SANGER LEARNING CENTER

TA Skills for Leading Discussion Sections

The following nine skills are fundamental to leading an effective discussion section. Each skill has associated material that provides more details on how to implement in the classroom.

What it is	What it can look like in the classroom ...	Why it's important
Planning Determining the objectives, activities, and assessments that will accomplish course goals.	• Putting an agenda on the board. • Sequencing tasks in increasing levels of cognitive difficulty. • Making overt references to course goals. • Transitioning smoothly between activities. • Using a variety of activities. • Managing time well. • Putting discussion in context (referring back to prior course content, looking ahead).	• Gives purpose and structure to the session so that: • Students know where the class is going and what to expect. • TA feels and appears more confident. • Course goals are more likely to be accomplished. • Challenges are anticipated and contingencies built-in.
Assessing Learning inthe Classroom • A way of obtaining clear feedback about the extent to which the daily learning objectives are being met. • Formative assessments are no- or low-stakes check-ins that happen along the way to graded tests/papers (i.e., summative assessments).	Providing opportunities for students to demonstrate competency and/or explore limits of knowledge. These can: • Be planned, discrete events (e.g., no-stakes quiz, muddiest point, minute paper, directed paraphrasing, blind poll). • Arise spontaneously (e.g., posing questions, listening to student questions and comments, monitoring body language).	• Creates a feedback loop. By assessing what, how much, and how well students are learning, you can better gauge how to adapt your teaching to meet the needs of your students. • Provide students opportunities to practice and demonstrate proficiency. • Allows students to receive incremental feedback, which encourages students to assess their own learning and mastery of material.
Creating Tangible Outcomes • Physical products that record, prompt, and reinforce student engagement with key course material. • Ideally, students take the tangible outcome with them after class to serve as a durable artifact of what happened in discussion.	• Creating opportunities for the session to yield some physical product that students can take home (e.g., notes, chart, concept map, essay outline). • The process of developing a tangible outcome to the session can be supported by: - Posting an agenda to signal what students will be accomplishing that day. - Using the board as discussion occurs to record, organize, summarize, and relate information/ideas. (This translates aural to visual and encourages students to take their own notes.)	• Serve as useful study aids during and after class, increasing student comprehension and retention of course content. • Increases perceived value of the session by providing a reminder of the experience. • Students are better able to articulate what skills or knowledge they learned/practiced, and how these relate to success in the class.

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Creating an Environment for Learning While classrooms are socially complex environments, they can generally be considered in terms of three dimensions: • **Physical:** Students are comfortable and undistracted by sensory stimuli such as noise. Seating and workspaces are arranged to compliment planned activities, and to promote student interaction. • **Emotional/Social:** Students feel secure in expressing their ideas, attempting unfamiliar tasks, and interacting with peers. • **Intellectual:** Students personally invest in their own learning, and are enthusiastic for subject matter.	• Arriving early to class and chatting with students. • Making eye contact. • Having everyone learn and use names. • Using positive language. • Moving chairs and desks to facilitate exchanges. • Being consistent and transparent. • Rewarding and acknowledging contributions. • Explicitly referring and responding to students' needs. • Only interrupting students if necessary. • Modeling respectful behavior.	A positive classroom space and culture: • Improves student motivation, enthusiasm and engagement • Encourages students to take intellectual risks • Helps students interact with, and learn from, each other • Increases likelihood that students will seek help and support beyond the classroom.
Establishing a Partnership with Faculty • A shared understanding of course goals, policies, and expectations achieved through frequent communication between the TA and professor. • An effective partnership is characterized by a clearly defined division of teaching roles and responsibilities.	• Establishing communication before the class begins to identify course goals and align expectations of students, TA, and professor . • Maintaining open communication throughout the course regarding students readiness levels, areas of strengths and weaknesses. • Previewing activities used in discussion sections with the professor to get any guidance.	• Communicates to students that TA is competent and can be trusted. • Reduces student anxiety and improves performance. • Helps ensure that students' behavior supports learning objectives. • Increases teaching satisfaction and effectiveness. • Helps TA anticipate and schedule his/her duties and responsibilities throughout the semester. • Helps TA identify and target the most essential course content and skills for students to practice, and to better integrate discussion sections with course lectures, readings, and graded assignments.
Using Questions Effectively Inquiring of the students in a variety of ways to clarify, diagnose confusion, promote discussion, or gather information and asking different types of statements.	• Avoiding the answering of one's own questions. • Allowing adequate time (> 7 seconds) after asking questions. • Redirecting questions by¬ rephrasing, prompting, allowing the use of additional materials like notes, etc. • Encouraging students to interact directly with each other by asking questions, responding, and elaborating on each other's comments • Troubleshooting the reasons for silence (e.g., lack of knowledge, clarity of the questions, students' anxiety). • Asking questions that get students involved with different types of cognitive skills (e.g., recalling facts, explaining a process, analyzing a case).	• Enhances and equalizes opportunities for participation. • Allows students to independently make connections. • Promotes analytical thinking. • Creates multi-directional interactions (i.e., TA to student, student to student).

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Modeling • Demonstrating a skill, thought process, or outcome that is identified as important to the course or field of study. • Most commonly led by an individual with expertise or experience: - Teacher to student(s) - Student to student(s)	• Thinking aloud for students re: how you would approach a problem, reading, or question (before asking them to do so on their own in an activity or assignment). • Showing and discussing examples of successful finished products such as projects, papers, lab reports. • Having students share with a partner or group their approach to taking notes, keeping up with reading, preparing for discussion and tests, etc. • Demonstrating the flexibility needed to move between: - big picture and small picture - main ideas and supporting details - procedural and conceptual knowledge - facts and arguments	Grounds abstract course material and expectations into specific actions which: • Expose students to new ways of thinking (especially those common to the field of study). • Offer beginners structured opportunities to practice new ways of thinking/ acting for themselves. • Clarify what successful performance looks like (which can alleviate perceived subjectivity in grading).
Promoting Self-Directed Learning • Integrating and scaffolding academic skills in a sequence that encourages students to become more capable in meeting the expectations faced throughout their college career. • This approach intentionally promotes the whole student's growth and development as independent, life long learners, rather than just a student in a single course.	• Providing opportunities for feedback and revisions. • Planning strategic activities over the course of the semester to promote students' independence. • Asking students to explain the thinking behind an answer. • Modeling a positive attitude towards learning.	Promoting self-directing learning: • Helps your students develop necessary academic skills for both present (potentially yielding higher grades) and future use. • Creates a more empowering academic experience where students feel capable.
Facilitating Group Discussion • Creating the opportunity for all students to talk about course material and put ideas into their own words. • Through the process of speaking and interacting with one another, students transform information from lectures and readings into usable knowledge and personal experience.	• Students talking in pairs or small groups before sharing with the whole class. • A freewrite exercise to get everyone thinking about the topic. • Students sharing their ideas in a systematic, or free flow, way. • Students actively listening and responding to their peers.	• Students practice and develop the ability to clearly communicate ideas and meaning. • Students develop skills of synthesis and integration. • Students explore a diversity of perspectives, and develop appreciation for continuing differences. • Students become more aware and tolerant of ambiguity or complexity. • Students recognize and investigate their assumptions. • Students learn the processes and habits of democratic discourse. • Students become more attentive, respectful listeners. • Shows respect for students' voices and experiences. • Affirms that students are co-creators of knowledge.