

# Tips on Leading an Effective Discussion

Some of you may be handling more than one group of students. It's been my experience that classes tend to develop a collective personality ("I have a really quiet group this term", "I've never had such a talkative bunch", "Trying to have a discussion is like pulling teeth with this group.") Even if you only have one group for the term, the techniques that worked well one day may fail the next time. For this reason, it's a good idea to try different techniques and strategies to keep lively discussions going.

Students create and follow group patterns. Without ever setting up a seating chart, you will find that students tend to take the same seats when they come to class. They will even be upset if someone happens to be in "their" seat. They also develop discussion patterns and it happens very quickly.

In every group of 25-30 students there will be about six who are not afraid to speak up in front of the whole class. They will be the ones you can count on to answer your questions and relieve the silence. However, these people can soon become the "voice" of the class if you're not careful.

The teaching strategy of asking a question and waiting for the brave souls who are not intimidated by speaking up in front of the class is the least effective in terms of generating group involvement. And yet--it's the most common strategy used in college classrooms.

Help all of your students develop the skill of articulating their ideas within the context of a class discussion by trying some of these approaches.

- **Let students write** their thoughts down first before you ask them to speak up in class. This gets their wheels turning and gives them the security of having something written down to refer to when they get flustered by the act of public speaking.
- **Use small groups.** Pair students, group them in threes or fours, and let them wrestle with the question or topic as a small group. This allows more students a chance to speak up in a comfortable, less intimidating setting. It also helps students get to know each other and that's part of breaking down the barrier of silence. Use different strategies for the grouping depending on your goals - planned groups, spontaneous and random groups and student-determined groups.
- **Ask questions that students feel invested in answering.** Whenever you can, relate questions to something your students may understand in another context of their lives--an area of importance. ("How many of you took on work responsibilities at an early age? Maybe this helps you understand some of the controversy around Child Labor laws. How does your experience affect your perspective on this current controversy?")
- **Use post-its creatively.** This idea comes from a UO math teacher, Stu Thomas. I think it could be adapted to classes in all disciplines. Every time a student catches him in an error or asks a particularly pertinent question, he gives them a post it (Stu stamps his with the face of Einstein and calls them "Einsteins"). They may use their "Einsteins" on midterms, quizzes, or the final exam. Each counts as an extra credit point when turned in with the test or quiz. It's a simple idea, but it really keeps students on track in class.
- **Repeating and rephrasing questions** (another suggestion from Stu Thomas in Math). (1) gives

you the opportunity to recognize the student's contribution by saying, "That's an excellent question Jennie. Class, here's what Jennie asked. Jennie, tell me if I understand your question correctly. She wants to know if we embedded the chain rule in the quotient rule in this example." (2) I'm making sure I answer the question she really wanted to ask, and (3) bringing the entire class into the action.

- The more you **use students names** in class, the more you break down the silence barrier and encourage participation.
- **Allow students who are shy and who may need more time to process** the opportunity to submit their contributions to class discussion to you through e-mail. Then when you feel the time is right, ask them if they would be willing to share their contribution with the class. Introduce this idea by saying (e-mailing) something like--"Ayesha, I thought you brought up a good point regarding environmental protection laws which we hadn't considered yet. Would you be willing to share this with the class tomorrow?" Once a student's contribution has been validated by the teacher, he/she may be more willing to speak up.
- **Make the value of participation clear to your students.** A meaningful percentage of students' grades for the course should be allotted to participation. With this, provide many avenues for earning this portion of the grade--speaking out in class, sending contributions through e-mail, coming to discuss topics further during an office hour with you, writing out comments and putting them in your mailbox.
- **Acknowledge contributions.** "Brandon has moved our discussion in a new and interesting direction. Thanks.", "Helena's point about the lack of focus in the study is well-taken. How does this affect the conclusion?" Your validation helps students feel comfortable, encouraged and valued.
- **Structure some kind of preparation for discussion.** Many teachers ask their students to bring questions covering the readings to class. Often these are collected and count toward the participation grade. Other ask students to write short response papers. Another strategy is to put your students in groups (planned group are recommended for this) and ask them to lead and facilitate a particular discussion topic.
- **Teach students to listen to each other.** Teach this by being a good example. Really listen when your students contribute and rephrase your understanding of what they said. When a student contributes, regularly ask another student to rephrase what was said. Help your students get into the habit of listening to each other. One instructor asked for a paper based on some aspect of the discussions which happened each week. The topics were to be drawn from clearly-identified, student-generated ideas.
- **Talk less and facilitate more.** Your students should be doing most of the work. Try to draw the best you can out of each response. If a student's answer is too general, draw out more specifics. "Okay, Mark--it's clear that you don't feel this was a good decision. What would have done in their place?", "That's a good observation, Tomas, can you give me another example of kinship ritual?"
- **Never humiliate your students.** One of the biggest fears students have which keeps them silent is being WRONG. Curiously, it's their instructor's worst fear, too. The primary endeavor of teaching is learning. One of the most powerful ways we learn is from our mistakes, from being wrong. Find a way to make being wrong all right. "I can see how that would make sense to you, Jolene. For a long time people thought this nutrition plan would lead to optimal health. Can anyone help us out on what the recent research has uncovered?"

- **Have some "Plan Bs" ready to go** if your discussion comes to a logical end earlier than you had planned. Reflective writing works well for an end-of-the-period activity and helps students draw together what has taken place in class. Sometimes you might be able to show a relevant video clip or read a relevant passage from another text which pertains to the discussion.
- **Give the discussion to the students.** Divide the class in half (25-30 student groups work well in this format). Make two circles (if your room allows, if not--get creative). Half the group is in the middle and half around the outside. The middle group will be in charge of the conversation for the first 15 minutes and then the groups will switch. Give the inside group a good question designed to generate discussion (remember that right or wrong questions tend to kill discussions). The job of the inner group is to answer the question well and to facilitate a good discussion among everyone in their circle. The outer group will be giving feedback at the end of the 15 minutes on how well the question got answered and the quality of the group discussion dynamics.

This format may feel awkward at first. The inner group feels "fishbowed." However, if you give them a good question to work with, they soon forget that they are being observed and get into the discussion. Often the students who are observing and may have been happy to sit passively in the past, want to get in on the conversation. For this reason, some instructors leave an "empty chair." If someone in the outer circle is dying to contribute, he/she can take the empty chair and say their piece and go back to observing.

This "feedback" discussion technique helps students learn group roles and processes and raises awareness regarding what comprises a high-quality discussion. It is important to mention that contributing is only one way to participate in a discussion. Often it is the individuals who know how to listen as well as speak, who are not afraid to challenge what someone has said, and who keep an awareness of who has spoken and who has not who keep the quality of the discussion going.

In this format you have a wonderful opportunity to study the dynamics of your group and to see the strengths and weaknesses of their ability to have group discussions.

### Presenting and Facilitating

This section of the TEP website addresses many former GTFs concerns about leading a discussion.

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