EFFECTIVE CLASS DISCUSSIONS

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Today:

■ Why have class discussion?

■ What does effective class discussion look like?

■ What are some barriers to effective discussion?

■ How can you overcome barriers for effective discussion, and some ideas for organizing class discussion
Why have class discussion?

- Wakes students up/keeps them "on task"
- Review course materials and gauge student understanding
- Allow students to express and develop ideas
- Practice critical thinking and/or application of knowledge
- Practice oral argumentation and listening skills
- Develop original analyses of readings or materials
- Engage in collaborative learning experiences
What does “good” or “effective” class discussion look or sound like?
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- Students sharing ideas with the professor and the class
- Students demonstrating understanding of the material
- Students teaching each other
- Students solving problems or correcting misunderstandings of course materials or concepts
- Students exploring new ideas
What are some things that prevent good class discussion?
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- Students don’t do reading/are not prepared
- Students don’t understand the material well enough to discuss it – I end up lecturing
- One or two students talk, but there is no real discussion or debate because the other students just agree with them
- In group work, students talk about other things and don’t focus on the topics or materials I want them to
Idea #1: Prepare all students for class

- Pre-class written assignments or other submissions, such as “what confuses you about this reading?”
- Discussion questions to focus reading or preparation
- Ask students to locate or bring in examples to illustrate course ideas
Idea #2: Create a structure

- Have a goal for discussion: Where are you headed?
  - *Goals can include:* review, practice, argue, analyze, compare, argue for or against etc.

- Organize debates
  - *To ensure preparation, have students outline or choose positions ahead of time, or present the positions/teams and ask students to prepare to be on one or both teams*

- Ask groups of students to focus on specific readings
  - *Depending on level, you can provide guiding questions, or they can provide them; their goal should be to be an “expert” on a small number of readings*
Idea #3: Give them something to talk about

- Ask students to find examples to bring to class; these can be part of an assignment that is due before class
- Ask students to annotate readings or take notes on specific areas
- **Quotes for discussion**
  - *you can ask students to choose quotes they agree with or disagree with*
  - *you can ask students to identify types of argumentation, use of data, or to research other sources on the same topic*
  - *You can choose the quotes for them, and ask them to discuss or offer a position on each of the quotes*
# Solutions to 3 common problems:

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<tr>
<th>PROBLEM</th>
<th>SOME IDEAS</th>
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| Only a few students speak     | • Try assigned roles (e.g. summarizer; devil’s advocate; recorder; synthesizer; reporter  
                                 • Require participation from all students; offer shy students the chance to offer ideas first, or to write down their statements |
| Students are not prepared     | • Have assignments turned in in advance  
                                 • Give discussion questions ahead of time  
                                 • Require students to bring an example  
                                 • Provide materials for students to work with in groups such as examples, problems, quotes |
| Students get off task         | • Use discussion structures with time limits  
                                 • Walk around and ask questions  
                                 • Use structures with changing tasks/groups or fast pace such as debates; jigsaw; groups must present |
Training students for discussion

- Being active discussion participants for academic purposes takes training, just like oral or written presentations.
- Help students identify good practices for participating in discussion.
- Offer a means for students to self-evaluate the quality of their preparation and participation. For an example, see the “Student self-report on class discussion”.
- Use a rubric to describe preparation for and behavior during class discussions (handout has an example).
Handout: Ideas for discussion

- Page 1 has a list of reasons to hold class discussions, and types of discussion structures suitable for different class types and sizes
- Page 2 has 8+ ideas for things you can try in your class (some of them
- Page 3 has an example of a self-evaluation questionnaire
- Page 4 has an example of a rubric for grading discussion participation
Review of this session:

- Understand the function of discussion in your particular class – what is your purpose in having students discuss?
- Make sure that students understand how they should prepare and help/guide them to prepare appropriately
- Use discussion structures (e.g. debates) that help motivate students and give them a goal for preparing and participating in discussion
- Model good discussion – help students understand what a productive discussion looks like, and what their responsibilities are (rubric, self-evaluation, feedback)
QUESTIONS?