




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:

PROBLEM	SOME IDEAS
Only a few students speak	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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?

