow the logic of the discussion as it proceeds.

Common Difficulties during Discussion

No matter how interesting the subject, most groups respond slowly to the first few questions. Many people hesitate to speak up for the first half hour or so. It is useful to throw out a question, talk around it for a few sentences while it sinks in, then ask the question again. Even so, the discussion leader must steel herself and wait patiently for the group to warm up. A halting discussion will gradually become lively if the leader does not give up and begin to talk too much.

To encourage as many people to participate as possible, comments should be acknowledged with respect. Most of them can be related to the subject in some way. The leader also can call on individual group members occasionally, using a question that is easy to comment on: "Marie, does that happen in your local?" or "Is that the way it works in Texas?"

Every discussion leader finds, at times, that the group wants to pursue a subject that seems irrelevant to the leader (it wasn't in her outline!). The group may understand its members' concerns or interests better than the leader does. The leader must decide whether or not to spend time on this "tangent." Since the discussion leader's perception of the subject is not necessarily the last word, there are times when it is best to let the group lead. It is reassuring for the inexperienced discussion leader who fears that if she does this she cannot get the group back on the subject to know that most union groups respond quickly to a firm hand. "You seem agreed that And now I think we had better move on."

Another common problem is the non-stop talker who monopolizes the discussion. To handle this the leader might try: "Brenda, I think we should hear what someone else thinks on this," or "We need to hear how that works in a different industry (or state)." Occasionally the leader may have to talk to the person outside of class, explaining that a discussion requires wide participation and asking the person to help her achieve this by talking less. If the person is too disruptive or argumentative, the group eventually will move to counter or quiet her down, sometimes by confronting her directly, sometimes by kidding her outside of class.

Some of these problems are bound to occur in varying degrees at every discussion session. The leader must not expect perfection. Discussion is a difficult technique, because the instructor openly relinquishes a certain amount of control to the group. She must expect some surprises and some disappointments.

Evaluating the Session

How does the leader know whether she has done a good job? After the session is over, take some time to evaluate what went well, what problems arose, and what might be done differently next time.

How many of the group took part? Were the silent ones interested? Bored? If a few people did most of the talking, why?

Did the participants listen to each other and talk to each other? Or was the instructor always the focus?

Did the group grasp the major points? Did it move to a logical conclusion?

Was there hostility? What areas were controversial? Why?

What comments or points did the group make that were unexpected? Should these areas be covered next time?

Did the participants leave the room talking or laughing, and in a good frame of mind?

Teaching through discussion is a skill that grows with practice. The instructor/leader must prepare thoroughly beforehand, school herself in the subject matter, analyze the group, and prepare an outline and questions that move logically and focus on the material she intends to cover.

Conducting a discussion requires flexibility and a feeling of trust in the group's common sense and basic fairness. The rewards of this hard work come in the deeper understanding and greater commitment of all participants—including the instructor—at the end of the session.

DISCUSSION OUTLINE

Introduction

Instructor introduces topic, gives examples of non-traditional jobs. States general aim of session: what are pros and cons of encouraging women to move into non-traditional jobs; can we help?

Questions

1. What kinds of non-traditional jobs do you see women moving into in your area? (This is a good opening question because it taps experience and is easy to answer. Leader might want to follow up some responses by asking what makes those jobs “non-traditional.” This ensures that the group really has agreed on a definition of “non-traditional.”)
2. What has kept women out of these jobs in the past? (This question will elicit a variety of replies, all true of some part of the elephant. At some point the instructor must generalize and make the point that we have, to a

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large extent, a segregated job market in the U.S. It might help to list on the blackboard all the reasons given.)

3. Why are women moving into these jobs now? (This question also taps experiences, since the group will know of contract changes, EEO, affirmative action, job posting. Comments will also deal with changing attitudes among women, need to earn money, and the like. Instructor must decide how deeply to discuss these points in view of time limitations.)
4. How does it work out? Is it successful? What are the problems? (The instructor can anticipate some of the comments—some successes, more problems. Problems with male workers or foremen; disapproval of females; lifting; refusal to do dirty work; no training, etc.)

The questions below anticipate possible areas for the group to explore in detail.

- a. If males were supportive, how and why? If not, what did union/management do?
 - b. Do women want these jobs? Why or why not? Should we encourage them or ignore this problem?
 - c. How does the work force, or the union, handle heavy or dirty work when the problem arises with male workers? Are there alternative ways to solve lifting problems?
5. Do women in non-traditional jobs need support? What can the union do? What can the women already in that work place do? (Hopefully the group by now sees this as more than an individual problem and will move to action.)

Summary

The instructor summarizes the reasons why women are moving into non-traditional jobs, the factors that lead to success or to problems, and what union women can do to help others.