



# Tips for Effective Discussions

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*Discussions are more effective than other methods of instruction for the goals of retention, application, problem-solving, attitude change, and motivation for future learning (McKeachie, 2002). Although discussion is an effective teaching tool, it can be difficult to manage because “discussion teaching is the art of managing spontaneity” (Barnes, 1994, p. 23). This tip sheet provides suggestions on how to create and manage effective classroom discussions.*

## **Consider What You Want Students to Accomplish or Learn**

- If your lesson or course objectives include having students apply concepts, develop critical thinking, use problem-solving skills, evaluate ideas, critically consider multiple points of view, or retain learning for use in future situations than small group discussion has much more to offer than other teaching techniques.
- Create and share students the objectives and expected outcomes of the discussion.

## **Formulate Attainable and Acceptable Goals**

- Have clear objectives for the discussion and communicate them clearly.
- Clarify for yourself your role as the discussion leader. Will this be a student-led discussion or will you take a more central role in guiding the conversation?
- Make objectives clear at all times by using handouts and a flip chart.
- Take into account different stages of intellectual development (Tiberius, 1999).
  - Students may feel they only receive the “truth” from an authority figure.
  - Students may accept more than one right answer.
  - Students have an “intellectual commitment” and accept more responsibility for interpretation and exploration.
- Use plus-one-staging. Challenge students’ understanding by legitimating alternative points of view, explaining why authorities disagree, and dividing arguments into specific parts (Tiberius, 1999).
- Consider timelines. Allow enough time for brainstorming, discussion, and preparation for reporting (Tiberius, 1999).

## **Create Meaningful Tasks that Produce Productive Discussion**

- Ask why or how questions that lead to discussion. If students give only short answers, ask them to elaborate. Try to avoid asking yes/no questions or questions that have only one answer.
- Ask questions that require higher order thinking. See tip sheet on Bloom’s Taxonomy for examples.
- Use, rather than fear silence. Students will generally need some time to react to your question and formulate thoughts.
- Consider introducing discussion in small groups rather than as one large group. Providing opportunities for students to talk in small groups often helps them to become comfortable with sharing ideas.
- Whenever possible, provide students with a specific goal for discussion. This is especially important when asking students to engage in small group discussion. You may ask students to answer a question, solve a problem, or provide alternative approaches.
- Chose meaningful topics. Often good conversation stems from discussion of controversial topics, conflicting viewpoints, case studies, or examining concepts or theories.

## **Prepare Students for Group Discussion**

- Early in the course discuss discussion. Talk about the way you teach and why discussion is important. Define what it means to engage in discussion. You may want to have students provide input on what defines an effective vs. ineffective discussion.
- Layout general ground rules for discussion and have students respond to or generate specific ground rules for the course.
- Make evaluation of the discussion or participation explicit. Explain how you expect students to participate on how, or if, they will be graded on their contributions to discussion.

- Consider handing out a list of discussion topics at the end of the session to give students something to think about and prepare for the next class meeting.
- Consider having students prepare something before the class discussion. This could be a short written response to a question, a quiz, or online postings about readings or course topics.
- Prior to the discussion, ask students to write down one or two comments about the selected topic.
- Teach students how to participate. Consider providing them with resources about small group communication.
- Inform students that participation is not just sharing their unformed or uninformed opinions.
- Make resources available before, during, and after group activities.
- Give individual students an opportunity to react to the discussion through reports, journals, and evaluations (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Use this feedback to refine or reconfigure future discussions.

### ***Take Time to Encourage Student Participation***

- Get to know students' names and if possible find ways to incorporate things about them in the course. For example, if you ask Laura to contribute a perspective based on her work in a non-profit agency you are more likely to get her involved in the conversation than if you ask a more general question.
- If discussion is going to be used frequently in the class, plan an icebreaker activity early in the class and make certain that within the first week or two each student has had an opportunity to talk during class.
- Provide positive feedback for participation. Use student comments as a way to add insight or build on a concept. Nonverbal cues, such as nodding or smiling, will also provide students with positive feedback about their contributions.
- Ease students in to the discussion. One way to do this is to informally chat with students at the beginning of the class period. This helps students to feel more comfortable speaking in class.
- Take time to manage both the process and content. Encourage quiet students to speak up and when needed ask students who have made numerous contributions to hold their comments until you have heard from others. In addition, when discussion moves off topic the leader will need to carefully move it back on track.
- Consider assigning student roles. For example, you could assign students to serve as recorders, reporters, process observers, and time keepers. Be sure to have students rotate roles throughout the semester.
- Protect dissenting views by focusing on the view and not the person.
- If some students dominate conversation and others rarely speak you may want to consider using a talking stick, which will serve as a visual cue of student participation.
- Assign credit for the quality of the discussion or its product rather than the presentation.
- Recap the discussion. A summary of the discussion lets students know they have been heard and assisting in their understanding of the most important points.
- Model effective communication by paraphrasing others' views, asking students to give summaries of group goals, and incorporating students' agendas into class plan.

### ***Intentionally Divide Students into Small Groups***

- Divide students into heterogeneous ability, major, or prior experience groups to promote sharing of ideas, integration, and cooperation
- Divide students into homogenous ability, major, or prior experience groups to solve particular problems or look more deeply at an issue or topic.
- Divide students using learning styles such as a learning style inventory or personality tests such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator to enhance social and skill development.

#### *References*

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- Johnson, D. & Johnson, R. (1999). Making cooperative learning work. *Theory into Practice*, 38, 67-73.
- McKeachie, W. J. (2002). *Teaching tips* (11<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Tiberius, R. (1999). *Small group teaching: A trouble-shooting guide*. London: Kogan Page.