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Discussion as a Skill- Not a Technique

What Students Say About Discussion (When You Ask)

- 1) It seems professors use discussion (especially small group discussion) when they don't feel like teaching.
- 2) There is no accountability in group discussion. People who participate/prepare are not rewarded more than those who do not.
- 3) I leave discussion feeling that I've heard a bunch of ideas, but have been given no guidance towards which ideas are good or bad, or how the discussion should relate to what we are supposed to be learning.
- 4) Professors are so eager for contributions they let people go off on tangents and do not keep discussions focused and they feel useless/pointless.

What Else Do Students Say About Discussion (When You Ask)

- 1) Professors think we don't speak in discussion because we haven't read or aren't prepared. (and for many and maybe most students that isn't true).
- 2) Professors use class discussion because they want us to learn from each other and to explore ideas.

How I Have Used This Information to Improve Class Discussion

- 1) Students always have a series of questions in front of them for discussion.
 - If a whole class, they are given questions the class prior to take home for a reading guide.
 - If small groups, they are given at the beginning of class to guide group work.
 - If students conduct work in small groups, the class always ends with 20-30 minutes of active sharing. If we work as a class in discussion format, I actively use the board to record and organize comments. In either case: I ask DIFFERENT questions than the ones students were given as a reading guide or in small groups.

How I Have Used This Information to Improve Class Discussion

- 1) Class participation is a significant grade component: about 20% in 100 level courses and up to 50% in upper division seminars.
- 2) Standards for what constitutes productive contributions to discussion are presented, distributed as handouts, and discussed at the beginning of the course.
 - -linking discussion to course objectives
 - - linking discussion to course assignments
 - - setting standards for participation in discussion
 - - maintaining those standards throughout the quarter!

How I Have Used This Information to Improve Class Discussion

- 1) I have separated class preparation issues from performance in class discussion.
- 2) I have talked to students to find out barriers (in their minds) to productive class discussion and have developed the technique of teaching discussion *as a skill*.

Tips for Class Discussion Performance

Ten points to help you maximize the benefits of seminar style learning and master the skill of working through material in a discussion format.

We have a problem

- When I asked you what you don't like about seminars and class discussions you answered:
 - 1) The Silence
 - 2) The Speaking

Point 1: Everyone Needs to Speak

- Just because you are “shy” or “don’t like it” does not somehow give you a free pass to not speak up in class.
- Not speaking in discussion the equivalent of choosing not to take a test or failing to turn in a paper.
- For some people in the class, these things are just as difficult as speaking up may be for others.
- There are few jobs I can imagine that don’t require speaking skills- and these are skills you need to acquire.

Point 2: There is a learning curve

- Realize that participating in seminars and discussions involves developing a particular skill set.
- Therefore, you should expect to improve at discussion *over time* just like you would in other skills like reading, writing, or learning another language.
- Focus on improving your skills. This is an active learning process.

Point 3: Be Present

- It is important not just to have done the reading but be prepared in other ways.
- Being physically prepared is important for participation- adequate rest and nutrition
- Being mentally prepared is critical for participation- learn to put distractions from other parts of your life aside to maximize your learning time
- Learn to bring dedicated focus to different activities- including discussion.

Point 4: Check your ego at the door

- Being afraid to say things because you think they aren't "right" is a major problem.
- You are all intellectually sophisticated enough to know there are no "right" answers, so why should that create anxiety in a seminar?
- Often, the things that left you wondering or you didn't understand are the BEST points for discussion.
- Say what you think and ask questions- just always be considerate of others.

Point 5: Step Outside the Readings

- Sometimes the best way to get conversation going productively is to connect the readings to something else that people will be familiar with.
- Creating a common vocabulary or a universal experience in a seminar group is a good way to have an inclusive discussion.
- Make sure these are references that people are all familiar with, or may become familiar with as a follow up to class.
- I do this in class from time to time.

Point 6: Keep it Conversational

- Imagine yourself at a bar or at a party or at a coffee shop with friends. How does the conversation flow? How do you speak to each other? How do you give different opinions and listen in the course of a “normal conversation”?
- For some reason people want to change rhetorical forms in a seminar to make it formal and stuffy.
- The best learning comes from conversations that follows normal patterns- you're just some smart people chatting about a book.

Point 7: Listening is Just as Important as Speaking

- Listening is a critical skill.
- Pay attention to what people are really saying- take the time and make the mental space to take in the ideas and opinions of others.
- Don't judge – just listen.
- It is often good to ask for clarification from someone who has just spoken, particularly if you think your understandings of the subject differ somewhat but it isn't clear.

Point 8: Enjoy the Silence

- Really, it is no big deal to have occasional pauses in a seminar or discussion as long as they are productive.
- If you are exploring ideas it is normal to have to “digest” at times to move forward in the conversation productively.
- The silence isn’t ever a problem- it is the ability to jump back into conversation.

Point 9: This is a Safe Space

- Most jobs require the ability to effectively engage in seminar style discussions.
- Post-college these seminars have much more at stake.
- Use this as an opportunity to explore knowledge and develop skills in listening, conversation and speaking.
- I am more interested in your willingness to explore ideas than your “getting it right”

Point 10: You'll get what you need

- If you all stay focused on having these discussions benefit your assignments and address the course objectives you all have a way of thinking about the readings that are meaningful individually and collectively. It gives us a focus.
- If you actively engage materials cumulatively from the readings, previous discussions, work on class assignments and lectures, you'll be able to maximize the benefits of discussion time.
- If I feel you've missed things, we'll fill in the gaps at the end. I'll also leave some time for you to ask me questions at the end or for me to offer some additional insights and comments to keep you on track in the bigger picture.

A Quick Summary of How I Approach Discussions

- 1) Always provide printed questions and then use different questions to bring a discussion together.
- 2) Make class participation an important part of student evaluation.
- 3) Set standards for discussion, distribute and discuss them, and then stick to them.
- 4) Recognize student preparation and student participation as two separate issues that are not always interrelated.
- 5) Approach class discussion as a skill and teach this skill to students. Create a space that enables a development of skills and a mastery of content.