



Facilitating Group Discussion

Adapted from *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, by Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, Jossey-Bass, 2005.

What It Is

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.

“ We think because we can talk, and we think in ways we have learned to talk.”

Kenneth Bruffee

Why It's Important

- 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.

What Do Students Need to Participate in Discussion?

Knowledge of the topic

Will the subject of the discussion be something students have heard about in lecture or encountered in the readings?

- Make students aware of what they need to know in advance.
- Hold them accountable when they get to class (e.g., administer a short quiz).
- Have a contingency plan to involve students who do not yet have adequate knowledge of the topic, or did not do the reading.

Ability to follow and remember flow of conversation

Human working memory has a relatively small capacity. It can be very challenging to keep multiple pieces of information in mind, while also formulating one's own ideas. Encourage students to jot down notes to aid their memory, and model this by taking notes on the board.

Equal opportunity

Some students will naturally be reluctant, some will be especially assertive. Make sure you have a way of including all voices in the conversation. (For techniques, see our handout on *How to Get Everyone Participating.*)

Ability to create new connections or ideas

For students new to a subject and to the practice of intellectual discussions, this type of information processing will be the most demanding part of a group discussion. Students will improve with practice as long as they know exactly what it is they're supposed to be doing, so be very explicit about the types of contributions you want them to make.

A safe environment to speak in front of others

Establish your class as a safe place for students to explore ideas, express their thinking, and make mistakes. (For techniques, see our handout on *Creating an Environment for Learning.*)

Other handouts in this series

- Getting Discussion Started
- How to Get Everyone Participating
- How to Handle Silence
- Using Writing to Improve Discussion



BEFORE YOU WALK INTO THE CLASSROOM:

- 1. Decide on your learning objective(s).** What do you want students to know or understand as a result of the discussion? Conversation is unpredictable and has a way of running away from you, so be sure to ground your discussion in the learning objective(s) for the day. That way you can steer the conversation where it needs to go, or highlight important elements. Refer to our handout on Planning for ideas on formulating learning objectives.
- 2. Decide how you will kick off the discussion.** Refer to our handout on *Getting Discussion Started* for techniques to launch discussion.
- 3. Prepare students for the experience of discussion.** See reverse for what students need for effective discussion.

RIGHT BEFORE THE DISCUSSION - SET THE STAGE:

- 1. Give students a chance to collect their thoughts.** If you have prepared questions you are going to pose, give them to your students ahead of time and give them a few minutes to individually write down and collect their thoughts. This will lead to higher level and more in depth conversations.
- 2. Arrange students in a conversation-friendly manner.** To encourage student-to-student interaction, arrange students in a circle, facing each other. If your room has fixed seating, then place yourself in one of the seats on the side, not at the front, and ask your students to turn in their seats so they can all see each other.
- 3. Explain goals/learning objectives of the discussion.** This is incredibly important! Large-group discussion can seem very abstract to students, and often students walk away with the feeling that not much happened. Explicitly point out what you want to be accomplished by the discussion, how it will benefit them, and how you want the discussion to proceed. This can help them focus their contributions on the learning objectives you have set for them.

DURING THE DISCUSSION:

- 1. Be a role model.** The most common models of public discourse are political debates and radio/TV talk shows. Students who adopt this approach will tend to be loud, oppositional and speak in dichotomies. Students who reject these models, may just opt to be silent, particular if you haven't modeled an alternative approach.
- 2. Monitor contributions.** You want to make sure all students are participating in the way you want. Pay attention to who is talking and who is silent, and if necessary, intervene to balance the conversation. Also pay attention to the types of contributions and the flow of the conversation. Gently intervene if necessary.
- 3. Use the board.** Notes on the board can also serve as a map of where the conversation has been already, so students can refer to it as they generate new ideas and contributions. Also, be sure to highlight the points you want students to remember from the discussion. This signals to students what is most important, and increases the likelihood that they will record some notes of their own.

AT THE END OF THE DISCUSSION:

- 1. Recap.** Just as you started the discussion by telling your students what you hoped they would get from the discussion, now you can tell your students exactly what they did get from it! Recap what your learning objective was, summarize the main points that came up during the discussion, and point out again how this is important to your students.
- 2. Assess.** Have a way to tell if your students are "getting it."
 - Ask them to respond to a prompt about the topic (i.e., in a minute paper). For example, "How did your thinking about X change ...?" Collect responses and read through them, or have students trade papers and provide feedback to one another.
 - More assessment techniques are provided in our handout *Assessing Learning in the Classroom*.

