

Leading/organizing Discussion in Class/tutorial

Discussions can be in the forms of both spoken or written discourse. They are unique in that they deal with a topic or topics from several points of view. In an academic setting, discussions are most commonly conducted among a large class with instructor as the discussion leader or in small groups where students provide discussion leadership among their peers.

Discussions may not be effective in presenting new information, but they help students to examine, evaluate and share knowledge about the subject matter. They provide an atmosphere for students to seek evidence for their own and others' positions, to make use of the resources of other student-members in the group, and to see to the applications of principles. It is one of the most commonly used instructional methods in classes and tutorials because it challenges participants to both analyze and articulate various personal as well as collective beliefs and ideas.

Leading discussions in class, however, is not problem-free. Establishing and maintaining participation in the process is one commonly reported problem and making students aware of their progress towards course objectives and handling the emotional reactions of students is another.

The following report aims to summarize suggested recommendations from experienced university instructors on how to improve discussions. Bibliographic references are listed at the end of the paper.

Laying the groundwork for active student participation in class discussions *(Hansen)*

One fundamental principle:

Respect for the learner

Four sub principles:

1. Treat students as unique individuals

Technique: Learn students' names and start questions with a specific student's name

2. Establish a context that requires student participation, but poses no psychological threat

Technique: Let students know everyone will participate but offer students escape hatches or "dodges" to use when, for whatever reason, they don't want to answer when called upon. These range from "I don't want to talk just now" and "Will you please call on me later?" to "Why are you asking me THAT question?"

3. Get students to attend to each other

Technique: Take one's self out of the center of the discussion by asking a student to comment on what another has said. Example: "Jenny, you remember that ten minutes ago Sam argued that...Does that argument still seem a strong one, given what Liz just said?"

4. Pose questions that merit explorative discussion

Technique: Ask genuine questions and recognize various reasonable answers from students. Be prepared to shift ground to follow the promise of new leads from what students contribute during the discussion.

Helping students to prepare for the discussion

Speaking, just like writing, is a learned skill. Individuals can learn to contribute ideas, respond to others' comments, not monopolize, keep the discussion on task, provide summary and closure, introduce new ideas, ask questions for clarification, give examples, etc.....One way for them to learn this is by receiving regular and frequent feedback on their performance...applying the "process view in writing" to discussion participation. (Littlefield)

I had students doing informal reading responses to the selected readings and generate three-four questions at the end. One was a point or item they personally needed clarification on or more information; the others were to focus on questions they thought the text would raise for any reasonably critical reader....I would like them to give me the questions the day before class so that I can look over them and revise my discussion questions in light of the students' concerns. (Sweany)

I give students a series of four to eight discussion questions on each week's reading assignment. These are spelled out in my course syllabus which is handed out during the first week of class. All of my students are responsible for all of the questions each week. These questions serve both as study aids and stimuli for discussion. (UTS-Tips)

In an introductory administrative management class, I handed out articles from practitioners' journals, each student getting a different article. In class they would each give a brief synopsis of the article and we would discuss how it agreed or disagreed with the course materials, and how things fit together from a practical, rather than a theoretical point of view. (Fischer)

Starting a discussion (Breaking the ice)

One of the best ways of starting a discussion is to provide a concrete, common experience through presentation of a demonstration, film, role play or a short skit. Following such a presentation it's easy to ask, "Why did——?" (McKeachie)

Another technique is called problem posting. In the first class, the instructor might say, "Let's see what problems you'd like to tackle during the course. What sorts of concerns do you think we might deal with?" or "What kinds of things have you heard about this course?" The instructor then begins recording briefly on the blackboard, the problems contributed by the group....It is important to

maintain an accepting, non evaluative atmosphere...Disagreement should be used to get additional problems out rather than to persuade a group member to withdraw a contribution. Other than the first class, the instructor might say something like, "Let's see if we can get all the questions out so that we can see what they are and how to handle them." (McKeachie)

You could start by discussing expectations and ground rules, e.g. anyone is allowed to speak to anyone (not through the chair); anyone is allowed to bring another person into the discussion (students tend to assume that the instructor is the only person who is allowed to invite people into the discussion); "rounds" will form part of the regular activities of the group, etc. (Habeshaw)

Ask students to speak in turn. Make it clear to students that it is okay to pass and also okay to repeat what someone else has already said. (Habeshaw)

Use open-ended questions which promote analysis, interpretation and the application of principles. Give students time to think and use silence constructively. (UTS-Tips) (The first issue of Teaching-Learning Tips deals with different kinds of questions to be used in class/tutorial. Call IDU/ETC for a copy.)

Dealing with nonparticipants or reticent students

McKeachie suggests:

- Get acquainted with each other and break the ice;
- Call students by name and ask the nonparticipants to contribute to a problem area in which they have special knowledge;
- Ask students to discuss a question in pairs or small groups before asking for general discussion;
- Ask students to take a couple of minutes to write out their initial answers to a question and then ask "What did you write?";
- Encourage infrequent contributors through non-verbal language such as a smile;
- Ask nonparticipants questions which have no right or wrong answers, e.g. How does this look to you? How do you feel about this?
- Ask a question a class period before the discussion and ask students to write out answers involving an example from their own experience;
- Ask students to bring one question to class for discussion;
- Arrange seats to facilitate interactions;
- Use buzz groups. (Students are put in pairs or small groups with a given task or discussion topic for a limited period, often 5 minutes or less.)

Additional ways to stimulate participation in discussions:

- Use buzz groups, trios and pairs to stimulate discussion first, then have large group sharing;
- Assign roles to students for leading discussion—Students select topics for which they will serve as discussion leaders. The number of student leaders per topic depends on the size of the class. Each student, either alone or with other students, leads a discussion two or three times per semester. The leaders' task is to prepare a set of three to six discussion questions about the reading materials. These discussion questions are handed out to the rest of the class the week before the topic is covered.;
- Distribute group roles to students to encourage them to take more responsibility for the group. Typical roles could be: chairperson, timekeeper, monitor, summariser, note taker and spokesperson (to report findings to the larger group);
- Ask students to write a question based on the materials covered, and list all questions on board. Put students in pairs and ask the pairs to select a question and work on it. Another alternative is that individuals in turn ask their question and chair the discussion which lasts until they feel they have received a satisfactory answer;
- Use 'snowball' method. This method requires students to first work alone, then in pairs, and then in small groups and finally, the entire group in order to pool together their conclusions and/or solutions. Individuals note down some questions of their own which relate to the discussion topic, and then pairs of students try to answer one another's questions. Pairs join together to identify general problems and areas of controversy in the topic with a representative to report the conclusions from the group. Conclusions can be listed on the board as a record.
- Introduce a debate on a controversial issue. Put students into both the pro and con sides according to their expressed standpoint or preference, set ground rules for the debate and provide time for both parties to prepare. Possible variations are: students speak from a view with which they don't agree, students change sides half way through the debate and students role-play a proponent of the view they support.

Helping students to focus on the discussion issue

McKeachie suggests adopting a developmental discussion approach to keep students aware of the stage of discussion that is the current focus. The method is to break a problem into sub-problems and have the group tackle one thing at a time. The tasks/stages in the discussion process are likely to be:

- Clarification of the problem
- Getting relevant data by asking "What do we know?"
- Setting criteria for an acceptable solution
- Generating all possible solutions and
- Evaluating the solutions against the set criteria.

Occasional summaries during the discussion help students chart their own progress. The summary can be a restatement of the problem in terms of the issues resolved and those remaining. Keeping a visible record of ideas on the board, questions, data or points to explore in written form, helps maintain a focus and gives a sense of progress.

At all times, the discussion leader has to attend and react to the feedback from the group, e.g. non-verbal language of inattention, hostility or diversionary questions. The leader has to apply his/her facilitative skills in discussions: (*IDEA Paper No. 15*)

- Listen—attend to students' feelings as well as their thoughts
- Observe—pay attention to the content and the group process/interaction
- Allow for pauses and silences to think and reformulate ideas
- Post and verify what students are saying and check your own understanding
- Request examples and/or illustrations
- Encourage and recognize students' contributions
- Test consensus
- Provide a summary and/or conclusion.

Handling arguments or disagreement in discussions (*IDEA Paper No. 15*)

- Define the apparent areas of conflict (the problem may simply be cognitive misunderstanding) by effective listening, concentrating on the points the students are trying to make more than the points you want to make; ask students to elaborate, clarify, expand, explain, etc.
- Paraphrase or summarize the different viewpoints and emphasize the areas in which students agree;
- Be receptive instead of judgmental or evaluative. Use positive reinforcement;
- If needed, ask the disagreeing students to switch sides and argue the opposing point of view.

Conclusion

A supportive and non-threatening atmosphere is absolutely essential in order for a successful discussion to flourish. Participants should feel both comfortable and confident, particularly when they are discussing personal thoughts, feelings and beliefs. It is the interaction, therefore, that stimulates further exploration of a topic, while at the same time, it also generates new ideas and concepts among participants. In conclusion, discussion is as much about speaking or articulating as it is about listening or responding. It is a dynamic two-way interaction, and when at its best, takes on a life of its own.

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Teaching-Learning Tips is an ETC publication which aims to provide quick and practical ideas for lecturers and teaching assistants to enhance teaching effectiveness. It will be published four times annually. Contributions of ideas and suggestions of topics are heartily welcomed. Please contact Winnie Wong, editor at ext. 6809 or email “etwinnie”.