

The Notebook from the Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence
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From the Director

Mary Stephen, Ph.D.

Director, Reinert CTE

Discussion is a strategy used by many faculty members at the University to address a variety of goals, ranging from engaging students with course content to developing critical thinking skills. Using discussion, whether in face-to-face settings or online, does not come without challenges.

How does a faculty member facilitate discussions that encourage all students to contribute? How does one avoid having a few students dominate the discussion or, alternatively, foster discussion when greeted by silence? How does one keep discussions on-track or decide when an off-shoot contributes to the goals of the course? Are there different strategies to be used when facilitating discussion online as opposed to in a "live" setting? Should points be given for contributing to discussions and if so, how should points be awarded? Are there ways to use discussion in large classes?

For this issue of the Notebook, we invited faculty members to share their experiences and suggestions for using discussion in teaching. Our faculty guest columnists for the year, Mary Dunn, Ph.D. and Randy Richter, Ph.D., address this theme as well.

There are many excellent resources with tips for using discussion in teaching available. One of my favorites is Discussion as a Way of Teaching by Brookfield and Preskill. (Discussion as a Way of Teaching, S. D. Brookfield and S. Preskill, 1999, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, CA.). The following links lead to additional resources on using discussion in teaching:

[Engaging Students in Online Discussion](http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/Bulletin/OnlineDiscussion.html), prepared by the Center for Instructional Development and Research, University of Washington (http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/Bulletin/OnlineDiscussion.html)

[Using Class Discussion to Meet Your Teaching Goals](http://ctl.stanford.edu/Newsletter/discussion_leading.pdf), prepared by The Center for Teaching and Learning, Stanford University
(http://ctl.stanford.edu/Newsletter/discussion_leading.pdf)

For additional ideas on teaching, please join your colleagues from 8:30 to 12:30 on Thursday, January 7 for the Center for Teaching Excellence sponsored event, Spotlight on Teaching: Interactive Strategies from SLU Faculty. Additional details and registration information will be available shortly on the CTE website (<http://cte.slu.edu>).

Where We Started: Reflections on Dialogue and Teaching

Bryan Sokol, Ph.D
Assistant Professor
Department of Psychology

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time
(from T.S. Eliot, Little Gidding)

Twenty years ago, I sat in a classroom at SLU as an undergraduate. I can vividly remember reading, for the first time, Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in Father Kevin O'Higgins' ethics course. Now, I am a faculty member at SLU in the Psychology Department, returning as it were to the classroom of my youth and with a new appreciation of Freire's work.

In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire describes two concepts, or models, of education: the banking and the problem-posing models. According to

Freire, education in the banking model boils down to “an act of depositing” (p. 58). Students’ minds are akin to a bank vault into which teachers deposit information. The prevailing attitude in this unilateral approach to instruction is that “the teacher talks and the students listen” (p. 59). Freire contrasts this model with a more discussion-oriented, or dialogical form, of education. Problem-posing education, as he calls the alternative, leads to the mutual transformation of both students’ and teachers’ understanding. In this model, a more equalitarian approach to instruction is used, in which, as Freire claims: “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself [or herself] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach” (p. 67).

Twenty years later, as I return to the classroom, I try to be sensitive to Freire’s words. I remember as an undergraduate being struck by their significance, but not really understanding how they could impact my life. Like many undergraduates at that time (and perhaps even now), I was simply confused by what was expected from me in this alternative, dialogical approach. Using Freire’s language, the words did not transform me, or so I thought.

Reflecting on my teaching experiences now, I recognize how my own learning and personal transformation has occurred on at least two fronts. The first of these has to do simply with the preparation involved in teaching any course. I find that through this process of putting myself in the shoes of those who are new to the field I discover nuances to course materials that I had not yet fully appreciated. The second, and perhaps most significant aspect of teaching, grows directly from the many discussions I have with my students and research team. It is in these more dialogical encounters – our collective efforts to clarify and elaborate some idea – that I feel the most authentic learning takes place, and where, quite often, the traditional boundaries of teacher and student become blurred. Of course, this was Freire’s point all

along. Some lessons, it seems, just require arriving again at the place where it all started.

Discussion Techniques for the Lecturer

Paaige K. Turner, Ph.D

Associate Provost for Community Engagement

Graduate Director, Dept. of Communication

The truth is, I am a lecturer. I like directing the topic of conversation and ensuring that we spend an appropriate amount of time on each subject. But as a communication professor I know that all communication is interactive. That is, communication is done with people not at them. Below are some of my top tips for lecturing with my students:

PowerPoint dictates discussion if you let it. Your class may want to talk about a topic that either you don't have in your slides or that you haven't gotten to yet. Rather than stopping discussion, use shortcut keys. In a slide show "B" or "W" will take the screen to black or white without losing your place. Any other key will return you to the same slide. This allows you to stop and talk about a subject that might not actually be part of the slide show without students being distracted by the material on the screen. If the discussion jumps ahead of your slide show type in the number of that slide, hit enter, and you immediately skip ahead. To return, just type the number of the slide you were on!

Introverts can contribute, too! They just need time to think and collect their ideas. You can encourage their participation by asking students to write down their thoughts or ideas on a subject prior to discussion. Be sure to be quiet while they think and warn them as the time for writing draws to an end. Now you can call on any student and know that they will have something to

contribute.

Let everyone have a chance to contribute and listen. When you allow students to reflect prior to speaking you may get “popcorn” hands ... hands popping up so students can share their thoughts is a teacher’s dream! But students who are holding up their hands aren’t paying attention to the contributions of those who are speaking. Identify students with their hands up by name and hold that number of fingers on one hand in your other hand. As each speaks, release a finger. That way students can focus on the other speakers with their hands down, and you know that you have speakers who still want to contribute.

No one likes to be talked at, but by using these and other discussion techniques, you can ensure that class time stays focused on the subject while talking with your students.

Teaching Tips: Using Discussion

Daniel Chornet Roses, Ph. D.

Assistant Professor

Department of English and Communication

Saint Louis University, Madrid Campus

Sometimes, during class discussion, there is a gravity-like force that turns the instructor into the target of all questions and answers. In my class, I change the default traditional seating arrangement and allow students to see each others’ faces. I sit next to them in the circle and I let them pose questions that they have prepared beforehand about an assigned reading. Our discussion is grounded in listening. I strive to create an atmosphere in which students are encouraged to address each other directly and take their time to genuinely understand each other’s points of view.

John P. Keithley, Ph.D., C.P.A.

Professor

Department of Accounting

John Cook School of Business

Saint Louis University

Classroom discussions are often the most interesting part of a course. However, in order for the discussions to be a meaningful experience, thoughtful preparation is required.

Discussions should not be scripted, but the instructor needs to consider how the conversation may evolve. The nature of the course will impact the nature and direction of the discussion, but my experience is that you can often anticipate the outcomes and questions which may be raised. This will enable the instructor to think about examples which may enliven the discussion, or ways to keep it "on point."

Experience is a great asset, and young faculty may have difficulty projecting the results of a discussion. However, even a new teacher should spend some time considering how a discussion may go before saying to a class, "Well, let's talk about this subject for a little while."

Mark Ruff, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

Department of History

College of Arts and Sciences

Saint Louis University

For three semesters, I have been teaching a required survey course - "The Origins of the Modern World" - for between 150 and 200 undergraduates, mostly freshmen and sophomores. This format - a large lecture - would not seem to be exceptionally favorable for discussions. I have been determined, however, to use discussion regularly as part of my teaching. I began my first classes by having the students view via power point short texts that

purported to explain major historical events. These texts were, by definition, incomplete and inaccurate: they left out important information like names, dates and locations. They provided one-sided or misleading explanations. I then asked the students to "pick holes" in these texts and provide better explanations for the events we were analyzing. I typically receive more than one dozen volunteers for these exercises.

Conversations on Teaching

[Mary Dunn, Ph.D.](#)

Assistant Professor

Department of Theological Studies

In my undergraduate courses, I try to implement some discussion in every class. Although I am careful not to rely on discussion to carry the whole class, some discussion is essential in terms of maintaining student interest and keeping students on their toes! I tend to structure my classes in a way that strikes a balance between lecture (which is an opportunity to give important background information pertaining to the reading and to introduce major themes and issues in the reading) and discussion.

I find that a good way to begin discussion is to ask how the assigned text compares or relates to texts we've read earlier in the semester. I also send out reading guides in advance of class. These guides consist of questions that will be the basis for our class discussion and give students a chance to prepare for discussion (and fewer excuses not to participate). To facilitate discussion, too, I think it can be helpful to draw out the quiet or shy student and to ask that student what she or he thinks—particularly in response to another students' comments—or to make use of a small group format. Students tend to speak more readily when among their peers and then, with the support of their group, are more eager to share their thoughts and reflections with the class as a whole when we get back together.

Finally, student presentations can be a good way to prompt discussion on issues in which the students themselves are interested. In my undergraduate classes, I require each student to present the reading once over the course of the semester. I ask the students to come prepared to present the major point or arguments of the assigned text and to pose to the class three or four questions she thinks merit discussion.

Conversations on Teaching

[Randy Richter](#)

Associate Professor

Department of Physical Therapy and Athletic Training

While I believe class discussions provide a valuable alternative to lecturing, the challenge for me has been how to encourage discussions in a large (~ 70 students) class setting. Several years ago I tried an approach that failed. A percentage of the course grade was based on participation. In an effort to be fair, I tried to note in real time who was participating. This approach had the unintended consequence of promoting student competition to earn participation points. Also, I do not believe this approach encouraged discussion. Midway through the semester, I spoke with the class and we decided to drop the grade aspect of participation.

In 2006 I attended a workshop co-sponsored by the Reinert Center for Teaching Excellence . The speaker, Dr. Barbara Walvoord, described a technique to encourage students to take responsibility for the first exposure to class material. For example, a first exposure activity may ask students to complete a reading prior to class. When students read ahead, class time normally spent introducing material can be spent in discussion of the material. I was intrigued with the idea and read about the process in more detail.

In the fall of that year, I and a colleague, Rosemary Norris, implemented First Exposure Learning Activities (FELA) in a class we co-taught. Following Dr. Walvoord's work, we developed assignments with questions related to

required readings. Students completed these prior to class, turned in a copy and brought a copy to class. These questions then served as a springboard for discussion. We graded the FELAs on a pass / no pass basis. Although students generally evaluate the FELAs positively, and we have found the FELAs encourage discussion, using them does not guarantee class discussion. While completing a FELA gives a student the knowledge to participate in class, if the class atmosphere is not welcoming of discussion this strategy will likely be unsuccessful.

1. Making the Grading Process Fair, Time-Efficient, and Useful for Student Learning, presented by B.E. Walvoord, PhD. Saint Louis University, May 16, 2006.
2. Walvoord B, Anderson V. Effective Grading A Tool for Learning and Assessment. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 1998

What's Writing Got to Do with It?

Debie Lohe, Ph.D

Program Director for Teaching Enhancement

Reinert CTE

Facilitating discussion (and doing it well) can be harder than it looks, especially in a culture where speedy reaction trumps thoughtful response and those who shout are often the only ones to get air time. In class discussions, both large and small, we often find ourselves dissatisfied with the quality of students' contributions and frustrated by those who sit quietly while their more vocal peers dominate.

One way to enhance discussion is to incorporate informal writing. There are some good reasons to do this: among other things, it allows those who need to process ideas before speaking a better chance at being heard, and it helps multilingual students record (and even translate) ideas before discussion

begins. Ultimately, it slows the pace, which can elicit more deliberate responses.

Short, in-class writings are perhaps the easiest to incorporate. Students can jot down responses to discussion questions before you open the conversation. They can write down, at the beginning of class, important points from readings, or discussion questions of their own. (In small classes, students could be asked to read these aloud before discussion begins.) They can do short, focused free-writes in which they brainstorm creative solutions to complex problems. In text-based courses, they can use writing as a tool of close reading, marking passages before contributing to the conversation. Having students write a little before they begin discussion can force them to be selective, to make strategic decisions about what to say, not just rely on the first thing that occurs to them.

Writing can also capture what happens in discussion, providing organization to seeming chaos and spurring more conversation (whether in class or online). Since students can struggle to take good notes while participating in discussion, you might ask for a volunteer to document important themes and to share them with the class later. Or you might create a wiki or blog, where students collaboratively document the important points of the discussion. Check out how Dr. Monica Rankin incorporates Twitter into large class discussions at the University of Texas in Dallas.

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6WPVWDkF7U8>.)

Of course, the degree to which writing enhances discussion depends upon the goal of discussion in your class. However, if you find yourself dissatisfied with the quality of students' contributions to discussion, get them to write first and see what happens. While it won't radically transform every student's comments, it will signal that talking first (or loudest) isn't what matters most.

Top Five List: Making Online Discussion Work

Sandy Gambill, Program Director for Learning Technologies. Reinert CTE

5. In large classes, use small groups.

It's easy to get students to "talk" online, but listening online translates into reading. If a class of 20, if each student is making an initial post and two responses on a discussion board topic, the listening can become overwhelming. Consider splitting your students into small groups for discussion activities.

4. When it comes to using the tools, think outside the box.

Not every discussion topic needs to be a full-on class discussion. Consider the discussion tool for activities such as peer review, journaling, and as a communication space to support group projects. If you're thinking about trying the FELA technique described by Dr. Richter above in this issue you could ask students to post questions or thoughts about the readings on the discussion board before they come to class. You might have small groups develop questions that would then be addressed in class.

3. Gauge how much you participate.

The professor obviously needs to make sure the discussion stays on topic, but if you post too much, you can find yourself conducting one-on-one tutorials with each student or in the worse case scenario, shutting discussion down all together as the students wait for you to express your opinion. You want students to "feel your presence" and know you're reading their discussion, but you don't want them to sit back and wait for you to do the work. A technique you might want to try is having students rotate responsibility for facilitating and summarizing discussions by working with you in advance to develop discussion questions for a particular unit and then by summarizing the discussion at it's conclusion.

2. Use discussion prompts.

This sounds like a no brainer, but surprisingly, it's something that doesn't always occur online. In the face-to-face environment, you can spark discussion with "Questions?" or "What did you think about this chapter?" because you can immediately probe for more input or change the direction. You'll need to be more specific online, especially with undergraduates. You'll want to develop a very specific discussion prompt, such as "After you have

read Chapter 2, list the two questions you have about Brown's theory of psychomotor development. Then respond to the postings of at least two of your classmates." Building in deadlines can be helpful here. If discussion will run for a week, set a deadline for the original posting so there will be sufficient time for conversation to occur.

1. Provide guidelines to ensure quality discussion.

Students often have difficulty formulating an appropriate academic discussion posting; it's easy for a discussion thread to slip into the realm of opinion and anecdotal. You can head this off by providing clear guidelines that let students know what's expected of them. Google "discussion rubrics" for many examples.