

Discussion as a Teaching Technique

Adapted with permission by Helen Davies from (1) Cashin, William E. and McKnight, Philip C. (January, 1986). "Improving Discussions." IDEA #15, Center for Faculty Evaluation & Development, Kansas State University, and (2) Peter J. Frederick (1981). The Dreaded Discussion: Ten Ways to Start, Improving College and University Teaching, 29(3), 109-114.

Used on its own or combined with lectures, discussion is an effective way to facilitate learning. Discussion can provide the instructor with an opportunity to assess student understanding of course material. In addition, by introducing their own observations and questions, students can explore ideas thoroughly. Most importantly, discussions allow students to actively participate in the learning process. Learning is more interesting and students are often more motivated when they are actively involved in using the course material.

Instructors must remember that some students are uncomfortable with the discussion approach and, therefore, a number of different teaching strategies must be used to encourage students to trust their own opinions.

A successful discussion doesn't just happen—it demands that the instructor be well prepared. To help you prepare for a class discussion, common concerns and problems are listed below with suggestions for how to deal with each.

PLANNING THE DISCUSSION:

Define the objectives of the discussion group.

You can relieve anxiety by letting students know that you do not expect everyone to speak every time. Emphasize that they are not expected to "perform," but rather, share their opinions and observations. It is important that you acknowledge student fears and nervousness. Reassure students that you will not grade everything they say, and stress that the goal of a discussion group is to enhance student understanding of a chosen topic or "text."

Explain the discussion format to the class.

Let students know if you require them to bring prepared material to class or whether you will focus on a number of previously handed-out questions or a particular theme.

Change discussion formats frequently to ensure that students don't lose interest.

Define terms and state assumptions.

Discussion participants must agree on definitions of terms and assumptions so that everyone is starting from the same point. The instructor should watch for terms that may need definition and assumptions that may be implicit, but not stated. For example, in discussing adequate social services for individuals living in poverty, the following questions arise: How is "adequate" defined? Are students making assumptions about what social services exist or are readily available? How is "poverty" being defined?

GENERATING DISCUSSION:

Asking questions

- Ask students ahead of time (in a previous class) to prepare one or two questions about their reading.
- As students walk into the classroom ask them to write down discussion questions. Hand all the questions to one student (a shy one perhaps) who, at random, selects questions for class attention.
- Divide the class into pairs or small groups (the size of the class will influence the size and number of small groups) and ask each group to decide upon one salient question to put to the rest of the class.

Some reasons for asking questions:

- To diagnose student difficulties
- To introduce a topic
- To stimulate analytical thinking
- To give direction to problem solving
- To encourage imaginative thinking
- To help students discover connections between concepts and ideas (e.g., to link cause and effect)
- To promote interest and encourage the application of what has been learned by the students

Finding illustrative quotations

Ask each student, either ahead of time or at the start of class, to find one or two particularly significant quotations from the assigned readings.

Ask students to:

- Point out quotations they especially liked or disliked.
- Find a quotation from the text that best illustrates the major thesis of the piece.
- Select a quotation from the assigned reading that is difficult to understand.

With this exercise, instructors and students alike often discover new insight into a particular text.

Break the class into smaller groups

Some students find small groups less threatening and, therefore, are more likely to enter into the discussion. In order to make this method effective, however, students must be given a clear task and a definite amount of time in which to complete it. Finally, they must be asked to use their responses in a follow-up discussion with the class as a whole.

FORMAL DEBATE

While the effectiveness of this strategy depends on the dynamics of the group, it can be useful. Have students select one or the other side of two opposing opinions. They must then defend their point of view.

This exercise is most successful when students are given some time to prepare before coming to class. Be sure, however, that they do not prepare a formal presentation.

Ask for responses in writing

One excellent way to get discussions going is to ask students to respond to the question in writing. Usually five minutes is enough time for students to prepare an answer. Quiet students will often speak up if they have the words before them. This strategy also demands that students think concisely.

MAINTAINING DISCUSSION:

Control excessive talkers.

Don't let one or two students monopolize the discussion.

1. Do not call on the "talkers" first. Wait to see if someone else raises a hand or volunteers a comment.
2. Solicit responses from the "nontalkers." Be alert to nonverbal cues indicating that they have something to say, and then call on them: "Did you want to say something...?" or, "Let's hear from some of you who haven't said anything yet."
3. Have the class observed by someone (e.g., a student selected from the class), then discuss who is talking, how often, to whom, etc. Often this will make both the "talkers" and the "nontalkers" modify their behaviour.
4. Talk to excessively talkative students outside of class, one-on-one if all else fails. Be careful that a bright conscientious student is not made to feel penalized. You don't want to destroy initiative, creativity, or confidence; you want to ensure that contributions come from all or most members of the class.

The discussion that goes off track.

Stopping and asking students to summarize the discussion up to that point helps to re-focus the group. However, be sensitive to the direction taken by a "tangent," since it may result in a valuable learning experience of great interest to students.

Instructor's role as group leader.

Know your students. Start the discussion with a topic that students can relate to. Use a common experience or concern to initiate discussion.

Be patient. Try not to monopolize the discussion.

Listen. Discussions are rarely beneficial when a leader does not listen to the contributions of the participants. Hear the students out and concentrate on the points they are trying to make as much as on the points you want to make.

Don't question a single student for too long. If a student does not respond to a question, do not embarrass him/her by continuing to question the individual. Remember, you must challenge, NOT threaten, students.

Use personal anecdotes. Relating your own experiences can facilitate the discussion if done in moderation.

Inquire. Ask the students to elaborate, clarify, expand, explain, explore, etc.

Paraphrase. It is valuable - particularly for the leader - to summarize ideas, conclusions, and the general direction of the discussion several times during a class. This helps to ensure that everyone is following the development of ideas, and provides a starting point for continued discussion.

Relate concepts and ideas. The leader can ask participants to compare ideas or concepts brought out in the discussion, or use analogies of illustrative anecdotes to relate ideas.

Be accepting rather than judgmental or evaluative. Try to focus on the "correct" part of the student's response.

CONCLUDING THE DISCUSSION:

Good discussions end with a summary so that students know the important points that have been covered. In addition to showing students why the discussion is important to their learning, a summary provides an opportunity to fill in points not covered, and to praise the class for the quality of their responses.

Questioning as a Teaching Technique

The effective use of questions in the classroom may be a hard skill to develop. Good questions take some planning. This is particularly so if you have a direction you'd like the class to move in or if you have a line of reasoning you'd like students to use or discover. Time spent preparing potential questions and anticipating answers can make classroom question sessions an effective teaching and learning tool.

FOUR GENERAL TYPES OF QUESTIONS

1. *Memory or Recall Questions.*
E.g., What is the population of Canada?
2. *Questions that ask for analysis or "convergent questions."*
These questions can require analysis of data, application of selected tools, and synthesis of a broad knowledge base, e.g., How did the building of a coast to coast railroad affect the economic and political development of Canada?
3. *Questions that call for creativity or "divergent questions."*
These questions can require lateral thinking and consideration of a variety of possibilities, e.g., How would the Canadian economy be affected by a free-trade agreement with Mexico?
4. *Questions requiring evaluation.*
These questions require judgment or the making of choices, e.g., Is the Prime Minister doing a good job of representing Canadian interests outside of Canada?

COMMON PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH THE USE OF QUESTIONING

1. *Using "double barreled" questions* (asking two questions at one time) so that the student doesn't know which question to answer.
E.g., Are you still thinking about that problem, or do you want to move on to the next subject?
2. *Not giving students enough time to think about questions.*
30 seconds or a minute is not a long time for students thinking about the answer to a question.
3. *Providing students with the answer to your question.*
When students know you don't really expect them to come up with answers to your questions, they'll stop thinking and wait for you to provide the answer. Be patient.
4. *Being overly judgmental about responses provided.*
Even when answers are poor or not what you wanted or expected, you should be somewhat accepting of a student's response or he/she may be discouraged from responding to future questions.
5. *Avoid "yes" and "no" questions.*
Questions with one-word answers are usually not productive because they often don't lead to discussion. Rather than asking, "Is carbon monoxide a pollutant?" ask, "Why is carbon monoxide considered a pollutant?"
6. *Avoid ambiguous questions.*
Ambiguous questions can frequently be avoided by using a written question as a model. A written exam question is best stated as a direction: "Name...", "Balance...", "Devise a synthetic scheme...", etc. In each case, an "action" verb is used in the question. Another way to avoid ambiguity is to remember to use words such as what, how, and why.