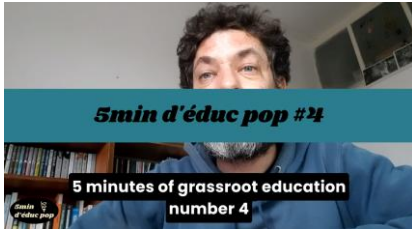


Post #4: How can we make it easier for everyone to participate?

[Watch Anthony's video here !](#)



One of the major difficulties in running a group is regulating the flow of ideas. Without regulation, the floor is often reserved for a few people, the most accustomed or legitimate to take it, due to their ascendancy over the group, linked to their hierarchical position, but also their seniority, their gender (male), their race (white) or their qualifications (high).

The more formal the meeting, the stronger this phenomenon will be: if the regulation of speech occurs more or less naturally in informal discussions, it will become formalized in one way or another in a meeting.

The limit of speaking turns

The most basic rule is to raise your finger to speak and wait your turn. If there's a moderator at the meeting, he or she will take turns and distribute the floor as and when required.

Without a facilitator, one technique is to raise a finger for the first to ask to speak, then two fingers for the second to ask, then three fingers for the third, and so on. Each person lowers a finger as soon as they have finished speaking. This allows the group to self-regulate: when one person ends up raising more than five fingers, everyone sees that they need to wait a little before joining the queue of requests to speak.

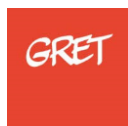
Working by turn means having the floor long after you've asked for it. The exchanges that take place between the moment you ask for the floor and the moment you get it often lead you to want to react, to bounce back, on several subjects. As a result, speaking time can often be long and cover several subjects.

A group that operates in this way often holds several discussions in parallel. This makes it difficult to follow a thread of discussion. Those more accustomed to speaking take notes to help structure their next contribution.

Faced with lengthy debates, it's difficult for most people to keep up with these multiple threads and listen attentively... and ultimately dare to ask for the floor!

With speaking turns, it's difficult, once you've finally got the floor, to go back to the subject you wanted to talk about when you asked to speak. You have to dare to cut the thread of discussion in progress. As the desire to bounce back and forth on the various subjects being dealt with in parallel is strong, you have to be clear and concise on each of these subjects. All this requires great skill... which is often that of people who are used to taking the floor, the majority often finding themselves in a very passive role.

Taking turns to allow each person to express themselves is often counter-productive. With this in mind, many are calling on popular education and its tools to break this deadlock.



Some tools for regulating speech

The double list

Keeping a double list means taking turns using a sheet of paper with two columns: the first with requests from people who have already spoken, and the second with requests from people who have not yet spoken. The facilitator then gives the floor first to the people in the second column, and when it's empty, returns to the first.

This favors access to the floor for people who don't take it up very often, by cutting off the queue of people who have already had it. As a result, it's quicker and easier for people to get involved in the discussion.

In practice, however, even with a double list, it can quickly become intimidating for many people to ask to speak above a certain group size. Many censor themselves by checking the relevance of what they have to say, wondering if it's the right time to say it, questioning their ability to express what they want to say correctly... while others don't ask themselves these questions enough, if at all...

Small groups

To ensure that everyone has a chance to express themselves, the best solution seems to be to work in small groups. In my experience, it's easy to get people to speak when there are fewer than 5 people.

If the idea is to get everyone to express themselves on a subject, this is the best way to do it! But working in small groups usually means reporting back to the whole group on what was said in the smaller groups.

A small-group sequence is followed by a large-group sequence, with a succession of rapporteurs. It's a difficult task to report concisely on the richness of a discussion! One pitfall is to report the whole discussion, another is to give only the conclusions, which often make little sense without the process by which they were reached.

What's more, after a period of immersion in a small group, it's difficult to pay attention to the different reporters: our heads are often still immersed in the discussion of our small group... And it's even more difficult when the reports are very long, or too short...

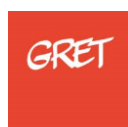
In the end, most participants only really listen to their rapporteur, checking the accuracy of the report made by his or her small group, and politely wait for the break, only listening with one ear to the other rapporteurs...

Tour de table

Now there's a tool that radically regulates access to the floor! Apart from the fact that it quickly becomes tedious beyond a certain group size, the main limitation of round-table discussions is that it negates the principle of a discussion, where the idea is to confront ideas and make them evolve with a view to arriving at collective proposals or decisions.

A round-table discussion enables individual positions to be collected. After the round-table discussion, there may be a temptation to move straight on to the proposal or decision phase. This means skipping the collective elaboration phase and choosing, from among the individual positions, what will become the collective position.

The best individual position will then undoubtedly be the most constructed, i.e. the one most often emanating from the person in charge of the group, the person who already has the most power or



influence within the group, the one who has given the most thought to the subject even before the meeting, the one who has the best overall view of the subject.².

Perhaps it's even simpler for that person to state his or her position first, and then check with the group to see if that position suits him or her. But who will then dare to oppose this person, having less information and having given less thought to the subject than this person? Without a counterweight, the meeting risks becoming a recording room for the positions of the group's leaders. This is a clear departure from the principle of a participative meeting!

The role of the host

As you can see, it's not easy to get everyone involved in a meeting! Rather than collectively confronting the differing influence of participants in a meeting, the idea is often to rely on a facilitator, who in turn will easily rely on the use of tools.

Facilitating a meeting involves a number of different conceptions of the role of the facilitator. Here's one of the main tensions in the role of meeting moderator: is it a question of giving equal access to the floor, or of keeping the discussion on track?

As is often the case, it's a question of doing both at the same time. Which could be formulated as follows: guaranteeing not equal access to speech, but equal quality of listening to each speaker.

Ensuring that everyone is listened to equally

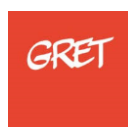
The moderator must therefore take responsibility for interrupting anything that interferes with a person's listening, whoever they may be. This means interrupting asides, suspending the discussion while windows are opened or closed, while the video-projector is set up or coffees are served, interrupting the discussion while someone is arriving to welcome him or her, making sure that no one is busy on their cell phone, helping and supporting a person who might be confused about what to say, and so on. And no tool, unfortunately, will do this job for the host!

For each person to be heard, it's best if they can express themselves in front of the whole group, not in a small one. While small groups make it easier for everyone to express themselves, it's only in a large group that everyone can be heard. But it's true that the facilitator's role is more difficult during a plenary session than during one in small groups.

Keeping the discussion going

As for the substance of the discussion, the role of the moderator is to ensure that the subjects to be dealt with are dealt with, which means keeping the discussion on track. In concrete terms, this means refocusing speakers who stray from the thread of the discussion, and even interrupting digressive speakers. It may be necessary to cut off someone who's talking a lot, but to let someone who's having trouble expressing their ideas speak for themselves, or even to support them. Here again, no tool can make these choices for the facilitator.

Enabling a group to follow the thread of a discussion also means clearly reformulating the tensions or contradictions that arise when several people speak, visualizing the different options open to the group on a given subject, regularly proposing a summary of what has been said, ensuring that things are not repeated, checking with the group whether it is necessary to extend the discussion, or even to steer it towards what needs to be extended. Here again, there are very few tools that can be used to steer a discussion in place of the moderator. And that's just as well! That's what makes group facilitation so interesting and rewarding!



Further information

- [Le guide à l'usage des participants](#): this link downloads the pdf of an article (which I wrote for the Scop Le Pavé) presenting a critical reflection on participation and meeting facilitation.
- A 5-minute video from the La Braise cooperative on the [distribution of speech in a group](#).
- [The toolbox of the La Braise cooperative](#), with a pdf of a few pages or a video for each of the tools presented.
- A book on [the micropolitics of groups](#), entirely online, designed to be read in the order that suits the reader.

