

Facilitating Effective Discussions

"Initiating and sustaining a lively, productive discussion are among the most challenging activities for an instructor" (Davis, 1993). Here are some strategies that will help you prepare for and lead an effective discussion.

Preparing for a discussion

- **Plan how you will conduct the discussion.** Although the ideal discussion is spontaneous and unpredictable, you will want to do some careful planning. You should have a clear goal/objective for the discussion, a plan for how you will prepare the students, and a general idea about how you will guide the discussion (e.g., with activities, videos, questions, etc).
- **Help students prepare for the discussion.** You can distribute a list of questions for each discussion, ask students to bring in their own questions, suggest key concepts or themes for them to focus on, or ask them to collect evidence that clarifies or refutes a particular concept or problem. Discussions will be more satisfying for you and your students if they are prepared.
- **Establish ground rules for participation in a discussion.** In order for a discussion to be effective, students need to understand the value of actively listening to their peers, tolerating opposing viewpoints, and being open-minded. They also need to recognize the importance of staying focused and expressing themselves clearly. You might spend the first session with your students exploring the characteristics of effective and ineffective discussions or provide the group with a tip sheet for participating in discussions.

Starting a discussion

- **Refer to questions you distributed.** Start the discussion by asking one of the study questions you assigned or by asking group members which of the questions they found most challenging.
- **Make a list of key points.** Identify and list the important points from the reading and use these as a starting point for discussion.
- **Use a partner activity.** Ask students to come to the discussion with 3 or 4 questions prepared. Start the discussion by having students pair off and alternate asking and answering their questions.
- **Use a brainstorming activity.** Ask students to contribute ideas related to the discussion topic (no matter how bizarre or farfetched) and write all ideas on the board. After a set period of time or when students have run out of ideas, critically evaluate all the ideas or categorize themes.

- **Pose an opening question and give students a few minutes to record an answer.** The process of writing down their answers will enable students to generate new ideas as well as questions. After they have finished writing, ask for volunteers or call on students to share their ideas. This activity also gives quieter students the opportunity to prepare answers they can share with the group.
- **Divide students into small groups to discuss a specific question or issue.** Be sure to assign explicit questions and guidelines and give the groups a time limit to complete the exercise. Also ask them to select a recorder and/or a reporter who will report back to the entire discussion group.
- **Pose a controversial issue and organize an informal debate.** Group the students according to the pro or con position they take and ask the groups to formulate 2-3 arguments or examples to support their position. Write each group's statements on the board and use these as a starting point for discussion.

Encouraging student participation

- **Create an inclusive discussion environment.** Group members will be more likely to contribute to a discussion if they feel they are in a safe, comfortable environment. Here are some general strategies for achieving this:
 - at the beginning of term, use an icebreaker activity and ask students to introduce themselves and describe their interests and backgrounds so they can get to know one another
 - as the facilitator, you should also learn all of your students' names (using name cards may assist you and your students in accomplishing this task)
 - arrange the seating in the room, if possible, into a semicircle so that the group members can see each other

See the Teaching Tips sheet on [Classroom Management: Creating an Inclusive Environment](#) for more ideas on this issue.

- **Positively reinforce student contributions.** You can emphasize the value of student responses by restating their comments, writing their ideas on the board, and/or making connections between their comments and the discussion at large. Also be sure to maintain eye contact and use non-verbal gestures such as smiling and head nodding to indicate your attention and interest in students' responses.
- **Use a "token system" to encourage discussion.** Distribute three pennies or poker chips to each student at the outset of the discussion. Each time a student speaks, a penny/chip is turned in to the facilitator. The goal is for students to spend all their pennies/chips by the end of the session. This system can be useful for limiting students who dominate the discussion and encouraging quiet students to contribute.

- **Limit your own involvement.** Avoid the temptation to talk too much and/or respond to every student's contribution. Try to encourage students to develop their own ideas and respond to one another (i.e., student-to-student interaction). You might also sit someplace other than the "head" of the table.
- **Balance students' voices during the discussion.** Here are some strategies for dealing with problem group members who can affect the level of student participation:
 - (a) Discourage students who monopolize the discussion by implementing a structured activity that requires each group member to be involved, avoiding eye contact with him/her, assigning a specific role to the dominant student that limits participation (e.g., discussion recorder), or implementing time limits on individual contributions.
 - (b) Draw quiet students into the discussion by posing non-threatening questions that don't require a detailed or correct response, assigning a small specific task to the student (e.g., obtaining information for next class), sitting next to him/her, or positively reinforcing contributions he/she does make.
 - (c) Clarify confusing student contributions by asking the student to rephrase/explain the comment, paraphrasing the comment if you can interpret it, asking the student probing questions, or encouraging him/her to use concrete examples and metaphors.

Guiding the discussion

- **Keep the discussion focused.** Have a clear agenda for the discussion and list questions/issues on the board to inform and remind everyone of where the discussion is heading. Brief interim summaries are also helpful as long as they don't interfere with the flow of the discussion. If the discussion gets off track, stop and bring the discussion back to the key issues.
- **Take notes.** Be sure to jot down key points that emerge from the discussion and use these for summarizing the session. You might also assign a different group member each week the specific role of recording and summarizing the progression of the discussion.
- **Be alert for signs that the discussion is deteriorating.** Indications that the discussion is breaking down include: subgroups engaging in private conversations, members not listening to each other and trying to force their ideas, excessive "nit-picking," and lack of participation. Changing the pace by introducing a new activity or question can jumpstart the discussion.
- **Prevent the discussion from deteriorating into a heated argument.** Remind students of the ground rules for discussion: they need to practice active listening, remain open-minded, and focus on ideas and content rather than on people and personal issues. Defuse arguments with a calm remark and bring the discussion back on track.

- **Bring closure to the discussion.** Announce that the discussion is ending and ask the group if there are any final comments or questions before you pull the ideas together. Your closing remarks should show the students how the discussion progressed, emphasizing 2-3 key points and tying the ideas into the overall theme of the discussion. Also be sure to acknowledge the insightful comments students have made. Providing closure to the discussion is critical for ensuring that group members leave feeling satisfied that they accomplished something.

Evaluating the discussion

- **Ask students to write a one-minute paper.** You can ask students to write about how their thinking changed as a result of the discussion or how the discussion fits into the context of issues previously discussed. Have students hand in their papers and review samples to assess what they have learned.
- **Ask students to respond to specific questions about the discussion.** Was the topic defined effectively? Did the facilitator keep the discussion on track? Did everyone have the opportunity to speak? Was your participation invited and encouraged? What questions related to the discussion remain unanswered? In what ways could the discussion have been improved? You might also use a more formal questionnaire and have students rate these various aspects of the discussion.
- **Conduct your own informal evaluation of the discussion.** Consider the following questions when making your evaluation: Did everyone contribute to the discussion? How much was I, as the facilitator, involved? Did the discussion stay focused? What questions worked especially well? How satisfied did the group seem about the productiveness of the discussion? What would I do differently next time?

Suggested Reading

- Brookfield, S.D. (1999). *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.
- Clarke, J.H. (1988). *Designing Discussions as Group Inquiry*. **College Teaching**, 36(4), pp. 140-143.
- Davis, B.G. (1993). *Discussion Strategies. Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., pp. 63-98.
- McKeachie, W.J. (1986). *Teaching Tips*. Lexington, Mass.: Heath.