Overview: Discussion Sessions

In general, there are at least 3 reasons for the discussion sessions: 1) to expose you to original (and often recent) literature; 2) to help develop skills to critically read articles; and 3) to evaluate new ideas. You are encouraged to select the topic and articles for your discussion session. First select the topic that you are interested in, and then examine some recent papers to see if they interest you. Good starting points to select a topic are the course outline. For specific articles, consult any of the current literature services. Generally, 2 articles is the maximum number that can be examined at any one discussion session. After you have selected a topic and articles, let me know what they are so that I can determine if they are suitable for the course. If you need help at any stage, let me know.

The ground rules for each session are simple: 1) Everyone is expected to read all assigned articles; and 2) Everyone is expected to participate in the discussion. How the session is conducted is up to the discussion leader. Below are some possible approaches that you can take. The 1st is usually the least interesting and intellectually satisfying.

1) "The critique" -- Carefully examine the articles and research and critique the work. Do the authors explicitly state a hypothesis or idea that they intend to test or investigate? Are the methods appropriate, and why? Do they interpret the results correctly, accurately, and completely? Do their results support their discussion and conclusions? Have they over-extrapolated or distorted their (or other people's) results, and why?

2) "The conflict" -- Articles may present different sides of an issue or differ from class readings or lectures. Who has the better evidence, and why? Is the issue a substantial one, or simply a semantic problem? Can the issue be formulated into 1 or more testable hypotheses? What experiments could be designed to test the hypotheses?

3) "Ecological significance" -- What are the ecological implications of the articles? Are the results specific for few or many environments, and why? How do the articles extend or extrapolate information from readings, lectures, or experience?

These are only some of the possible approaches the discussion leader can take. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, and you may want to combine one or more of these (as appropriate).

The key to leading a good discussion is to prepare ahead of time a series of questions that probe the selected topic and articles. Some suggestions on how to lead the session:

1) Perform an article by article review. Start with a synopsis of an article (no more than 5 minutes – make sure that you keep it short). Then examine each article in more detail by posing questions about it. End the discussion session by contrasting or integrating the articles with each other as well as with topics we have discussed in class.

2) Raise a series of conceptual issues. How do the articles pertain to these issues? Do the articles support or contradict our notions about these issues?