

Effective Class Discussions

Yale Center for Teaching and Learning

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Discussion can be utilized in seminar and lecture courses, and various strategies allow instructors to meet specific class needs. This flexibility stems largely from grounding in the work of social theorist Len Vygotsky, who emphasized knowledge and conceptual gain through peer-to-peer dialogue. Vygotsky understood peers to coexist in the “zone of proximal development,” where knowledge could be shared and misconceptions clarified through dialogue (Vygotsky 1962). This form of verbal participation and active dialogue has been shown to maximize student engagement and learning over straight lecture scenarios (Howard 2015). When an instructor effectively facilitates rich discussion in class, their students are more apt to build upon existing knowledge frameworks and achieve better learning outcomes.

Examples of Discussion Formats:

- **Socratic Seminar** - In a Socratic seminar, the instructor asks open-ended questions that encourage students to think critically about the course material, often a particular text or reading. This format typically supports whole-group discussions.
- **Fishbowl** - In concentric circles, students take turns actively participating in discussion and serving in the role of listeners. The inner circle consists of active participants, while the outer circle consists of observers – at some point in conversation, these roles are then switched. All class members are assigned a particular task such as the completion of a worksheet. The instructor is largely silent, allowing students to work through a challenging question, dilemma, or controversial topic together.
- **Jigsaw** - A jigsaw helps students become experts on a particular topic and share their knowledge with fellow students. Students are first divided into small groups. Each group discusses and learns more on a particular topic. These students are then re-shuffled to create new groups with representatives from each previous group. In these new groups, each student is responsible for sharing key aspects of their original discussion, synthesizing ideas in order to complete a new or more advanced task.
- **Think-Pair-Share** - Think-pair-share is also a useful way to generate discussion. Students work individually on an active learning assignment or formative assessment activity such as a one-minute paper, example problem or other topic (Think). Students then compare their responses with a partner and synthesize a joint solution (Pair). Some pairs share with the entire class (Share). This method helps increase the frequency of responses from quiet members of the class, and can be accomplished quickly.
- **Write-Discuss-Write** – Discussion need not be differentiated from writing or other modes of intellectual engagement. In addition to the writing prompted by think-pair-share, students can also come together to discuss their blog posts, essay drafts (either formally through peer review or more informally), or freewriting. In these approaches, students have taken time to order their thinking first, and dialogue helps them communicate it to others, draw from new ideas, and revise their thinking.

Recommendations

- **Prepare a structure** - Because class discussion can be less controlled, instructors should have clear expectations for themselves and for students about topics to cover. Instructors might develop several key big-picture questions to ask at the beginning of class and have groups answer by the end of class. Free-flowing discussion is particularly prized in the humanities, but can still benefit from big-picture guidance. Part of a solid discussion structure also includes explicit details defining participation and grading.
- **Regulate the discussion** - Instructors should feel free to insert themselves in order to keep conversation on track. Students especially appreciate this tactic when a few students monopolize conversation. After ensuring that groups are functioning well, instructors can invite especially talkative students to continue conversation after class or in office hours.
- **Address inequity in participation** - Instructors should be aware when students of particular gender, race, class, or abilities are systematically marginalized in class. To this end, instructors can set ground rules for discussion in the syllabus, invite students to help formulate class rules, and consider other inclusive classroom techniques available online.
- **Give quieter students time to answer questions** - Instructors can consider strategies for ensuring that students have time to formulate answers, and that quieter students have alternative opportunities to enter discussion. In class, instructors can allocate a few minutes for students to think and / or write about their answers to a question, and then have them discuss with a partner. Additionally, instructors can provide a worksheet with key ideas or concepts which students should be prepared to define or explain in class.
- **Model active listening** - The behavior of an instructor plays a huge role in the tone of a class. Instructors should regularly show appreciation for student comments, substantively responding to them by fleshing out good ideas and pushing back on flawed arguments. Additionally, instructors can encourage students to build on each other's ideas.
- **Consider active learning** – Discussion can be deepened by integrating it with related active approaches like role play, case studies, debate, and problem-solving scenarios.

References

- Hollander, J. (2002). Learning to Discuss: Strategies for Improving the Quality of Class Discussion. *Teaching Sociology* 30 (3): 317-327.
- Howard, J. 2015. *Discussion in the College Classroom: Getting Your Students Engaged and Participating in Person and Online*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1962). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (Original work published in 1934).