

Resource Guide

Fostering Discussion in Face-to-Face Classes

Many instructors rely on discussion as a central component of their classroom practice. For many, facilitating effective discussions can be intuitive. They seem always to know just how to draw students out, connect students' ideas (even seemingly disparate ones), and discussion to achieve their learning goals. For others, the task is more challenging. Depending on the students and the course and the instructor's own comfort level, class discussions can fall flat or fail to achieve the intended learning. Students may remain passive or unengaged. They may want to participate, but find their peers have already expressed the ideas they wanted to share. For students who come from different educational cultures and/or whose primary language is not English, the pace of discussions can be challenging. Even in cases where the discussion feels energetic, where students seem actively engaged, it can sometimes be difficult for students to know what the discussion was meant to teach. Below are four small steps to help you foster more meaningful discussions in face-to-face classes.

- **Identify the purpose of discussion:** When the purpose is merely "to discuss," students may find it difficult to know where/how to enter a discussion. Without a clear purpose, instructors may find it difficult to turn *discussing* into *learning*. Before beginning a class discussion, identify what you want the discussion to *accomplish*: to reveal multiple and diverse responses to or interpretations of assigned readings? To help students formulate creative approaches to solving a common problem? If the purpose of a discussion is to *test students' knowledge* (or to find out if they read), students may be less likely to engage. If the purpose is to explore unfamiliar ideas, generate solutions to problems, or compare interpretations or experiences, the discussion is more likely to fuel itself as it unfolds. Having a clear purpose – and naming that purpose explicitly for students – can lead to richer, more learning-focused class discussions.
- **Invite students to reflect briefly before beginning the discussion:** Before opening the discussion to verbal contributions, ask students to jot down a few ideas about the topic or possible responses to questions posed. Quiet time allows students to process their thinking, reflect critically on the topic, and formulate the words to convey their ideas. The strategy is helpful for students whose primary language is not English, for students who are more introverted, and for many others. It creates more equitable discussion environments by not rewarding the first person to raise a hand, and it can lead to deeper, more complex thinking, since students can reflect critically before speaking (as opposed to saying the first thing that comes to mind).
- **Ask "open" questions:** When preparing to lead a class discussion, write out your questions ahead of time. Then, consider whether the questions are "open" (that is, inviting discussion) or "closed" (that is, more likely to lead to single-word or fact-based

responses). Questions that invite single-word or fact-based responses are less likely to generate discussion than those that have multiple possible answers. If discussion is important to you, focus more on *why* and *how* questions. Such questions invite complex perhaps even conflicting responses, and fuel discussion rather than closing it down.

- **Start smaller:** Many people feel more comfortable talking with one other person before contributing to a full-class discussion. Often referred to as “think/pair/share,” one strategy is to ask students to reflect on a question or topic on their own, then ask them to turn to someone nearby and discuss in pairs, and then to ask students to share with the full class what was discussed in pairs. The “think” and “pair” portion of this exercise serves as a warm-up for the larger discussion.

Resources

Brookfield, S. D. & Preskill, S. (2005). Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms (2nd edition). Jossey-Bass.

LINK: <http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0787978086.html>

Davis, B. G. (2009). “Discussion Strategies.” Tools for Teaching (2nd edition). Jossey-Bass.

LINK: <http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0787965677.html>

Nilson, L. B. (2010). “Leading Effective Discussions.” Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors (3rd edition). Jossey-Bass.

LINK: <http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0470401044.html>.

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at ctl@slu.edu.