
The Art of Leading Discussions

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Objectives

- Identify the benefits of classroom discussions
- Predict ways to incorporate skills learned today to non-IOR situations
- Implement the groundwork for leading successful discussions in a variety of class formats
- Determine what makes for a strong question
- Solve issues that arise during classroom discussions

Discussions as a Learning Tool

- Why do you use/want to use discussions in your classroom?
 - A = It requires less preparation for you
 - B = It encourages active participation
 - C = Students can practice critical thinking skills
 - D = Opportunity for students to exchange and collaborate ideas

Discussions as a Learning Tool

- What are your goals for the discussion?
- Different goals require different kinds of preparation.
- Potential benefits:
 - Apply concepts
 - Contemplate new material
 - Clarify content
 - Active learning and participation
 - Practice critical thinking skills
 - Exposure to multiple points of view
 - Collaboration or exchange of ideas

Laying the Groundwork

- Prepare the students for discussions from the very first day of class
- Set expectations
 - Participation - grading?
 - In syllabus
 - Verbally
- Establish a classroom community
 - Get to know each other
 - Use students' names and encourage students to use each other's names
 - Create discussion guidelines
- If possible, create a physical space that encourages discussion

Online Discussions

- What is your top reason for avoiding online discussions?
 - A = I don't! I love online discussions.
 - B = I teach/TA a face-to-face class.
 - C = Getting students to participate is like pulling teeth!
 - D = They don't seem like a worthwhile exercise.

Online Discussions - Key Considerations

- Set clear expectations for students
 - Original post, response post, word count, grammar, evidence/support, engagement
 - Helpful to provide students with advice on proper language and ideas for posing strong questions
- Establish grading criteria
 - Best to grade online discussions
- Think through the role of the moderate/facilitator
 - IoR or TA
 - How active should the teacher/TA be?
- Start discussions with strong questions that offer multiple avenues of response
- **Resources:**
 - [Online Discussions - Tips for Instructors](#)
 - [Online Discussions - Tips for Students](#)

Online Discussions - Benefits

- Can be utilized in all types of courses
- Gives students time to compose thoughts
 - Less pressure to respond right away
 - Beneficial for students with social anxiety...
- Increases the quality of responses/discussions
 - Work on writing skills
 - Practice supporting ideas with evidence
- Accessible to students with disabilities

- **Resources:**
 - [Online Discussions - Tips for Instructors](#)
 - [Online Discussions - Tips for Students](#)

Large Lecture Discussions

- Make large classes feel small - discussion formats
 - Think/Pair/Share
 - Small groups
 - Have groups report the conclusions of their discussion
 - Clickers or polling technology to generate discussion
 - Can be used to enhance T/P/S
- Break up discussion with mini-discussions
 - Try a 15-20 minute lecture and then a 10 minute discussion, repeat.
 - Ask questions throughout the lecture
 - Makes lecture interactive and keeps students engaged

Preparing for the Discussion

- In the past, how have you prepared for leading a discussion?
 - A = I don't. I like to live dangerously.
 - B = I re-read the text or course materials.
 - C = I carefully plan out how I want the discussion to go.
 - D = I prepare some questions, but I'm also ready to see how things progress.

Preparing for the Discussion - Teacher

- Remember to ask, “What are my goals for the discussion?”
- Plan guiding questions
 - How will you kick off the conversation?
 - ... address topics you want to hit on?
 - ... revive a dying discussion?
 - ... wrap it up?
- What is the basis of the discussion?
 - Text or reading assignment
 - Image
 - Video
 - Class lecture
 - Current event
 - Etc.

Preparing the Student for Discussion

- Remind students of expectations
- Provide pre-discussion reading questions
- Short freewriting exercise or quiz
- Ask for discussion questions based on their reading

Types of Conversations

- What kind of conversation do you usually use in class?
 - A = Think/Pair/Share
 - B = Small discussion groups
 - C = Whole class discussion
 - D = Ask questions throughout a lecture

Types of Conversations

- Two person
 - Small group
 - Whole class
 - Teacher-led
 - Student-led
- Interleaved into a lecture
 - * Centered around a common experience or topic
 - * Debate
 - * Case-study or problem
 - Think-pair-share
 - * Small groups
 - Conver-stations
 - Activity based

Resource: [Creative ideas for discussion formats](#)

Structure the Conversation

- State your objectives for the discussion
- Start with a short activity
 - Respond to reading questions individually in writing or small groups
- Determine the flow of the conversation
 - Do you want to call on students?
 - Have them call on the next person?
 - Let the conversation flow organically?
- Kick off the discussion with a strong question
- It's your job to keep the conversation on track!
- Leave time at the end of class -
 - Take the last 5 minutes to wrap up the discussion
 - Ask for lingering questions
 - Exit ticket

Asking Strong Questions

- Questions asking for information
 - Who? What? Where? When? Why?
- Open ended
 - What's going on here? What do you make of the situation or example?
- Priority
 - Which issues are most important? Where do you start?
- Challenge
 - Why do you say that? How would you explain? Where's your evidence?
- Extension
 - What else? Keep going? Therefore?
- Prediction
 - What would happen if...?
- Summary

Source: [Harvard Typology of Questions](#)

Resource: [Designing Effective Discussion Questions](#)

Weak Question Types

- Generally avoid these types of questions. They often lead to dead-ends, confusion, or awkward moments
 - Simple yes or no questions
 - Too vague, broad, or confusing
 - Fillers
 - Does everybody understand? Any questions?
 - Leading
 - Question itself implies the expected answer
 - Slanted
 - Questions convey a certain perspective and students who disagree might close down
- Also avoid asking too many questions at once.

Source: [Designing Effective Discussion Questions](#)

Resource: [Discussion Questions that Follow Bloom's Taxonomy](#)

The Facilitator

- What is your role when it comes to facilitating a discussion?
- What are your responsibilities?
- When do you step in and guide conversation?
 - Ask questions
 - Embrace silence
 - Synthesize/clarify
 - Summarize
 - Connect
 - Push the conversation forward
 - Moderate conversations dominated by one or several students
- Avoid shutting down a student's comment or question

The Dreaded Silence

- How would you handle the dreaded silence after asking a question?
 - A = Ask another question
 - B = Call on a student to respond to your question
 - C = Embrace the silence
 - D = Rephrase your original question

The Dreaded Silence

- Embrace the silence
- If your posed question doesn't get any responses, try again by rephrasing.
- Allow students to gather their thoughts
 - Consider pausing for a short writing exercise
- Ask students to summarize key points so far
- Direct students towards a sentence, paragraph, graph, quote, etc. and use as a new jumping off point

Potential Discussion Pitfalls

- What is your biggest concern when it comes to facilitating discussion?
 - A = Students who talk too much
 - B = Students who don't talk at all
 - C = Students who aren't listening to each other
 - D = Conversations falling flat
 - E = Other
- When you run into these issues brainstorm solutions with faculty, colleagues, and PIE!

Top Five Resources on Discussion Leading

- [Leading Discussions from The Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning](#)
 - Be sure to click “For More Information” at the bottom!
- [The Dreaded Discussion: Ten Ways to Start by Peter Fredrick](#)
- [Discussions from the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching](#)
 - This website has a ton of great teaching resources!
- [Question Strategies from the University of Waterloo Center for Teaching Excellence](#)
- [Effective Class Discussions from the Yale Center for Teaching and Learning](#)