

Class Discussions: Promoting Participation and Preventing Problems

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“I tried to have a discussion today, but hardly anybody said anything. You’d think a class of 95 students really would get into arguing about theory XYZ.” Sound familiar? It’s a common and chronic refrain of professors around the country. And many attempts to inspire class discussions use the following format: The instructor lectures, then pauses, and then asks the class “What do you think about X?” Most students either try to look busy, continue to read the newspaper, or wait for this minor irritation to pass so they can continue to take notes. The only advice we have for instructors using this approach is: Don’t bother!

Goals of Class Discussions

A discussion is an exchange of ideas where all members of the group have an opportunity to participate and are expected to do so to some degree. Discussions are the best way to accomplish at least three important objectives: (1) to integrate course content with personal experience, (2) to explore the basis for feelings and opinions of oneself and others, and (3) problem solving. Class discussion also is the best way to accomplish some important educational objectives, such as developing critical thinking skills and learning to appreciate the ideas of others. Guidebooks that provide tips for beginning teachers always include chapters on managing discussions, with advice on how to handle problems such as students who talk too much or not at all.

These books emphasize the importance of preparing for discussions, with the preparation usually recommended for teachers rather than the students. Our purpose in this column is to suggest techniques that can be used to help students become good participants in class discussions, and perhaps prevent problems from arising later in the semester.

Practical Problems

Large Classes and the Limits of Time and Space

In theory, size is no limit for small group discussions. Any class can be divided into subgroups. The logistical limits are set primarily by space and time. There should be sufficient space to minimize noise and cross-talk between groups, and time may be needed for reports from each group to the whole class. The sheer size of a class may put constraints on small group discussion; imagine trying to form 100 small groups in a class of 600! The limits of space and time lead us to conclude that discussions, as we have defined them, are not practical in classes larger than 100. You can have question-and-answer sessions, develop a dialogue with a few favorite students, and use writing or other individual active learning exercises, but these are not discussions. In large classes students can be asked to pair up or to form “buzz” groups, but there is no control over the content of the conversations and it would be difficult to do more than sample the results of these discussions.

Discussion Group Size

We think that discussions are most effective in groups of 4-9, and suggest breaking larger classes down into multiple small groups. As the size of the whole group increases beyond ten it becomes more difficult for all to be heard and easier for students to fall into passivity while the teacher assumes a more dominant role.

Forming the Discussion Group

How do you form tile groups? If you let students choose their own groups, those who know each other will stay together, which may lead to a situation where one or two strangers in the group are ignored. Counting off is a better method of assignment to groups. For example, start in the front row and count off by fives. We favor changing the composition of the groups during the semester so that students encounter different learning styles.

The Fishbowl Technique

It is impossible to avoid passivity when classes have more than 25 students, but using the fishbowl technique allows the instructor to involve all students in discussions some time during the semester. Select 6-8 students to form an inner-circle for the discussion. The remaining students are observers and are responsible for taking notes on the content of the discussion and forming questions or comments of their own. When the inner-circle discussion has been completed, time should be allowed for other students to comment or ask questions. If time permits, a new inner-circle can be formed.

Space is not a problem with the fishbowl, but class size again presents limits. In larger classes there will be fewer opportunities for participation, and shy students will be even more reluctant to become the focus of attention.

Quiet or Shy Students

Even in small groups some students are quiet. When we use learning logs, these students often describe their anxiety about revealing their ideas. Stating that all students are expected to participate in a discussion is likely to heighten that anxiety. We have these suggestions concerning shy students. First, the course description should make it clear that discussion is expected, and this should be emphasized in the first meeting of the class. Second, help should be available for shy students, from either the instructor or a counseling center. We strongly prefer helping students learn to participate, rather than helping them avoid taking part. Third, be accepting of degrees of participation. Students who have the courage to confront their shyness need time to develop, and all of us have “bad hair” days, when things are going terribly, and we need to be quiet.

Promoting Participation

There are three things an instructor can do to promote full participation in class discussions (i.e., active listening as well as talking) and to prevent the most common discussion problems: (1) establish clear ground rules, (2) clarify instructor and student roles, and (3) provide training.

Establish Ground Rules

We define a discussion as an exchange of ideas where all members of the group have an opportunity to participate and are expected to do so to some degree. It is difficult for students to participate, however, if the instructor is doing almost all the talking. Most instructors dominate the conversation even though they may not intend to do so. Brown and Atkins (1988) determined that instructors talk as much as 86% of the time during discussions. Establishing ground rules will help to ensure more balanced participation. When a group agrees publicly on how to carry out its work, the purpose is not to stifle behavior but to reduce ambiguity, promote participation, and maintain order. Ground rules can be set either by asking students to participate in developing them, or suggesting a list that is open to modification. Asking the class to generate their own rules increases commitment, but when the course is just starting it seems reasonable to suggest guidelines with input from the class, and be open to revision after a few discussions have taken place.

We assume that we want people to be open to sharing their views, that we want as diverse a set of views as possible, that participation is to be maximized, and that agreement is not a necessary outcome.

Given these assumptions we offer the following guidelines that apply to both the instructor and the students (adapted from Schwartz, 1994):

1. The discussion always starts with a question that all members understand.
2. Some level of participation is expected of everyone, but members may participate at different rates or levels.
3. Domination of the conversation by one or two people is unacceptable.
4. Let people finish their thought; do not interrupt.
5. Listen. Concentrate on what others are saying rather than concentrate on formulating a response.
6. Use the techniques of paraphrasing and summarizing to increase understanding.
7. Ask for and give the basis for opinions or observations.
8. Divergent views are encouraged. Assume that everyone may have *a piece of the truth*.
9. Debating the goodness, badness, right or wrong of a position is discouraged.
10. Be specific. Use examples whenever possible.
11. Keep the discussion focused on the question at hand.
12. Share, rotate roles and responsibilities for discussion management within the group.

Post your ground rules during class discussions.

Clarify Roles

The instructor can fill one of three roles: leader, facilitator, or observer. For a successful discussion it is critical for the instructor to understand his or her role and to clarify it for the class. At the same time, students should understand that they are expected to participate at an appropriate level, listen with an open mind, show respect for the views of others, and follow the ground rules established for the class.

Leader

The instructor as *leader* is an active participant who contributes ideas when they seem relevant but who focuses on asking questions rather than giving answers. Given the ground rules above, the instructor needs to move toward being an equal partner in the discussion and avoid dominance. Instructor dominance can be reduced by having an observer monitor the duration of the instructor's speaking, until it is reduced to 50 percent or less. The instructor also can "boomerang" questions back to the class so that students will provide answers.

Facilitator

A *facilitator* the instructor does not participate in the discussion itself but helps to manage it. This includes keeping the conversation on track, helping to even out the amount of participation by individuals, paraphrasing and summarizing, and encouraging students to respond to one another.

Observer

The instructor must become an *observer* when the class is divided into small groups. In this format one student in each group is assigned the facilitator role. This student helps to manage the conversation in the small group just as the instructor might do, including holding the group accountable for following the ground rules. Another student has the responsibility of summarizing and reporting out to the larger group on the main points brought out in the discussion. As observer, the instructor clarifies the discussion questions in the beginning, monitors the process and progress of each group, manages the reporting out, summarizes points across the groups, and draws out the implications of the discussion.

Involving students in the facilitation and management of discussions provides them with an opportunity to learn valuable communication skills, to begin to see the process that occurs in a group interaction, to assume more responsibility for their own learning. It also prepares students to operate more effectively in groups outside the classroom.

Provide Training

Active participation in a discussion includes speaking at appropriate times and listening carefully to understand what others are saying. Most students and teachers have had no formal training in these skills, so we suggest that this be provided either by the instructor or a colleague with more experience in this area. We suggest devoting class time to the introduction, demonstration, and practice of most or all of the following:

- participating

- paraphrasing and summarizing
- listening
- accepting divergent views
- keeping on track
- dealing with domination
- minimizing interruptions
- handling conflict
- enforcing the ground rules
- facilitating

How much time should be devoted to training? You may have a lot of material to cover, but consider your objectives. If you want to accomplish those objectives for which discussion is best suited, then it is worth the time. We disagree on how this should be done. Kramer two hours of training is time well spent. Learning these skills requires many examples and a reasonable amount of practice. Korn thinks that in 45 minutes, an instructor can explain the reasons for discussions, what makes a good discussion, present the ground rules, show a video tape that illustrates the skills, and find a few volunteers who will model what has been learned. Feedback after later discussions will provide the advanced training. If even 45 minutes seems like too much, then discussions may not be that important for you and you shouldn't mess up your lectures with all that noise from students.

Regardless of how much time one allocates to training in the beginning of a course, discussion skills require reinforcement. After each of the first two sessions review the discussion process, how students felt about it, and how it might be improved. Then make appropriate adjustments in the discussion format.

It is impossible to guarantee the success of all class discussions, but we think this method is more likely to work if you know what your objectives are and establish ground rules for your class. Clarify your role as leader, facilitator, or observer, and then help students understand what is expected of them by providing training in discussion techniques. Finally, evaluate both the discussion 'process (e.g., the extent to which the rules were followed) and the outcomes. One final bit of advice is to be patient and trust the process.