

Classroom Discussions

Description:

During a class session, instructors often inquire if there are any questions or comments. All too frequently these questions are followed by silence. Many professors would say they want students to participate in class discussion, but find it difficult to actually make it happen. Clearly, student participation is a necessity for genuine classroom discussions to flourish, but students cannot be expected to automatically be proficient in scholarly discourse. A first-rate class discussion depends on an unambiguous rationale, a healthy dose of preparation, and competent implementation.

Rather than asking if there are “any” questions or comments, instructors must design and develop specific, thought-provoking, and purposeful questions related to the desired course learning outcomes. Then, as the subject matter expert, instructors must allow students to develop their interactive competency skills without dominating the discussion.

In a student-centered discussion classroom, instructors might take themselves out of the role of leader entirely, becoming a facilitator instead. In this scenario, students are empowered to be responsible for the discussion while the instructor provides learning outcomes, a text for the discussion. The instructor also reinforces guidelines and furnishes feedback. An example of one set of classroom discussion guidelines would look like the following list:

1. Be Courteous
2. Participate Responsibly
3. Actively Read and Question Texts
4. Build Ideas on What Others Say
5. Be Credible – Support your Statements
6. Stick to the Subject
7. Question the Opinions of Others
8. Listen Actively
9. Speak Clearly and Loudly
10. Strive for Understanding

From Student-Centered Discussion Workshop, led by Linda Shoop, © 2004

Discussion formats might take advantage of materials, texts, or examples for purposes of disciplinary analysis and/or comparison. Through discussion and modeling disciplinary thinking, instructors can help students think like a specialist in the field. How might an engineer or a social worker view a particular text or situation? What is valuable, and why? What are the underlying theoretical frameworks or assumptions? Students can also be prompted by a related current event or controversy.

Frequently vocal, confident students will dominate discussions, yet it is critical for all members of a class to have a level of comfort and to be engaged in a quality discussion. Techniques such as starting out with pairs of students talking together, followed by rotating these partners, followed by a full group discussion are a means to begin to establish comfort levels for students who tend to remain quiet. Discussion techniques must be modeled and practiced and include the ideas of active listening and

building upon the ideas, arguments, and evidence of others. To assess the discussion process, ask students to write about how the discussion changed their thinking or understanding or ask them to evaluate the quality of the class discussion as well as the quality of their own contributions.

By asking students to discuss, instructors are providing a way for them to consider information and knowledge in new ways. Educational research suggests that active participation in class enhances student comprehension and retention of information and concepts. But to accomplish these sometimes elusive comprehension and retention goals, instructors must develop skills and strategies to use discussion effectively.

References:

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Brookfield, S. and Preskill, S. *Discussion as a way of teaching: Tools and techniques for democratic classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1999.

Students create and agree to discussion ground rules. Some methods included in the book include "Conversational Roles" such as the umpire and the scavenger, the "Circle of Voices" and "Newsprint Dialogue".

Christensen, C.R. et. al., eds. *Education for judgment: the artistry of discussion leadership*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School. 1991

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Hollander, Joyce. 2002. "Learning to Discuss: Strategies for Improving the Quality of Class Discussion." *Teaching Sociology*, 30, 317-27.

Neff, R. A. and Weimer M., eds. *Classroom Communications: Collected Readings for the Effective Discussion and Questioning*, Madison, Wisconsin: Magna Publications. 1989.

Teaching By Discussion

http://www.schreyer institute.psu.edu/pdf/Teaching_by_Discussion.pdf