

Taking Steps Toward Better Class Discussion

Two Key Ideas:

- Include a rationale for class discussion on the syllabus—highlight that students share responsibility for “making meaning” in the class.
- Avoid the creation of a “pecking order” of student voices by using round-table techniques in the first week of class. At the beginning of class, pose one or two compelling questions or statements and ask every student to briefly respond or “pass” (this is most effective when students are not seated in linear rows).

It’s easy to believe that fostering quality discussion in a class is largely a “hit or miss” proposition, one that depends on the luck of the student mix. While facilitating discussion is, without doubt, one of the most challenging tasks a teacher faces, many strategies exist that can radically improve discussion even among the toughest crowds. And, helping students learn habits for mindful discussion leads to improved course engagement and student work and facilitates important citizenship skills.

Some Pitfalls in Generating Discussion:

Beginning with lecture. Because students typically enter classes with a perception of the teacher as the expert, lecturing before discussion sets the stage for students to simply continue looking to the teacher for answers.

Starting discussion with vague questions. Questions such as “What do you think of the reading?” “Who would like to respond?” or “Someone start us off...” work only in the Shangri-la of classes, when students are comfortable talking with each other or when they are so provoked by the topic that they are bursting to speak.

Allowing one or two students to dominate discussion. While most teachers have experienced moments of gratitude for the presence of “the talker” in class, this phenomenon will, over time, prompt the rest of class to fall into a habit of mentally dozing off during discussion—with the comfort of knowing who will carry the ball.

Fearing complete silence. It’s easy to feel that silence during class discussion means bad news. Many teachers, after a few seconds of silence, will give up and answer their own question. As Brookfield and Preskill write, “Do this even once and you let students know they can rely on you to answer the question and do their thinking for them” (65).

Misinterpreting silence. Silence in discussion is a healthy sign—it is absolutely necessary for reflection and processing. Teachers can integrate periods of silence into discussion intentionally and make it “normal.” (e.g. “OK, let’s have two minutes to think about this...”)

Strategies for Facilitating Democratic Discussion:

Include a rationale for discussion on the syllabus. In addition, some teachers allow students to choose from a range of points to put toward discussion (15-25 points, for example), and then develop a discussion rubric as a class. In this way, students take some control for how much stake they want to put toward discussion and for determining how discussion will be evaluated.

Evolve ground rules for discussion with the class. Allow students to write and share their own guidelines, and consider incorporating the following ideas

- Value diversity of opinion
- Value silence and understand the teacher will not “take over” just because there is a period of silence
- Avoid overemphasis on reaching consensus—ending a discussion with divergent views is expected
- Share responsibility for bringing quiet members into discussion

Build a framework for discussion early. Have students write autobiographically in the first couple classes (for example, consider asking students to write a 2 page sketch of their personal history with various subjects or skills, such as reading, math, science, etc.). The first class discussion might center on key ideas in these autobiographical sketches. Encourage students to share something slightly risky about themselves by modeling risk-taking in your own talk about yourself—your own struggles, challenges, or difficulties with a topic. When individuals reveal something risky, their stake in the discussion—and the class—rises significantly.

Use a round-table, “everyone contributes” approach to discussion in the first week to avoid establishing a pecking order of talkers. (If the room has movable desks or tables, arrange the room in a circle or half-circle.) In response to a question or quotation, go around the room and ask each student to either share a thought or “pass” before moving to whole class discussion.

Visibly track student comments during discussion: using the chalkboard, computer and projector, overhead, or by taking notes and making them available to the class. Make these “discussion notes” part of the body of class texts, so that student comments become material for exams, quizzes, or other class work. (A student can also take responsibility for tracking discussion on the board or in a form that is accessible to the class)

Use small groups to set up discussion. Give groups 15 minutes to discuss 2-3 focused questions, and then ask groups to choose someone to present the ideas to the class. When the groups present their perspectives, let the presenter write a brief summary of the group’s thoughts on the board—this gives the group total control for presenting instead of filtering through the instructor. Consider giving each group a different role in getting discussion going: summarizing, connecting pieces, arguing other side(s), finding assumptions, etc.

Understand that the semester is often half-over before true democratic discussion gets underway. When you lecture:

Lecture on information that does not lend itself to democratic discussion. Avoid trying to spark discussion about a topic that (for you) has only one right way to go. When you begin a discussion, be sure you are OK if it goes in a direction you did not anticipate or results in outcomes you did not foresee or perhaps even like.

Begin each lecture with a set of questions that you are trying to answer. Do not hesitate to model periods of silence during a lecture to think about something before continuing.

Lecture for no more than 20 minutes at a time, and consider ending or breaking up lectures by asking students to write questions or identify the most compelling or “muddiest point” in the lecture.

Resources:

Brookfield, S. D., & Preskill, S. (2005). *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.