

Leading Classroom Discussion

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Many professors and instructors find that building a community of trust in their classrooms is a humbling challenge. Yet it is in such classrooms that energetic, honest, deeply probing, and sometimes even transformative discussions can thrive. In this session, I will discuss approaches for building class cultures that can sustain such interactions. I will also present a variety of discussion formats and strategies that can be used for different instructional purposes.

Why have discussions?

- They can help students achieve a richer, deeper understanding of content.
 - Fledgling connections can solidify in discussions.
 - Discussions help students approach material from different perspectives to get a fuller understanding.
- They can make course content more relevant.
- They often increase the instructor's enjoyment.
- They can reveal the content of a course to be contingent, open, and poised between accepted knowledge and the unknown. Students become a more vital part of larger discussions within a discipline.
- They can foster a sense of community – something for which many of us long.

Balancing safety and challenge

- Requirements for safety
 - Early discussions need to demonstrate that students' comments are valued by the instructor.

Students must come to trust that other class members will treat them with respect.

If the above conditions are not met, student participation in discussions will diminish to the point of silence.

- The need for challenge

On the other hand, students also must understand that sloppy, vague, knee-jerk comments can degrade discussions. Reasonable efforts must be expected of students or they may just blow off discussions.

Facilitating the discussion

- Excellent discussions often begin with questions that are inviting.

Useful approach: Move from material that is quite familiar to students personally, and then progress toward ideas central to course content.

Suggestion: It is often difficult to gauge the thrust and wording of a question that will inspire discussion. If a question falls flat, keep trying other phrasing, or provide an example, or first couch the question in more concrete terms.

Every instructor regularly asks questions that go nowhere. The trick is to keep trying.

Caution: If a question is too vague, students may stare in puzzlement.

Discussions, if they materialize, may drift far from the instructor's intended content. Attempt to clarify or restrict the range of a question.

Caution: If a question is "cut and dried," students may refrain from answering – to avoid being "masters of the obvious." However, if they are not sure of the answer, they may avoid answering for fear of appearing foolish.

- Calling on students

Students with their hands raised

Approach #1: Try to remember whose hands have gone up and in which order. Caution: This is tricky to do in the middle of a heated discussion, but with practice it gets easier. Students may become resentful if the instructor repeatedly misses a hand or calls on others out of order.

Approach #2: Write students' names on the board in order. Mark through names of students as they speak. Caution: Taken to the extreme, this means of regulating a discussion can become wooden.

Approach #3: Take comments from only one or two students at a time before moving on to other questions/material.

Caution: Avoiding repeatedly calling on the same persons. It's especially tempting to do this, though, if it's a sluggish discussion day and only a few students keep raising their hands.

- Systems of calling on persons

Approach #1: Call on those with their hands up first, then call on others.

Advantage: This process is very easy for the instructor. Little thought is required.

Caution: Sometimes a challenging question or discussion topic requires a lengthy lag time for thought. And often students with the most thorough analysis are hesitant to raise their hands quickly, if at all.

Caution: Repeated use of this system can lead to discussions mostly focused on only a few students. Essentially, the environment for discussions degrades.

Approach #2: Call on students by selecting index cards (each marked with a student's name) from a shuffled deck.

Advantage: Students have a roughly equal chance of being called on in any class meeting.

Caution: If questions are potentially pressure-inducing ones, repeated use of index, or "terror cards" can affect attendance. However, if questions are mixed, responses can be better.

Caution: It is probably best to avoid becoming reliant on index cards for the whole semester. This system is pretty mechanical. Real discussion communities thrive when members speak as it makes sense – and in the flow of things. However, the cards can be used for variety.

Approach #3: Keep mental track of students who have spoken and those who have not. Be sure to call on reticent students from time to time.

Caution: Some students are very good at fading into background. It takes practice to keep track of these students and to bring them into the discussion while respecting their privacy, or perhaps their lack of confidence.

- What about the people who do not raise their hands?

Often it is important to respect the privacy of shy persons.

Some instructors maintain e-mail lists or otherwise invite students to write them with questions or comments. This option can help more reserved students communicate comfortably with the instructor. However, sometimes this can become a large job for the instructor to manage, especially for large classes. Other options include:

Using discussion lists

Using threaded discussions

Calling on shy persons means balancing their privacy needs with other needs, such as allowing the whole class to hear a wide variety of opinions/comments, building the confidence of persons who believe their own views to be worth little....

Get to know class members

- Discussions tend to deepen when instructors call students by name.
Knowing class members helps solidify trust and respect.
- Discussions grow richer when class members and the instructor have the context of previous discussions on which to build.

- **Tips**

Get digital camera and take students' pictures on the first day of class. Print out a set of pictures with names and learn them. I usually set up web pages with students' first names and last initial (This way, search engines will not find the full identity of students, thus helping with their privacy.) With such photo galleries, students in the class also can come to know each other.

Alternatively, ask students to bring in photos of themselves. This works very well for some instructors, but I usually have to spend time wrangling photos from people.

At the very least, have students fill out an information sheet with a few open-ended questions.

Refer back to info sheets over the course of the semester – and perhaps even hand sheets back to students to make revisions if they want.

Instructors frequently are called on to write letters of recommendation for students. Information sheets (perhaps with photos included), if saved, can become wonderful tools for instructors to remember students. One instructor I know has forms printed on large index cards which he has collected for decades. It is thousands of cards thick. He is still able to write accurate letters of reference for many students he taught long ago.

Some instructors keep databases of student information.

Enhancing discussions

- Using a variety of discussion formats can increase attention in class.
- When an instructor calls on a student who then speaks, the instructor should
 - Acknowledge the comment, or
 - Paraphrase the comment to see if the instructor has understood it correctly, or
 - Respond to the comment as part of the larger discussion, or
 - Ask a follow-up or extending question of the student, or
 - Take the comment as a point of departure for broadening the larger discussion.
- When a healthy discussion climate is fostered, the instructor can open the floor for discussion and students can then initiate and direct conversation with some guidance from the instructor.

Gradually, the instructor can pull back from being the controller of all discussion. As students understand the class and its members better, they can respond to each other more effectively – and on their own.

- Usually there need to be some ground rules for discussions such as:
 - Discussants may critique the ideas of others, but must refrain from criticizing individuals.
 - Blanket assertions may be challenged with a call for evidence or examples.
 - Classes of persons must be respected and not minimized.
 - A person must be allowed to speak without interruption.
 - Some instructors ask the class to form its own rules. The instructor must then take care to honor those rules – and to make sure class members do, too.

Killing discussions

- Failure to acknowledge a comment
 - Student may feel his/her comment was stupid or that the instructor dislikes him/her.
- Failure to understand or to respond appropriately to comment
 - Students will be puzzled or then need to confer with classmate to confirm that the instructor missed the point... If this happens repeatedly, students lose respect for the instructor.
- Angry or short responses
- Interruption of student comments
 - Such instructor behavior is rude and minimizes the worth of student contributions.
- Insulting groups of persons in discussions, lectures, or other parts of the course. Students remember and make critical decisions about whether or not to continue to participate. Students can shut down for good if they feel slighted, directly or indirectly.
- Instructor acts as the fount of all wisdom – rather than as a person who is interested in seeking out larger wisdom. If the instructor already knows everything, why have a discussion?
- Long lectures tend to tax student attention. If a lengthy lecture is necessary, try to find a brief activity or joke... to bring the energy of the class back up.
- Failure to identify enticing entry questions, or to show places where current understanding is incomplete....
- Poor preparation. Students usually can pick up very quickly that an instructor is poorly prepared and is just trying to wing it. Many reciprocate.
- Sometimes good discussions just do not happen, in spite of all the best efforts of the instructor and students. Some reasons might be predictable such as class meetings the day before VEISHEA – especially if many students in a class are heavily involved in the event. At other times, it is hard to say why discussions fall flat. The next time, it will probably go better.

Playing with discussion formats

1. Use a talking stick. Only the person with the stick gets to speak. This includes the instructor!
2. Divide into 2 groups. Each side takes a position in opposition to the other.
Advantage: Can help students clarify the boundaries of a polarized issue.
Disadvantage: Polarized discussion can plunge both sides into a bottomless chasm.
3. Divide into 3 or 4 groups. Each side takes a position or represents the interests of a particular group of persons. Advantages: Discussions are more complex than with polarized groupings. Allegiances shift. Students can run the discussion largely themselves with minimal instructor intervention. Disadvantages: Some groups may have difficulty charting out their positions. Also, without skillful direction at times, the point of the discussion can get lost.
 - Tips: Ask students to sit on tables rather than at desks. This can lead to greater discussion comfort and ability to get talking stick, if it is used.
 - Rules: Each side makes opening comments. Then the talking stick is put in the center of circle/square. The person with stick gets to speak. The stick must move from group to group rather than within group. No blood.
4. Assign different areas of the classroom for students to sit according to their position on a topic. As the discussion progresses, ask students to change their position as their own views shift. If new positions emerge, encourage students to find an entirely different place in the class to sit.
5. Discussion tickets – Hand out one or two “tickets” to each student before a discussion starts. Once the discussion is underway, then every student who wishes to speak must first “pay” for the privilege by giving up a ticket. This exercise is useful for drawing out the comments of the more reticent students – and those who tend to speak most often begin to understand their pattern of conversation dominance.
6. Simulations and role-play.
7. Talking wad – students choose who speaks next. Can be tossed around a room.
8. Sometimes simply changing the configuration of seats can radically alter the flow of discussion in a class. If there is moveable furniture in a classroom, try shifting it around. Pay attention to the shape of arrangements, spacing (very important!), and the instructor’s position within configurations.

For more information

Brookfield, Stephen D. and Preskill, Stephen (1999). Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.

McKeachie, Wilbert J. (1994). Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath.