

U-shaped discussion

an alternative to the traditional two-sided debate

Why use the strategy

Instead of an adversarial debating format, this strategy encourages students to see the merits of all sides and to recast binary options as positions along a continuum. The goal is to encourage students to endorse positions provisionally while listening to others in an attempt to figure out the most defensible personal stance along a continuum of possibilities. Rather than trying to convince others, students explain why the position they are sitting or standing in is the most defensible one for them. There is no need to reach consensus on the issue.

How to use the strategy

Approach A

- Arrange the class in a U-shape.
- Ask students with polar views (i.e., either strongly agreeing or strongly disagreeing with the proposition) to stand or seat themselves at either tip of the U. Ask students with mixed opinions to position themselves at appropriate spots along the rounded part.
- Ask students at each tip of the U to state their position and offer a few reasons only (if there is an imbalance in strong support for one side or the other, locate yourself temporarily in a polar position to get the discussion going).
- Alternate from side to side, as students from all parts of the U offer their views.
- Encourage students to physically move along the spectrum if they have heard reasons that cause them to want to shift their intellectual position on the issue.

Approach B

- Invite students to individually decide which of three answers best represents their thinking on a proposition: No, yes or maybe.
- Ask the “maybe” group to stand in line across the front of the class and invite several spokespersons to explain their reasoning. When they are done, ask if any students in the audience have changed their mind and, if so, invite them to join the “maybe” group.
- Ask the “no” students to form a line along the side of the classroom perpendicular to the “maybe” group and invite a few spokespersons to present their reasons. When they are done, ask if any students have changed their mind and invite them to join one of the groups.
- Ask the “yes” students to line up on the other side of the classroom facing the “no” side (the three lines should form a U shape) and invite several spokespersons to present their reasons. When they are done, ask if any students have changed their mind and invite them to join one of the groups.
- Encourage students who are in the “yes” or “no” lines to move closer to the “maybe” line, if they are so inclined. Conversely, invite students in the “maybe” line to move to one end or the other, if they are attracted to that position.
- Invite further discussion, encouraging students to change their minds when they hear reasons that cause them to question their current position.

U-shaped discussion

Accompanying documents

U-shaped discussion reflections

A chart to support students in thinking about four aspects of the discussion

To use this chart, the student:

- indicates his or her position on the U and provides supporting reasons at the start of the discussion
- summarizes interesting arguments offered by two other students that caused him or her to wonder about or rethink his or her position
- indicates whether he or she moved during the discussion
- provides reasons for remaining in the same position or for changing position
- lists the four most powerful reasons that support his or her final position on the issue

U-shaped discussion reflections

Initial position: Explain the reasons for your initial choice

Final position: If you shifted along the U-shaped continuum during the discussion, in which direction did you shift? What caused you to make this shift? If you did not shift along the continuum, what additional arguments or evidence reinforced your position, causing you to stay in your original position? Please explain the change(s) or continuity in your position along the U-shape continuum.

Reasons for remaining in the same or for changing my position

Justification for your final position: List the four most powerful reasons that support your final position on the issue.

Reason 1

Reason 2

Reason 3

Reason 4

Position on the U-shaped continuum

Reasons

Reasons

Self-assessment of a U-shaped discussion

An assessment rubric to help students assess their preparedness for the discussion

	Sophisticated understanding	Extended understanding	Basic understanding	Partial understanding	Not demonstrated
Background knowledge	• I am able to refer to many relevant facts, always with accuracy.	• I am able to refer to relevant facts, usually with accuracy.	• I am able to refer to some relevant facts, usually with accuracy.	• I am able to refer to a limited number of relevant facts with little accuracy.	• I am able to refer to few or no relevant and accurate facts.
Open-mindedness	• I always carefully consider all viewpoints presented. I am always willing to reconsider my position when evidence or arguments warrant.	• I usually consider most viewpoints presented. I am usually willing to reconsider my position when evidence or arguments warrant.	• I occasionally consider a variety of viewpoints presented. I am sometimes willing to reconsider my position when evidence or arguments warrant.	• I seldom consider other viewpoints. I am rarely willing to reconsider my position, even when evidence or arguments warrant.	• I rarely or never consider other viewpoints. I am always reluctant to reconsider my position when evidence or arguments warrant.
Reasoned judgement	• My decisions are always based on available evidence. I always consider the range of criteria when arriving at a decision.	• My decisions are usually based on available evidence. I usually consider	• My decisions are sometimes based on available evidence.	• My decisions are seldom based on available evidence. I seldom consider	• My decisions are rarely or never based on available evidence.

Assessing a U-shaped discussion

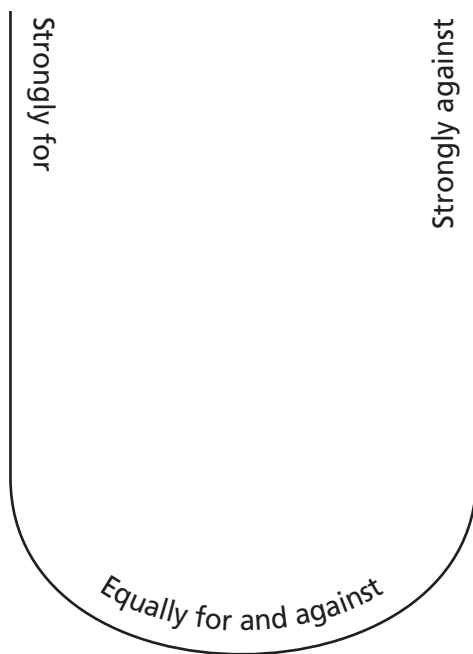
An assessment rating scale to support teacher assessment of student performance while listening to the discussion

Use the following scale to score student performance:

Student names	4-sophisticated understanding	3-extended understanding	2-basic understanding	1-partial understanding	NA-not demonstrated
	Background & knowledge • accurate use of relevant facts	Open-mindedness • open to consider a variety of views, willing to rethink position based on new evidence or arguments	Reasoned judgement • uses evidence to reach an informed decision, considers criteria when making a decision		
	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A
	Comment:	Comment:	Comment:	Comment:	Comment:
	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A
	Comment:	Comment:	Comment:	Comment:	Comment:
	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A
	Comment:	Comment:	Comment:	Comment:	Comment:
	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A
	Comment:	Comment:	Comment:	Comment:	Comment:
	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A	4 3 2 1 N/A
	Comment:	Comment:	Comment:	Comment:	Comment:

U-shaped discussion reflections

Initial position: Where along the U-shaped continuum did you first place yourself?



Explain the reasons for your initial choice.

Interesting arguments: Describe the reasons given by two students whose position on the U-shaped continuum was different from yours but caused you to wonder about or rethink your position.

Position on the U-shaped continuum:	Position on the U-shaped continuum:
Reasons	Reasons

Final position: If you shifted along the U-shaped continuum during the discussion, in which direction did you shift? What caused you to make this shift? If you did not shift along the continuum, what additional arguments or evidence reinforced your position, causing you to stay in your original position?

<input type="checkbox"/> I changed my position to _____ _____ <input type="checkbox"/> I did NOT change my position	Reasons for remaining in the same or for changing my position
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Justification for your final position: List the four most powerful reasons that support your final position on the issue.

Reason 1
Reason 2
Reason 3
Reason 4

Self-assessment of a U-shaped discussion

	Sophisticated understanding	Extended understanding	Basic understanding	Partial understanding	Not demonstrated
Background knowledge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accurate use of relevant facts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am able to refer to many relevant facts, always with accuracy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am able to refer to relevant facts, most often with accuracy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am able to refer to some relevant facts, usually with accuracy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am able to refer to a limited number of relevant facts with little accuracy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am able to refer to few or no relevant and accurate facts.
Open-mindedness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • open to consider a variety of views • willing to rethink position based on new evidence or arguments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I always carefully consider all viewpoints presented. • I am always willing to reconsider my position when evidence or arguments warrant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I usually consider most viewpoints presented. • I am usually willing to reconsider my position when evidence or arguments warrant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I occasionally consider a variety of viewpoints presented. • I am sometimes willing to reconsider my position when evidence or arguments warrant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I seldom consider other viewpoints. • I am rarely willing to reconsider my position, even when evidence or arguments warrant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I rarely or never consider other viewpoints. • I am always reluctant to reconsider my position when evidence or arguments warrant.
Reasoned judgement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • uses evidence to reach an informed decision • considers criteria when making a decision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My decisions are always based on available evidence. • I always consider the range of criteria when arriving at a decision. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My decisions are usually based on available evidence. • I usually consider most of the criteria when arriving at a decision. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My decisions are sometimes based on available evidence. • I sometimes consider criteria when arriving at a decision. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My decisions are seldom based on available evidence. • I seldom consider criteria when arriving at a decision. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My decisions are rarely or never based on available evidence. • I rarely or never consider criteria when arriving at a decision.

Assessing a U-shaped discussion

Use the following scale to score student performances:

4–sophisticated understanding 3–extended understanding 2–basic understanding 1–partial understanding N/D–not demonstrated

Student names	Background knowledge • accurate use of relevant facts	Open-mindedness • open to consider a variety of views • willing to rethink position based on new evidence or arguments	Reasoned judgement • uses evidence to reach an informed decision • considers criteria when making a decision
	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment:	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment:	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment:
	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment:	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment:	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment:
	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment:	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment:	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment:
	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment:	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment:	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment:
	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment:	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment:	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment:
	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment:	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment:	4 3 2 1 N/D Comment: