

Leading a Discussion

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Class discussion provides students with opportunities to acquire knowledge and insight through the face-to-face exchange of information, ideas, and opinions. A good give-and-take discussion can produce unmatched learning experiences as students articulate their ideas, respond to their classmates' points, and develop skills in evaluating the evidence for their own and others' positions. Initiating and sustaining a lively, productive discussion are among the most challenging of activities for an instructor.

General Strategies

Keep in mind the purpose of discussion. Discussions are useful for actively involving students in learning. Through discussion, students gain practice in thinking through problems and organizing concepts, formulating arguments and counterarguments, testing their ideas in a public setting, evaluating the evidence for their own and others' positions, and responding thoughtfully and critically to diverse points of view.

Plan how you will conduct each discussion session. A stimulating discussion is spontaneous and unpredictable, yet a good discussion requires careful planning. You will want to devise assignments to prepare students for discussion, compose a list of questions to guide and focus the discussion, and prepare specific in-class activities such as pair work and brainstorming. Have in mind three or four ways to begin the discussion (see below); if your first approach fails, try the next. To renew students' attention and heighten their motivation, plan to shift activities after twenty minutes or so if student interest and participation are waning (Frederick, 1989). Your plan should also allow time for a wrap-up so that students can synthesize what they have discussed.

Discuss your expectations at the beginning of the term. On the first day of class or in the syllabus, define the role discussion will play in the course. Describe students' responsibilities: let them know you expect everyone to

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participate, that class time is a “safe place” to test ideas and react to new perspectives, and that the discussion will be more worthwhile if students come prepared. Some faculty establish teaching/learning contracts that include the values, assumptions, and ideals of how the class will operate. (Sources: Hansen, 1991; Tiberius, 1990)

Setting the Context for Discussion

Explain the ground rules for participation. For example, do students have to raise their hand to speak? If you will call on students to speak, do they have a right to “pass” without penalty? One faculty member offers students a choice of responses when they don’t want to answer when called on: “I prefer not to talk just now” or “Please call on me later” (Hansen, 1992). Another faculty member asks those students who do not wish to be called on to write their name on a piece of paper. She places a star next to their name as a reminder to skip over them. She finds that few students exercise this option and some change their mind over the course of the term.

Give pointers about how to participate in a discussion. Students need to understand the value of listening carefully, tolerating opposing viewpoints, suspending judgment until all sides have spoken, realizing that often there is no one right answer or conclusion, and recognizing when they have not understood a concept or idea. Deemer (1986, p. 41) distributes a list of principles to students:

- I am critical of ideas, not people. I challenge and refute the ideas . . . but I do not indicate that I personally reject them.
- . . . I focus on coming to the best decision possible, not on winning.
- I encourage everyone to participate. . . .
- I listen to everyone’s ideas even if I don’t agree.
- I restate what someone has said if it is not clear to me.
- I first bring out all ideas and facts supporting all sides, and then I try to put them together in a way that makes sense.
- I try to understand all sides of the issue.
- I change my mind when the evidence clearly indicates that I should do so.

Tiberius (1990) also recommends distributing a handout on group skills (adapted from pp. 67–68):

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- Seek the best answer rather than try to convince other people.
- Try not to let your previous ideas or prejudices interfere with your freedom of thinking.
- Speak whenever you wish (if you are not interrupting someone else, of course), even though your idea may seem incomplete.
- Practice listening by trying to formulate in your own words the point that the previous speaker made before adding your own contribution.
- Avoid disrupting the flow of thought by introducing new issues; instead wait until the present topic reaches its natural end; if you wish to introduce a new topic, warn the group that what you are about to say will address a new topic and that you are willing to wait to introduce it until people are finished commenting on the current topic.
- Stick to the subject and talk briefly.
- Avoid long stories, anecdotes, or examples.
- Give encouragement and approval to others.
- Seek out differences of opinion; they enrich the discussion.
- Be sympathetic and understanding of other people's views.

One faculty member in sociology asks students to agree that no one will express an opinion on a subject until that person has (1) indicated an understanding of the previous speaker's views by briefly restating them to the latter's satisfaction and (2) inquired whether the speaker had something further to add. This instructor reminds the students of the agreement until the procedures become habitual (Thompson, 1974).

Help students prepare for discussion. Discussions are more lively and satisfying if students are prepared. Some faculty distribute four to six study questions for each reading assignment. Or you can ask students to conduct a "fact finding" mission to search the texts for factual evidence that clarifies a particular concept or problem (Clarke, 1988). Or ask students to come to class with a one- or two-paragraph position piece or several questions they would like to hear discussed. Hill (1969, pp. 55-56) recommends asking students to write out one or more of the following for each article they read:

- List all unfamiliar words or terms, and look up and write down the definitions.
- Write your version of the author's message or thesis.
- Identify the subtopics in the article, and design a question that you would ask for each.

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- Indicate what other ideas the reading substantiates, contradicts, or amplifies.
- Summarize your reactions and evaluation of the article.

A professor of business administration assigns a weekly "reaction" paper, one to two pages on a specific topic. The papers are graded and also used as the basis for class discussion.

Show a videotape of a good discussion session. Consider showing the class segments from Public Broadcasting System's "Ethics in America" or other PBS shows in which people with a variety of perspectives and political viewpoints discuss important issues. The impact of the videotapes will be greater if the content area relates to the subject matter of your course.

Starting a Discussion

Refer to any study questions you may have distributed. Begin the discussion by launching into one of the study questions or by asking the class which of the study questions they found most provocative or most difficult to answer.

Ask for students' questions. Tell students to come to the discussion session with one or two questions about the reading: "Bring a provocative, intriguing question to class and a sentence or two about why you would like to hear the question discussed." From these questions, pick one at random to start the discussion. Or have students divide into small groups to discuss their questions. For a change of pace, have students generate questions during class time, in pairs or in small groups. (Source: Frederick, 1981)

Pair students to discuss assigned reading materials in a question-and-answer format. Ask students to come to the discussion session with four complex questions that are phrased like good essay exam questions (you may need to give them models of good test questions). During class, have the students pair off and alternate asking and answering the questions. Move from pair to pair, listening or occasionally joining in. (Source: McKeachie, 1986)

Phrase questions so students feel comfortable responding. Lowman (1984) and McKeachie (1986) recommend formulating questions that probe students' understanding but do not have a single correct answer. For example, instead of asking for a definition ("What is entropy?"), ask the

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students to relate something new that they learned (“What about entropy stands out in your mind?”) or to give an example of the concept.

Pose an opening question and give students a few minutes to write down an answer. Once students start to gather their thoughts and write, additional questions and issues will arise. After students have finished writing, ask for volunteers or call on several students. (Sources: Clarke, 1988; Frederick, 1989)

Ask students to describe a “critical incident.” Begin the discussion by asking volunteers to recall an event in their own lives that pertains to the topic under discussion. When several students have related incidents, explore their commonalities and differences and connect the discussion to the readings. (Source: Brookfield, 1990)

Ask students to recall specific images from the reading assignment. Ask students to volunteer one memorable image/scene/event/moment from the reading: “What images remain with you after reading the account of Wounded Knee?” List these on the board and explore the themes that emerge. (Source: Frederick, 1981)

Ask students to pose the dumbest question they can think of. One faculty member uses this device to unleash students’ creativity and to minimize their fears in speaking up. After he has asked this question a few times during the beginning of the term, it becomes a game that everyone is willing to play. The class sifts through the questions, weeding out the irrelevant and focusing on the good ones. A variation of this technique is to pose a question and ask students for their “first approximations”—not a detailed answer, just a glint of useful information.

Pose questions based on a shared experience. A shared experience—a field trip, slide show, demonstration, film, exhibit—can stimulate an exchange that reveals students’ different perceptions and reactions to the same event. The discussion can then focus on how and why their perceptions differ.

Make a list of key points. “Let’s list the important points (or arguments that support a particular position) from the reading.” Then list the points on the board and use these as a starting point for the discussion by asking students which points are or are not important.

Use brainstorming. Brainstorming encourages students to consider a range of possible causes, consequences, solutions, reasons, or contributing factors

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to some phenomenon. Make the rules known to students: anyone can contribute an idea (no matter how bizarre or farfetched), and each idea is written on the board. Free association, creativity, and ingenuity are the goal; no idea is questioned, praised, or criticized at this point. After a set period of time (five minutes, for example) or when students have run out of ideas, the group begins critically evaluating all the ideas.

Pose a controversial question. Have students group themselves by the pro or con position they take. Ask each group to identify two or three arguments or strong examples to support their position. Write each group's statements on the board and then open the discussion for comments from all. (Source: Frederick, 1981)

Generate "truth statements." Divide students into groups and have each group compose three true statements about some particular topic. "It is true that Marxism . . ." or "It is true that high-density housing . . ." or "It is true that Executive Order 9066. . . ." List their responses on the board and open the discussion to the full class. (Source: Frederick, 1981)

Have students divide into small groups to discuss a question you pose. Give pairs, trios, or small groups of students an explicit task: "Identify the two most obvious differences between today's and last week's readings" or "Identify three themes common to the reading assignments" or "Make a list of as many comparisons (or contrasts) as you can in ten minutes." Give the groups a time limit and ask them to select a spokesperson who will report back to the entire class. (Source: Frederick, 1981)

Ask students to respond to a brief questionnaire. Distribute a brief set of questions to students, and use their signed responses as the basis for discussion. "Ellen, I see you answered the first question in the negative. Daniele, I note that you disagree with Ellen" or "Amber, your answer to question four is intriguing. Can you tell us more?" (Source: Davis, 1976)

Use student panels. Assign each student a different role on the panel (for example, experts in particular topics or representatives of particular points of view). Give panel members a week or more to prepare, completing whatever readings, research, or other activities you may suggest for them. Some faculty require all students to serve on a panel during the term; others offer panels as an option to a written paper or exam, or for extra credit.

Use storyboarding. Divide a particular problem into three to five subtopics or questions, post each subtopic or question in large type on a flipchart, and place the flipcharts around the classroom. Divide the class into as many

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subgroups as there are charts. Students are to read the question on their flipchart, write solutions on slips of paper or Post-its—one idea per note—and attach the slips to the chart. After ten minutes, the groups move on to the next flipchart and post notes there. Continue until all groups have visited all flipcharts. This technique encourages the free flow of ideas and keeps students actively involved. Here are examples of questions from a business administration course: “How can the sales reps increase sales?” “What methods can be used to recruit new distributors in underdeveloped markets?” (Source: “Storyboarding,” 1988)

Stage a role play. See “Role Playing and Case Studies.”

Guiding the Discussion

Take rough notes. Jot down key points that emerge from the discussion and use these for summarizing the session. You might also note problem areas that need clarification or students’ contributions that can be used as a segue to subsequent points.

Keep the discussion focused. List the day’s questions or issues on the board so that the class can see where the discussion is heading. Brief interim summaries of the discussion are helpful, as long as the summaries do not cut off the discussion prematurely.

Use nonverbal cues to maintain the flow. For example, hold up your hand to signal stop, to prevent one student from interrupting another. Step back from a student who is speaking so that he or she will see the other faces in the room. Prompt students to speak by an expectant look in your eye, a nod of your head, or slight motion of your hand. Interpose your body between two students in a heated exchange. To shift the mood and pace of the class, you can move around, sit down, stand up, make notes, or write on the board. (Source: Rosmarin, 1987)

Bring the discussion back to the key issues. If the discussion gets off track, stop and describe what is happening: “We seem to have lost sight of the original point. Let’s pick up the notion again that. . . .” “Peter, you have a good point, but does it directly apply to the issue of censorship?” “This is all very provocative, but we also need to talk about the NEA’s response before we end today.”

Listen carefully to what students say. Be aware of the following:

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- Content, logic, and substance (Is the student sensitive to the strengths and weaknesses of his or her presentation?)
- Nuance and tone, including the speaker's degree of authority or doubt and degree of emotion or commitment (Is the student involved with or removed from the subject matter?)
- How the comment relates to the overall discussion (Does it build on previous points and strengthen the flow of the discussion?)
- Opportunities for moving the discussion forward (Do students agree or disagree with what has been said?)
- The mood of the class as a whole
- What is left unsaid

(Sources: Christensen, 1991; Jacobson, 1981)

Clarify students' confusions. Don't let the discussion become bogged down in confusing information. "Let's clear up this misunderstanding before we continue." "We've covered some important points so far. Are you persuaded or troubled by this line of thinking?" (Source: Lowman, 1984)

Prevent the discussion from deteriorating into a heated argument. Remind students to focus on ideas, not on personal attacks, and to show tolerance for divergent points of view. Don't allow students to cut each other off or to make extraneous comments. If the discussion becomes too free-wheeling and heated, ask students to raise their hand if they wish to speak. Defuse arguments with a calm remark:

- Let's slow down a moment.
- Hold on. It's not helpful when five people jump all over what their classmate says. Let's give Russ a break.
- It seems like we need to identify those areas we can agree upon and those areas where we disagree. Let's start with those things we all agree with.
- This isn't getting us anywhere. Those who want to continue on this point can do so outside of class. Let's move on to a new topic.

You can also use conflicts as the basis for a homework assignment, to be written out away from the heat of the moment. (Source: McKeachie, 1986)

But do not shut off disagreement as soon as it occurs. A certain amount of disagreement can stimulate discussion and thought. Lively exchanges can be generated by asking, "Who doesn't agree with what's being said?" or "Will

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someone present an opposite point of view or counterposition?" or "What would a devil's advocate say?"

Change the task if the discussion begins to stagnate. Expect one or two lulls in the discussion. Students need time to think about what they have said and to take a breath. However, move on to a different task when students' attention is wandering. To refresh their thinking, pair students off for a short task or move from theory to application or from method to findings.

Be alert for signs that a discussion is breaking down. Indications that a discussion is not going well include the following:

- Excessive hair splitting or nit-picking
- Repetition of points
- Private conversations
- Members taking sides and refusing to compromise
- Ideas being attacked before they are completely expressed
- Apathetic participation

Introducing a new question or activity can jump start the discussion. It may also be useful to confront the problem directly by asking students to talk about why the discussion is faltering. (Sources: Hyman, 1980; Tiberius, 1990)

Vary the emotional tone of the discussion. To spark a discussion, ask specific rather than general questions; call on individual students known for their strong opinions. To calm a discussion, pose abstract or theoretical questions, slow the tempo of your voice, and avoid calling on specific individuals. For example, to heat a discussion, ask, "Should gays and lesbians be able to join the military?" To cool a discussion, ask, "What political and social factors affect the debate on gays and lesbians in the military?" (Sources: Christensen, 1991; Rosmarin, 1987)

Bring closure to the discussion. Announce that the discussion is ending: "Are there any final comments before we pull these ideas together?" The closing summary should then show students how the discussion progressed, emphasize two or three key points, and provide a framework for the next session. End by acknowledging the insightful comments students have made. (Source: Clarke, 1988)

Assign students responsibility for summarizing the major points. At the beginning of the discussion, select one or two students to be the "summa-

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rizers" of the major issues, concerns, and conclusions generated during discussion. A variation of this technique is to tell the class that someone will be called on at the end of class to summarize. This strategy encourages students to listen more carefully for the main ideas because they may be called upon to give the summary.

Ask students to write down a question that is uppermost in their minds. During the closing minutes of class, ask students to list one or two questions they have as a result of the day's discussion. Have students turn in these questions anonymously, and use the questions to start the next class meeting.

Evaluating the Discussion

Ask students to write briefly on how their thinking changed as a result of the discussion. You can also ask students to put the discussion in the context of issues previously discussed. Have students turn in their paragraphs, and review a sample to see what they have learned.

Make your own informal evaluation of the discussion. Did everyone contribute to the discussion? How much did the teacher dominate the session? What was the quality of students' comments? What questions worked especially well? How satisfied did the group seem about the progress that was made? Did students learn something new about the topic?

Occasionally save time at the end of the period to assess the day's discussion. You can hold an informal conversation or ask students to respond in writing to one or more of the following questions:

- What are some examples of productive or helpful contributions?
- When did the group stray from the subject?
- Whom do people look at when they talk?
- Does everyone who wants to speak have the opportunity to do so?

(Source: Davis, 1976)

Videotape the discussion. If you are interested in making a detailed analysis of how you conduct discussions, videotape a session. There are a number of ways to analyze a tape, one of which is to examine who undertakes which of the following activities (adapted from Davis, 1976, pp. 85-86):

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- *Initiating*: proposing tasks or procedures, defining problems, identifying action steps
- *Eliciting*: requesting information, inviting reactions, soliciting ideas
- *Informing*: offering information, expressing reactions, stating facts
- *Blocking*: introducing irrelevancies, changing the subject, questioning others' competence
- *Entrenching*: expressing cynicism, posing distractions, digging in
- *Clarifying*: clearing up confusions, restating others' contributions, suggesting alternative ways of seeing problems or issues
- *Clouding*: creating confusion, claiming that words can't "really" be defined, remaining willfully puzzled, quibbling over semantic distinctions, obscuring issues
- *Summarizing*: pulling together related ideas, offering conclusions, stating implications of others' contributions
- *Interpreting*: calling attention to individual actions and what they mean
- *Consensus proposing*: asking whether the group is nearing a decision, suggesting a conclusion for group agreement
- *Consensus resisting*: persisting in a topic or argument after others have decided or lost interest, going back over old ground, finding endless details that need attention
- *Harmonizing*: trying to reconcile disagreements, joking at the right time to reduce tensions, encouraging inactive members
- *Disrupting*: interfering with the work of the group, trying to increase tensions, making jokes as veiled insults or threats
- *Evaluating*: asking whether the group is satisfied with the proceedings or topic, pointing out implicit or explicit standards the group is using, suggesting alternative tasks and practices

As you observe your students' behavior and your own, think about ways to increase productive activities and decrease counterproductive ones. Ask a trusted colleague or a faculty development expert on your campus to analyze and review your tape with you.

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