



Creating Tangible Outcomes to your Discussion

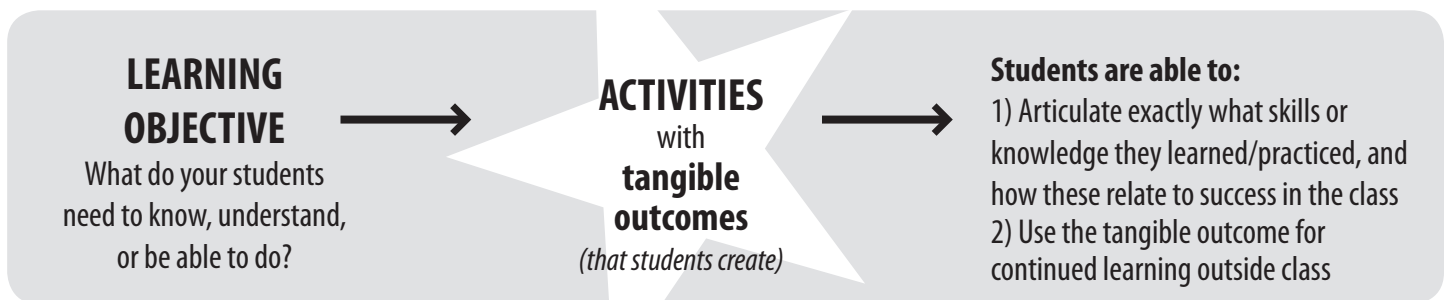
In a great discussion section, your students will be practicing the skills or knowledge they need to succeed in the class. But if students don't *realize* that's what they're doing, they may forget much of what was discussed as they walk out the door, or leave thinking that "not much happened."

To make sure your students get the maximum benefit from a discussion section, decide on concrete things you want students to accomplish that day, and then be very explicit about these goals. Be sure that there is a tangible outcome to the discussion—a **concrete artifact that will serve as a learning tool both in and out of class.**

Want to know what your students think they learned?

In the last few minutes of class, pass out a blank index card to each student and ask them to write down what knowledge or skills they practiced that day. Collect the cards. Do your students' responses match the learning objective(s) for the day?

For more ideas, see our handout on **Assessing Learning** in the classroom.



Fortunately, there are some straight-forward things you and your students can do to accomplish this ...

1. CREATE A CLEAR LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Think about what you want your students to walk away with. What do your students need to know, understand or be able to do?

2. IDENTIFY A TANGIBLE OUTCOME THAT STUDENTS WILL CREATE

The most straightforward and reliable way to ensure that your students know what they accomplished that day is to make sure they walk out the door with some concrete artifact of the discussion or activity.. To do so, structure one or more activities for your class that require your students to create something. It can be done on an individual or group basis, as long as the students do it—not you! Here are a few of the most typical tangible products to discussion:



GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

Have students (in groups) organize information/ideas in some logical way—a flow chart, diagram, time line, chart, pro/con list, etc. Then have each group share their ideas on the board to see multiple ways of organizing and thinking about the information. Make sure each student walks out the door with a copy of the results.

SOLUTION SETS

Provide a worksheet of typical problems and give students a few minutes to solve the problems on their own. Then have students work in small groups to help each other with the more challenging problems. Finally, ask students to present their solutions on the board and talk through their thought processes.

NOTES

Are your students often discussing complex topics as a whole group? Creating tangible outcomes to “a lot of talk” can be challenging. But, as you will see in the next section, you can use the board to help students organize, summarize and relate the wealth of information that emerges from a large group discussion.

MORE POSSIBILITIES FOR TANGIBLE OUTCOMES

Be creative as you think about ways your students can record what they learn in discussion:

- Graph
- Outline
- Flash cards
- Political map
- Timeline
- Venn diagram
- Story sequence
- Flow chart
- Caption for a cartoon
- Critique
- Brochure

3. STRUCTURE YOUR CLASS TO SUPPORT TANGIBLE OUTCOMES.

A. Write an agenda on the board. This is a must – just do it! An agenda is the general structure for class that day, and it lists the *actions* the students will be taking during class (NOT a list of topics). Writing an agenda is a very simple act that has many benefits:

FOR STUDENTS:

- It sets the expectation that there are concrete things to be accomplished that day.
- When they are clear on what needs to be done, students can more easily stay on track. Distracted students can use the agenda to re-orient themselves without intervention from you.
- An agenda communicates that you value the students’ time and will use it well.

FOR THE TA:

- You can use the agenda to keep activities moving. For instance, if an activity has been going on too long, you can acknowledge its value, and move on to the next task by referring to the plan you set for the day.
- The agenda gives you a preview of whether your plan for the day is viable. If you are having trouble writing your agenda in terms of the actions of your students, it may be a sign that your plan needs some reworking.

Agenda

- Pop-quiz over reading (5 min)
- Trade papers, grade (5 min)

- Groups of 3: work on one section of worksheet each (5 min)
- Report back to class (15 min)

- Develop outline for your paper (15 min)

Note the agenda specifies time and is focussed on actions rather than topics. Post your agenda on the board (rather than on a slide or doc cam) so it's displayed for the duration of the class. You might even include the day's objective: "By the end of today's session, you will be able to ..."



B. Point out things and be more overt than you think you need to be. Give your students verbal landmarks in order to recognize accomplishments and get students thinking about how what happens in discussion connects to the course assignments and goals.

- “Prime the pump” by telling students in advance what they are about to do and why it is important. This can also help students be more mindful and intentional about the task they are about to undertake.
- Give students specific feedback or encouragement about what they are accomplishing in the moment to keep participation and spirits high.
- Cement learning that occurs in your session by telling students what they just did and why it was important. You’ll make it more likely that students will retain what was learned, and you’ll help them realize how it is valuable to show up and participate in discussion.

PREVIEW

Today we are going to work on developing an outline for your upcoming paper. This is really important because ...

Today we are going to practice recognizing problem types, this is important because ...



IN THE MOMENT

Good job, you’ve just demonstrated how I want you to think about this material.

Look, you now have a great outline for your essay!

Great! You just successfully worked a problem that is like those you’ll see on the upcoming test.



SUMMARY

You have all just developed an outline for the paper that is due next week. This is a huge accomplishment because ...

You have all just had some great practice recognizing problems, this will serve you well on the upcoming exam because



C. Use the board to bring structure to chaos. Because most people are visually oriented, it can be very helpful to create visual representations of things that might otherwise only be stated orally (agenda, questions, answers, accomplishments, concepts, etc.). The act of writing something down gives it greater importance in people's minds – and if you write something down, your students are more likely to do the same.

Wise use of the board is especially important for a free-form discussion. Through writing and/or drawing, you can create a shared visual representation of a seemingly abstract conversation. The simplest way to do this is to outline the conversation that is occurring, by writing key words or phrases on the board in an orderly way. Here are some techniques:

Organize

Arrange the information in a meaningful order: chronology, steps in a process, compare/contrast, etc. Leave spaces for missing information.

Summarize

Distill several comments or ideas into a single theme, then write a word or phrase describing the theme.

Relate

Draw a concept map, graph or diagram to represent the ideas being discussed - and show how they are connected.

Note: When writing on the board, you should be reflecting back what the students are saying, rather than dictating the content. Think of what is on the board as an "object of consideration," not necessarily "the truth" – and remind your students of this perspective. Ask them to decide whether what is on the board is an accurate representation or not.

Also, keep in mind that **you** don't even have to do the writing! Remember: your primary role is guide, not scribe. So try inviting one or more students to record important aspects of the discussion on the board. This can also help you identify what students are hearing from the conversation in real time, and allows you to address any misconceptions as they arise.

Tips for using the board effectively:

Erase the entire board when you enter the room. This removes traces of a previous subject and establishes your presence.

Make good use of space. Begin writing at the top left, and work your way to the right. Avoid "patch-working" - writing in random places on the board, erasing, and moving to another random place.

Be aware of your body position. Only face the board when you have to in order to write; when you want to speak to the students, make sure you are facing them. Also, do not block the view of the board; when you are finished writing something, move out of the way.

Write neatly. Remember, students' notes will look an awful lot like what you put up on the board. So don't rush, take the time necessary to write neatly. This will also allow time for students to take their own notes.

Erase the board to signal switching topics. When you're transitioning from one topic or activity to another, it's a good time to erase the board. This prevents old material from distracting the students. Just make sure to ask students if they have taken all the notes they want before doing so.

Colors are your friend. Using colored chalk or dry erase markers can be very helpful if you want to highlight differences within text or figures. But remember, it is unlikely that the classroom you are in will have them, so bring your own (you can ask your department to supply them).

The most powerful learning technology is:

a. PowerPoint

b. Document Cam

c. Chalkboard/Dry erase

The answer is... c. The plain old chalkboard is still, in many ways, more powerful and flexible than other technologies. Consider:

- When you make a PowerPoint presentation, *you* are actually doing all the work. And what are your students doing? Just listening and watching.
- A chalkboard combines flexibility with a large area, allowing you to leave visual cues in place as long as needed. It also allows simultaneous contributions from multiple students.

