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TEACHING AT ITS BEST

**{ A Research-Based Resource
for College Instructors }**

THIRD EDITION

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Leading Effective Discussions

Chapter Twelve recommends breaking lectures up with intermittent activities that allow students to work with and assess their understanding of the material. In all but very large classes, one of the easiest and most effective student activities is a well-directed discussion. In smaller classes and seminars, this method may further your learning outcomes and serve as your primary classtime activity. Certainly a “discussion section” should remain true to its name and rely heavily on this format.

Let’s define discussion as a productive exchange of viewpoints, a collective exploration of issues. To bear fruit and not degenerate into a free-association, free-for-all bull session, you as the instructor must chart its course and steer it in the right direction. It is your responsibility to plan and control the content and conduct, to keep hot air from blowing it off course. But it is also your responsibility to go with the breezes at least occasionally, to keep it flexible and fluid. Your challenge is to strike that delicate balance between structure and flow. Finding that balance

helps you broaden participation and keep all hands on deck.

■ WHEN TO CHOOSE DISCUSSION

When well planned and managed, discussion can help your students achieve every type of learning outcome with the possible exception of knowledge/remembering, and it isn’t bad at that either (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; McKeachie, 2002). In fact, discussion shines in developing the skills, abilities, and learning attitudes on which lecture is weak (Bligh, 2000; Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2008; Delaney, 1991; Ewens, 2000; Forster, Hounsell, & Thompson, 1995; Gilmore & Schall, 1996; Kustra & Potter, 2008; McKeachie, 2002; Robinson & Schaible, 1993; Springer, Stanne, & Donovan, 1999):

- Examining and changing attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors

- Exploring unfamiliar ideas open-mindedly
- Deep learning
- Critical thinking
- Problem solving
- Listening actively
- Communicating orally
- Transferring knowledge to new situations
- Retaining the material
- Wanting to learn more about the subject matter

The problem-solving skills that discussion fosters apply not only to math problems but to all kinds of solution-oriented tasks, whether they call for one correct answer, one best answer, or many possible correct answers. Such tasks include resolving ethical dilemmas, designing a research project, explaining deviations from expected results, writing a computer program, solving a case study, evaluating various positions on an issue, analyzing a piece of literature, and developing approaches to tackling real-world social, political, economic, technological, and environmental problems. Because discussion models democracy, it may even promote civic engagement and good citizenship (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Lempert, Xavier, & DeSouza, 1995; Redfield, 2000).

One final benefit of discussion for you as well as your class is that across the disciplines, student ratings of instructors vary positively with the amount of time and encouragement an instructor gives to discussion (Cashin, 1988; Cohen, 1981).

Before moving on, we should distinguish discussion from recitation, which is students answering knowledge/remembering and comprehension/understanding questions. By contrast, discussion thrives on higher-order questions (see Chapter Fourteen). But recitation occupies a useful place in helping students achieve several respectable outcomes: recalling and restating knowledge, terms, and facts; speaking the language of the discipline (Leamson, 1999); expressing important material in one's own words, thereby demonstrating understanding; and practicing what requires drill and repetition to learn. It also helps students retrieve the basic knowledge they need for discussion.

■ HOW TO SET THE STAGE FOR DISCUSSION

The biggest challenge facing you is eliciting broad and active participation. If you can do that, most of the other problems that go wrong in a discussion—domination by one or two students, topical tangents, silent sectors of the room—simply disappear. Just about all the recommendations in this chapter help ensure that all of your students will come to a discussion prepared, comfortable, and willing to contribute.

From the First Day

Students need to be primed for discussion, especially since they spend most of their classroom time passively listening to an instructor and a few particularly loquacious classmates. If you plan to make discussion an integral class activity, even if not a primary one, inform and prepare your students from the first day of class. Let them know the primary ground rule: everyone's participation is expected and no backbenchers will be allowed. Announcing the key role that discussion will play in your course will encourage students to take the activity seriously. So will telling them your reasons for using discussion—for instance, how the research supports its effectiveness in helping them achieve your learning outcomes. Follow up by explaining how class discussions will relate to other parts of the course, such as readings, written assignments, and tests. When you can, build homework, quizzes, and tests around both the readings and the discussions about them.

Explain the true nature of discussion—that it thrives on the expression of different, legitimate points of view. Disagreement enriches the learning experience. In fact, college is all about hearing, “trying on,” and appraising different perspectives. So students should listen actively and respectfully to every opinion put on the table, evaluate the evidence for and against that claim, and be prepared with evidence to defend their own positions.

Then lead your class in a discussion—if not about the syllabus (see Chapter Three) then about

their prior knowledge of, experience with, and interest in the course material. Try to get every student to say something that day. You might draw students out by directing questions to them individually, such as, “Janet, what interested you in this seminar?” or “Matt, what topics would you like to see addressed in this course?” Cement their participation by having them post extensions of or comments on this first discussion online—to a class blog, wiki, discussion board, or chatroom.

Here are some other first-day primers to break down social barriers from the start. If possible, arrange the seats in a circle so that students can see one another. (It isn’t easy to talk to the back of a classmate’s head.) Have social or subject-oriented icebreakers the first day of class so students get acquainted (see Chapter Four). They will find it easier to speak out among “friends.” Give students index cards to fill out with any information they’d like to share about their learning styles, hometown, personal lives, and career aspirations. To induce them to talk, you might invite them to expand on their index card information. Finally, start calling students by name and helping them learn each others’ names by providing name tags or name tents for in-class use.

Continue to nurture the friendly atmosphere you establish on the first day by getting into the habit of casually chatting with students before and after class. If you have the time, make individual or small-group appointments with them early in the term (pass around a sign-up sheet), and include some noncourse conversation on the agenda. Your knowledge of your students will help you pitch the course at the right level as well as develop a solid rapport with your class quickly. If your students are comfortable with you as a person and you feel comfortable with them as well, your discussions will flow more evenly and honestly.

From the start, establish good eye contact and physical proximity with all of your students as equally as possible. A good rule of thumb is to maintain eye contact with one student or, in a large class, a cluster of students for at least three seconds. Your very look makes a student feel included. If your class sits in a

circle or around a table, varying where you sit can help you equalize your eye contact and physical proximity. If you do not normally sit down during class, move about the room as much as you can.

Grading on Participation

You may or may not wish to include the quality and quantity of class participation in your final grading scheme. But doing so will increase the likelihood of your students coming to class prepared and participating (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2006). If you do, you should make this very clear in your syllabus and your first-day presentation. Also explain your conception of adequate quality and quantity. To help articulate your standards, put the phrase “class participation grading rubric” in a search engine and peruse the examples your colleagues use.

To head off uneven participation, especially the problem of a couple of dominant students, you can limit the number of contributions each student can make each class before everyone has spoken. To keep track, have students display a colorful sticky note on the front of their desk for each of their contributions. You can combine this system with grading, giving students a participation point for their first two or three comments but no more points for any subsequent ones (Lang, 2008).

Consider the class level and size in deciding the weight to give participation. First-year students may feel comfortable with 20 percent in a class of twenty to twenty-five students but may find it unreasonably stressful in one of forty-five to fifty. More advanced students should be able to handle a higher percentage even in a large class. You might have students vote on the percentage (give them options) and follow the majority rule.

Setting Ground Rules for Participation

How do you foresee conducting class discussions? Students want to know how you will call on them. You have several options: (1) in some predetermined order—perhaps alphabetically, by seating, or by index card order; (2) by raised hands; or (3) cold-calling

by random selection, such as shuffling and drawing index cards with students' names or choosing students who haven't spoken recently.

The first method ensures broad participation and preparation, but it creates a stiff, recitation type of atmosphere. In addition, it raises the stress of the student next in line while encouraging others to tune out. Used alone, the raised-hands method keeps the class relaxed but does little to motivate preparation. Most important, participation is bound to be uneven, with a few verbal individuals monopolizing the floor and most students playing passive wallflowers. You may even wind up inadvertently reinforcing social inequities unless you make special efforts to draw out and validate your female and minority students. The third method, cold-calling by random selection, obviously ensures broad participation and motivates preparation, but some instructors resist it for fear it will cause students undue discomfort. Actually there is no evidence to support this concern, at least not for advanced students. In addition, cold-calling combined with graded participation is effective in increasing both the frequency of student contributions and preparation for discussion (Dallimore et al., 2006).

You may want to vary your methods for calling on students. For example, when the raised-hands method fails to generate broad enough participation, you might shift to cold-calling, perhaps targeting students who have been silent for a while.

If you use the cold-calling or predetermined order method, a good ground rule to set is the escape hatch—that is, permitting students to pass on answering a question. It is demoralizing to the class and counterproductive to the discussion to badger, belittle, or otherwise put a person on the spot for not having a comment when you demand it. A student with nothing to say may simply have nothing new to contribute. While it's possible he isn't prepared, he may simply agree with other recent remarks, or may have no questions at the time, or may be having a bad day and not feel like talking. To cover these instances, inform your class that you will occasionally accept responses such as, "I don't want to talk right now" or "Will you please call on me later?"

However, you should make it clear that certain negative behaviors will not be tolerated: purposefully steering the discussion off-track; trying to degenerate it into a comedy act; instigating an inappropriate debate; personally attacking a fellow student; displaying one's temper; asking wheedling, argumentative, or loaded questions; or engaging in more general uncivil classroom behaviors (see Chapter Seven).

A democratic alternative to your setting up civility ground rules is to lead a class discussion on what those rules should be (Kustra & Potter, 2008). Ask the students to recount the qualities of the best discussions they have participated in. How did their classmates behave? How did they show mutual respect? Then ask them about the worst discussions in their educational experience. How did people treat each other? What behaviors induced the silence, anger, or fear of others? From this point, the class can generate their own ground rules, and you can supplement as necessary.

One final rule to set yourself is a reassurance: "The only stupid question is the one you don't ask." Students are downright terrified by the prospect of looking stupid or foolish to you or their peers. They appreciate being told that you will welcome all questions and ensure that they are answered. A similar but modified rule should apply to all answers as well: you will welcome all contributions given with good intentions. But this doesn't mean that you won't correct faulty answers or allow other students to correct them.

Bringing Equity to a Diverse Classroom

If your class is especially diverse or the subject matter of your course encompasses race, ethnicity, and class, it's best to bring differences out in the open early. Brookfield and Preskill (1999) describe several classroom activities that acknowledge and honor diversity. In one of them, "Naming Ourselves," students first reflect on the cultural, racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic group with which they identify. Then they each introduce themselves as members of their group, stating the label they prefer for this group and what their identification means to them—for instance, how

it has affected their values, beliefs, language, behavior, and so on. In another, “Expressing Anger and Grief,” students get into groups and exchange personal experiences of cruelty set off by racial, ethnic, or class prejudice. Then the group analyzes the stories for common and disparate themes, emotions, and effects.

To ensure gender equity, Brookfield and Preskill (1999) recommend that instructors model and encourage female ways of interacting, such as disclosing personal information, taking risks that could lead to mistakes, and connecting discussion topics with personal experiences. They also offer several classroom exercises and assignments for acclimating students to both male and female ways of talking. One involves the students’ making scrapbooks or journals focused on how gender has affected their lives. Another asks students to write down five or so demographic identities or facts about themselves, including gender, and then explain how each has shaped their point of view.

A diverse classroom can introduce controversy and discourse that students may not know how to handle, and you shouldn’t assume that they know what civil discourse is. So either you or your students have to establish ground rules for discussion, to include forbidding personal attacks. If the topic may provoke racist or discriminatory remarks, stand poised to intervene and return to the discussion on the subject at hand. Regardless of how you feel about the various positions raised, do not project those emotions to the students who express them. Protect both the attacked and the attacker. Then have the students calm down, step back, and think about what has just happened. You may go from here to turn the situation into a teachable moment. Have students write a reflection paper on the incident expressing not only their feelings but what they learned. Or ask the students involved in the incident to restate and explain their views calmly. Or defer discussing the issue until later, and do bring it up later, after you have a strategy for handling the conflict (Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, 2006).

For more ideas on ensuring equity in your classroom, see the “Inclusive Instruction” section in Chapter One.

■ HOW TO MAXIMIZE PARTICIPATION THROUGH SKILLFUL DISCUSSION MANAGEMENT

Let us consider how to keep a productive discussion going with broad student involvement.

Facilitating Discussion

First and foremost, you are the discussion facilitator. This may seem a trendy term, but it is a fitting one nonetheless. To “facilitate a discussion” means to make it easy for students to participate, and the process can begin before class. By arriving a little early and casually chatting with students as they arrive, you can loosen them up for dialogue. Facilitating also entails starting off the discussion and adding to it when necessary. But once the discussion takes off, it largely involves directing traffic (see the section on this topic below). Still, at all times, you serve as manager-on-call to control the focus, structure, and tone of the exchange.

Depending on the circumstances, you may briefly assume a wide variety of roles: coach, moderator, host, listener, observer, information provider, presenter, counselor, recorder, monitor, instigator, navigator, translator, peacemaker, and summarizer. During particularly animated or contentious exchanges, you may even find yourself playing referee. Congratulate yourself when students start speaking to each other directly rather than through you. Your goal is to make yourself superfluous.

Motivating Preparation

You will find dozens of ways to induce your students to do the readings (see Chapter Twenty-Three), and the following are among them as applied to discussion specifically. Include the reading assignments on the topical agenda of the day they are due. Reading-focused discussions can be enriched by having students take notes on the readings, write a reaction to or a summary of them, draft answers to study questions

you have prepared, compose their own written questions on the readings, or make journal entries about their responses to them. Then allow students to use these notes, reactions, questions, and answers in the discussion. They will feel more confident and more willing to participate with a written point of reference in front of them. If you want your students to take notes, compose questions, answer study questions, or keep journals on the readings, collect these regularly or periodically to ensure they are keeping up.

Depending on your discipline, you may also be interested in the following seminar structure, which you can learn more about and watch in process online (SCCtv, Boyer, & Harnish, 2007). Students prepare for class by marking passages in the readings that are puzzling, especially important, or related to other readings or discussion themes. In class, each student in turn reads one passage aloud and explains why she selected it while the rest of the class takes notes. After all the students have shared their passages, each in turn responds to their classmates' choices and insights, recounting what they have found most meaningful, interesting, or novel. Some faculty and their students have found this process highly productive.

Recall that grading on participation and cold-calling motivate students to prepare for discussion. So does calling on students in some predetermined order, but it has weaknesses that cold-calling does not.

Readying the Class

Students come to class with all manner of things on their mind, and the subject matter of your course may not rank among them. So before launching into a discussion, warm up the class to the topic of the day. You needn't follow all the recommendations below, but implementing two or three will make it easier to launch the discussion.

To help students put the upcoming discussion into perspective, begin with a brief review of the previous class period. But draw the highlights out of the students, posing questions like, "What are the major points we covered last time?" Let students refer to, and thus review, their notes.

Then turn the students' attention to the discussion for the day with a road map—that is, an outline

on the board, a slide, or an overhead of the day's agenda, outcomes, topics, or the process through which you will guide them. (A list of discussion questions may justify a handout.) In other words, lay out the territory that the class will travel. Not only will you look more organized, you will *be* more organized, and so will the discussion. In addition, you will make it easier for students to take notes on the discussion. It is a technique they find hard to master.

You might also precede the discussion with a few recitation (knowledge/remembering) questions on the readings to refresh your students' memory and get them all on the same page. Or you might have them read important text passages aloud (see the seminar structure described in the previous subsection). Or ask them about their emotional reactions to the readings, such as what the content meant to them or how it made them feel. Another technique that will engage everyone is a writing prompt—that is, a reading-relevant question or provocative statement that students can reflect on and write about for three to five minutes (Jones, 2008). This prompt may be your launch pad for the discussion.

Igniting the Exchange

You have your choice of several proven strategies to stimulate a discussion (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Jones, 2008; McKeachie, 2002). One is to start with a common experience, which may be a well-known current event or a classroom experience you have furnished, such as a video, demonstration, or role play. Another is to have students brainstorm what they already know about a topic or what outcomes that they anticipate of a situation or an experiment. A potentially hot ignition switch is to pose a controversial or probing question. You can set up a student debate in advance (see Chapter Fifteen) or play devil's advocate yourself. As some students can interpret your representing "the devil" as manipulative, untrustworthy, and occasionally confusing, it is crucial that you explain what you're doing beforehand. While you're assuming the role, you might even wear a hat or a sign with "Devil's Advocate" written prominently on it.

You can always open a discussion by asking the first in a series of questions you have planned in

advance. As we rely on this strategy so extensively, and for good reason, the entire next chapter is devoted to questioning techniques. Not all questions evoke the types of thinking that launch discussions. You will learn about those that do and those that don't.

Motivating Attention

A good discussion relies on all students staying alert and listening carefully. To promote their paying attention, tell students to take notes on the discussion and tell them how to do so. You might start by advising them specifically when to take notes, such as each time a student proffers a new and worthwhile point. It also helps to refer frequently to your discussion road map, write the major points made on the board (another aid for note taking), and ask students to comment on and react to one another's contributions. Of course, if you tell (and remind) students that they will need the content of the discussions to complete assignments and perform well on tests, they are more likely to stay attentive. If some of the discussion takes place in small groups, have a policy of randomly selecting a few groups—and within each group, randomly selecting the spokesperson—to summarize their progress or conclusions.

Ending class with a wrap-up activity on a regular basis can also keep students alert during the whole period. For example, randomly pick a student to summarize the discussion at the end of class, then invite others to add major points. Or conclude class with a classroom assessment technique (see Chapter Twenty-Eight), such as a one-minute paper in which students write down the most important thing they learned that day and any remaining questions or still-confusing point.

Waiting for Responses to Increase Participation

To eliminate needless delays in students' responding, ask only one question at a time. Resist the temptation to pose another related question if you don't get an instant response to the first. Putting multiple questions on the table confuses students.

Once you pose a well-crafted question, allow sufficient time for students to respond—five to fifteen seconds, depending on the difficulty of the challenge. This rule applies no matter what your method of calling on students. While a few members of the class may jump at the chance to say anything, even if it is incorrect, most students need time—more time than we might expect—to think through and phrase a response they are willing to share publicly. After all, they are struggling with new knowledge and thinking in a foreign language—the language of the discipline. So they need time to retrieve and sort through the knowledge for an intelligent response, then figure out how to express it. Extending your wait time from the typical half-second (Stahl, 1994) to just three seconds can dramatically increase the number of students with a response (Rowe, 1974).

If the question is particularly difficult, lengthy, or complex, you might advise students to outline their answer in writing first. Having a response jotted down in front of them will boost their confidence and courage. You may also get higher-quality answers. This way, too, you can feel free to call on anyone—in particular, the quieter students.

Watch for nonverbal cues of students' readiness to respond, especially changes in facial expression. Still, refrain from calling on anyone until you see several raised hands or eager faces. When you have many possible students from whom to select, you can spread the attention and participation opportunities across students who haven't spoken recently.

Breaking the Class into Small Groups

A time-saving way to guarantee a broad response to a question, especially in larger classes, is to break the students into small groups. If you intend to do so only on occasion or as a brief warm-up to a general discussion, you may simply have students cluster themselves into informal, ad hoc "buzz groups" based on seating proximity. If you are setting up long-term formal groups to collaborate on a sizable project outside class (see Chapter Sixteen), you may have students get into these groups. Either way, not only will the groups generate higher-quality answers than will most individuals on their own, but they will give the shyer and

more reserved students a safer venue in which to develop their ideas and points of view.

Encouraging Nonparticipants

I have already mentioned several ways to broaden participation: letting students jot down their answer, extending your wait time, and breaking the class into groups to develop responses. You can also monitor participation and actively encourage it where it's lacking. If one side of the room seems too quiet, make a point of saying so, and start directing questions exclusively to those in that area. If an individual is not contributing, use the same tactic, but be extra gentle; you want to avoid putting that person too much on the spot. Another strategy with a quiet student is to ask her to read a passage of text, a question, or a problem aloud. This technique is particularly effective with a passage from a narrative, a play, a poem, or a treatise, and you can follow up by asking the student to interpret or comment on the reading.

Persistent nonparticipation may be a symptom of a deeper problem that calls for a private approach. It is a good idea to have the student see you in your office and tactfully ask why he has been so quiet in class. Accept any answer as legitimate, and then encourage him to become involved. One way to help a student overcome fear is to give him one or more discussion questions in advance of the next class and let him rehearse his answers with you.

Responding to Student Responses

Give approval, verbal or nonverbal, to all student contributions, but with discretion and discrimination. Students want to know how correct and complete their own and their classmates' answers are, but they want you to deliver your judgment in a diplomatic, encouraging way.

Approval can take the form of a nod, an interested or accepting facial expression, your recording the response on the board, or appropriate verbal feedback. Here are some verbal response options you may wish to use:

- *When the answer is correct but only one of several correct possibilities*, ask another student to extend or add to it. Or frame a question that is an extension of the answer. Avoid premature closure.
- *When the answer is incomplete*, follow up with a question that directs the student to include more—for example, “How might you modify your answer if you took into account the _____ aspect?”
- *When the answer is unclear*, try to rephrase it; then ask the student if this is what she means.
- *When the answer is seemingly wrong*, follow up with one or more gently delivered Socratic questions designed to lead the student to discover his error—for example: “Yes, but if you come to that conclusion, don't you also have to assume _____?” (See the section on the Socratic method in Chapter Fourteen.)
- *When the answer is incomplete, unclear, or seemingly wrong*, invite the student to explain, clarify, or elaborate on it. Or ask other students to comment on or evaluate it. Vary your response to faulty answers so students simply don't translate a stock phrase as, “You're wrong.” Avoid identifying and correcting errors yourself for as long as possible.

Directing Traffic

As some of the response options suggest, you often best facilitate by doing and saying very little, acting only as the resource of last resort. You should step in only if no student supplies the needed clarification, correction, or knowledge or if the discussion strays off track. In fact, the successful facilitator's primary task is to direct traffic—that is, to signal students to react to their peers' contributions. When you do respond yourself, try to do it in the form of a thoughtful follow-up question. In addition, whenever you can, refer back to the student's earlier remarks, using the contributor's name.

Your goal is to shift the spotlight from you to your students every chance you get. In addition to inviting students to comment on and extend each other's answers, ask them to address their comments to the classmate to whom they are responding by

- *When the answer is correct*, praise according to what it deserves.

looking at that person and addressing her by name. For the first few weeks, name tags or tents may be essential. If the class is splitting into camps on an issue, set up a spontaneous debate, allowing students to change their mind in the course of the exchange. For a twist, have each side argue in favor of the opposition. Also bring students center stage when you sense that you are not effectively explaining a point or answering a question. Ask them to help you out and offer their version; they speak one another's language.

What if traffic comes to a screeching halt? If no one says a word after a generous wait time, you might break the silence and tension with a touch of humor: "Helloooooo, is anybody out there?" But you should definitely find out the reason for the silence. Perhaps your question was ambiguous, or your students did not understand the way you phrased it, or they misunderstood your meaning. For your own benefit, ask them to identify the bottleneck.

Wrapping Up

Before moving the discussion onto the next topic, be sure the current one is settled. You might ask if anyone has something to add or qualify. If no one does, ask a student to summarize the main points made during the discussion of the topic. Then move on, making a logical transition to the next topic.

Watch the clock and reserve a few minutes at the end of class to wrap up and summarize the discussion. Some sort of review encourages students to check their notes and fill in important omissions. It also keeps them on common ground. See the "Motivating Attention" section above for several fruitful ways to end a discussion session.

Discussion appeals most strongly to the auditory learning style (see Chapter Twenty-Five), and any one method can get monotonous after a while. So consider varying your participatory strategies to better serve other learning styles, as well as to add spice to life. The many student-active, experiential, and cooperative-learning techniques described in Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen offer stimulating alternatives to the all-class discussion. These include brainstorming, debate, change-your-mind debate, the press conference, the symposium, the panel discussion, role playing, simulations, field and service work, and a wide variety of small-group activities.

Of course, engaging questions and sound questioning techniques can keep the discussion method lively and challenging for weeks on end. They can also inform your quizzes and exams so you can better assess the level of thinking you're trying to foster. So let us turn now to crafting questions.