

Planning Your Discussion Section

You might think that the primary reason you are leading a discussion section is to review course content, but this should actually be of lesser priority when you set about planning your session. Your job as a TA is actually to design an experience that will allow your students to *practice* the skills they need to learn the content. Here are three important questions to ask and answer before you step into the classroom:

1

What is my learning objective?

Before you can get your students practicing the skills they need in order to learn content on their own, you first need to know what they need to practice. Think about what your students need to *know*, *understand*, or *be able to do* in order to receive a good grade in the course. Then pick one or two of these to be your **learning objective** for the day. For example:

- *Know*: The order of events that led up to the civil war; The enzymes involved in each step of transcription; The chain rule.
- *Understand*: The relationship between events; How genes can be regulated at the transcriptional level; When the chain rule applies.
- *Be able to do*: Construct an argument and write a coherent essay; Read and summarize a complex textbook; Effectively study for a test.

When choosing your learning objectives, be sure they are:

- ☐ **Relevant to the syllabus**: What graded assignments are coming down the pipeline soon? How are the students being evaluated on them? What skills or knowledge are most critical in order to successfully complete these requirements?
- ☐ **Aligned with the professor's goals and concerns**: What skills or knowledge have students historically struggled with?
- ☐ **Addressing students' actual needs**: Of all the things the students need to know, understand, or be able to do, which ones are they having the most trouble with right now?

2

How will I get all students practicing?

Once you know *what* your students need to practice, you then need to work out the details and logistics of *how* it will work in the classroom. What activities could you plan that will get all students practicing the skills or knowledge you identified in your learning objective? This is where your creativity really comes into play – but keep in mind that to be most successful, the activities should have a few important features:

- ☐ All students get a chance to implement the skills or knowledge you deem essential to the class.
- ☐ Students have the opportunity to share their work (with TA and/or peers).
- ☐ Students receive feedback on their performance (from TA and/or peers).

For activity ideas, please see some of our other handouts (e.g., *Small Group Activities* and *Large Group Discussion*).

3

How will I know if they're "getting it"?

This is the part of a discussion section that is most often overlooked. You may have planned some great activities that *should* accomplish the learning objectives you have set. But if you don't have a way to **assess** whether it's working for all of your students, how do you know for sure?

A good assessment will:

- ☐ Allow *you* to understand what worked and what didn't work, so you can better plan future discussions sections, or alter the trajectory of the current one.
- ☐ Help students to understand the value of attending and participating in discussion, and to identify areas for improvement and focus their study efforts there.
- ☐ Be another opportunity to practice the relevant skills or knowledge.

Assessments don't have to be stand alone activities. In fact, a particularly well-designed activity will have assessment built in. For ideas on how to assess your students, please refer to our handout on *Assessing Learning in the Classroom*.

Once you have answered these questions, **write out** your plan. You may want to use the lesson plan template (see reverse) as a guide. Then, find a way to explicitly **communicate** your plan—and the reasoning behind it—to your students. They will be much more likely to follow if they know where they're going and why.

1

LEARNING OBJECTIVE(S)

- Students' performance on the upcoming _____ will have a large impact on their overall grade.
[test, homework, paper, etc.]
- To do well, my students will need to:
 Know: _____ Understand: _____ Be able to do: _____

- Because of my knowledge of their current abilities, I choose _____ from the above list as most critical for my students to practice right now.
- Learning objective: **By the end of this discussion section, my students will** _____
 _____.

2

PRACTICE

| Method (activity + time estimate) | Preparation (for both TA & students) | Success | Contingencies |
|--|---|---|---|
| | | | |
| Don't try to squeeze too much into a 50 minute class. Things usually take longer than you think, especially if all students are engaged. | Do your students need to have read something for the activity to work? Do you need to prepare materials? etc. | If everything went as planned, what would you see in the classroom? What would the students be doing? | Try to imagine the ways it might not work. What would you do then? Also, what will students who struggle or excel at this task do? What additional supports will they need to stay engaged? |

3

ASSESSMENT

What evidence would tell you whether or not student knowledge or skills are improving?

How can you get this evidence from each and every student?

How will you know if your learning objectives were met?

