

Frequently Asked Questions about Discussion

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Teaching Resources Center, Indiana University, 9/96*

1. How can I get a discussion going?

Discussions need to be carefully planned. Sometimes we see instructors try to get a discussion going on the spur of the moment, by asking a question they have just thought up. These often fail to stir much student response. Arguably, good discussions can take more thought than a lecture might.

It is important to plan an activity that gets at the most important issue in the class, as we discussed in the workshop. Planning a discussion is easier said than done. TRC staff frequently help faculty plan discussions until they get the hang of planning one.

2. What mechanisms can I use to keep the discussion going?

The problem to solve or question that the group discusses has to be open-ended and complex enough that they have something to chew on. As the facilitator, you can think through how long the discussion is likely to take, and then give them less time than that. You want to stop them when they are cooking, rather than let the discussion peter out or allow students time to drift into talking about last night's party.

3. What can I do if a discussion falls apart? How can I keep it from dying?

A good teacher always has plan B in mind. Planning several follow-up questions helps to prevent the discussion from coming to premature closure. Set the question so they have to do more than only come up with the easy answer. Have an alternative activity if the one you try does not engage students as you anticipated.

This does not mean that if a discussion does not heat up immediately you should ditch it and revert to lecture. Students need to practice discussion activities a few times before they become proficient at them. Hang in there with them as they learn to discuss easily and well.

4. How can I best keep conversation flowing without lapsing into long silences or a lecture?

In one study, instructors waited on average 0.9 seconds before calling on a student or answering their own questions. Silence is an important factor to be in control of in the classroom. Americans are uncomfortable with silence and 10 seconds can seem like an hour. We recommend that you count to yourself while you are waiting for students to answer a question. Few students can come up with any

answer in 0.9 seconds, and in our culture, white males are much more likely to be the ones who do. To give women and minorities a chance, push yourself to allow for some silence. At worst, if the silence drags on for too long, some student is sure to answer if only to come to your rescue. Being aware of the value of what is known in the literature as "wait time" can help you to allow your students the time they need to come up with intelligent answers.

If all of your students are reluctant to speak up on a regular basis, it may be that they are afraid of being embarrassed by saying something "stupid." **You can give them a chance to try out their ideas more safely by having them practice their answers in pairs or by having them jot their ideas down before you call on them.**

5. How can I promote discussion in a large class so that more than just the vocal few are involved?

You can do anything with 300 that you can do with 30, it just takes more planning.

In a class of 300, if you ask a question and one student answers, you have one student actively engaged, and 299 sitting as passively as they do when you lecture. Perhaps even more so, because they seem to value what fellow students have to say less than what the professor says. Discussion in a large class works much better when the students are divided into small groups and given explicit tasks.

To be sure the groups stay on task, take advantage of the power of randomness. Let them know that you will call on some groups for an answer at the end of the specified time, so they all feel the pressure to be prepared in case they are the ones you call on.

It might help you to know that you cannot expect all groups to perform equally well. It has been our observation that in an average class, a few groups will get more energized and work together better than some other groups, and some groups will seem almost dysfunctional.

6. How do you get everyone participating, especially the quiet ones, without putting them on the spot?

Create the expectation that everyone will participate. You can do so by telling them this explicitly, and by designing activities that require different students to have different responsibilities across the semester. Direct students to be sure and let everyone speak. Again, randomness can help. For example, when you tell students that the reporter for today's discussion will be the person whose last name is closest to the start of the alphabet, some quiet students will end up reporting.

What if we never made students who did not want to speak do so? Can you imagine letting someone get a college education and never having them speak in class? Should we also not make them take tests

or write papers?

7. How do you handle "discussion monopolizers"?

If the same people answer all the time, you might say, "Let's hear from someone we haven't heard from yet." And then don't call on the students you have already heard from that day.

Do not allow one student to speak an inordinate amount of class time. If one does, take that person aside and ask him or her to limit their comments in class. If they don't take the first warning (some students are surprisingly unaware of how they come across to their classmates), tell them an exact number of times they can respond in class, and don't call on them any more once they've reached that number on any day.

8. How can I evaluate discussions? "To grade or not to grade, that is the question."

The Not-to-Grade Approach: Some faculty say they don't grade in-class discussion directly because it will inhibit students and add some pressure to the group. Others don't grade discussions when it would account for just a small portion of the grade, such as five or ten percent; they say it's not worth the effort to grade.

One approach is to make participation the norm. For example, one professor we know sets the expectation that participation is the norm and is necessary from day one. When she assigns something, everyone knows that they had better read it because she expects them to be prepared to discuss it. One day, she'll start at one side of the room and ask students to discuss in turn the facts in the case. On another day, she'll start in reverse order. If a student does not participate, she talks to the student individually. Day in and day out, that is the mode of learning in her class, and students get used to it.

The Graded Approach: The benefits of grading participation include encouraging even participation by all and providing an alternative to standard tests or paper evaluations. Here are some grading variations:

Teacher assigns grade:

- Write a note to each student twice a semester telling each one their participation grade and the basis for the grade.
- Require a written product from student group activities and grade it. For example, a SPEA professor has the students do six to eight projects per semester. Students are assigned to a different group for each project. Once teams have been formed, they write their names on a card. When their group presents or develops their written product, the professor puts a grade on their card and returns it to them so they all know their grade. Over the semester, they get six or eight of these grades from the different group activities, which are a significant portion of their

grade.

- Put a tick mark next to student names each time they speak to encourage quantity of responses.

Peers assign grade:

- To get around the complaint that, "Two of us did all the work," require group members to grade one another. For example, let each student in the group distribute 100 points across the group. Have each student briefly describe in writing, the strengths and weaknesses of each person in their group.
- Groups can be required to keep a log of their activities; at the end of the project, each student write a paragraph reporting who did what, which is used to raise or lower the grade each individual receives on the project.

Students self-evaluate:

- Professor passes around a copy of the class list and students place a check, plus, or minus next to their name. This helps students to monitor their own participation in class discussions.

The Indirect Approach: Discussions can be evaluated indirectly through exam questions and written assignments. Whether one gives an explicit participation grade or not, every faculty member wants to encourage students to think. One of the best ways to do this is to make exam questions or written assignments reflect class discussions and activities. If you don't, these become throw-away activities. For example, three questions on your exam can be from a class discussion. Or, ask students to evaluate a class discussion in writing or tell where they stand on the issue. Grade them on this writing. Again, even if you don't give an explicit participation grade, you can make participatory activities show up in student grades.

The Bottom line on Evaluating Discussion: If you don't directly grade student participation in discussion or a product of the discussions, you should at the minimum include the content of discussions in your normal evaluation of student learning (tests or written assignments).

