



Facilitating Effective Classroom Discussions

Why Use Classroom Discussion as a Teaching Method?

When we ask students to participate in classroom discussions (either face-to-face or online), we're offering an opportunity for them to not only reflect upon their own ideas, but also learn from other people's expertise and eventually internalize the knowledge and thinking practiced in their discipline.

Why Do Discussions Sometimes Fail?

1. **Expectations are unrealistic** (*E.g. expecting students to master sophisticated content during a single large group discussion session*)
2. **Students are not prepared** (*Assign activities that will prepare them for the discussion and recognize their preparation*)
3. **Ground rules are not established** (*Who determines who speaks? What etiquette is expected? How long will the discussion last?*)
4. **There's no "reward"** (*I.e. participation is not required or recognized with points, etc. Some students may not see value in the discussion so share what you hope the discussion will accomplish*)

Classroom Discussions Work Best When You Plan Ahead

1. Prepare for the discussion

- Clarify your goals
- If you are leading the discussion
 - Compose provocative questions with no "right" answers
 - Develop guiding questions that will refocus the discussion if it goes too far off track
- Create a back-up plan in case the discussion stalls
- Design activities that will prepare students for discussion

2. Develop strategies for facilitating the discussion

- Set ground rules for participation, courtesy, and inclusiveness
- Ask questions to determine what students understand before asking them to do complex or original thinking
- Ask follow-up questions that allow students to develop or clarify a response
- Provide a record or summary of key points as they have emerged
- Draw connections between the discussion and other course or discipline topics

3. Determine how you will assess the discussion

- Leave time at the end of the session for debriefing
- Leave time at the end of the session for students to record key points or list unanswered questions
- Develop continuing assignments based on discussions (*5-minute papers, journaling, quizzes, etc.*)



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Classroom Discussion Types

1. Guided or directed (*Whole class or group discussion*)

- Course faculty pose a discussion question (*Sometimes in advance*)
- Each student contributes an original response to the discussion question (*Sometimes written*)
- Students offer responses or questions to each other's contributions to broaden the scope of the discussion
- Students present their views or the views of their groups, either orally or in writing

2. Inquiry-based (*Typically small group discussion*)

- Course faculty pose a discussion issue that requires argumentative reasoning and elaboration
- Students identify and highlight main issues relevant to the discussion by appraising new information, testing its validity and relevance, and considering their ideas against insights and perspectives provided by peers
- Students summarize the discussion in light of other discussants' reactions and interpretations in order to synthesize supporting and opposing ideas

3. Exploratory (*Typically small group discussion*)

- Course faculty pose a real-world problem that requires students to consider the premises or ideas they have been discussing
- Students consider their beliefs and opinions and evaluate how alternatives to these beliefs and opinions apply in the real world and in their discipline

4. Task directed (*Could transition from a whole class discussion to a small group discussion*)

Course faculty ask students to

- Scan: Extract a set of main ideas following a presentation, reading, lecture, or seminars. Students and TAs then select a core set of concepts, which will form the basis of other discussions
- Rank the selected concepts according to a criterion (*most important, hardest, most confusing, general to specific*) and justify their choices
- Define: Students record the concepts and then a student or a group must clearly define the concept

Assigning Discussion Roles

When discussions aren't progressing or students aren't participating, try assigning roles. The roles below were developed by Stephen Brookfield. Additional resources from Brookfield's work can be found at the end of the document.

- **Appreciator:** Makes comments indicating how she found another's ideas interesting or useful
- **Active Listener:** Tries to paraphrase others' contributions to the conversation –“So what I hear you saying is ...”; “If I understand you correctly you're suggesting that ...”
- **Connector:** Attempts to show how participants' contributions are connected to each other
- **Devil's Advocate:** Listens carefully for any emerging consensus, then formulates and expresses a contrary view



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- **Evidential Assessor:** Listens for comments that generalize or make unsupported assertions, then asks for the evidence that supports the assertions being made
- **Speculator:** Introduces new ideas, new interpretations and possible lines of inquiry into the group e.g. "I wonder what would happen if ...?"; "I wonder what (major theorist) would say about ...?"
- **Summarizer:** Makes and records summary observations that take into account each person's contributions
- **Umpire:** Listens for judgmental comments that sound offensive, insulting and demeaning
- **Underscorer:** Emphasizes the relevance, accuracy, or resonance of another person's comments and underscores why the comments are so pertinent

Sources and Resources

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