Leading a Discussion

Class discussion provides students with opportunities to develop their communication skills and to acquire knowledge and insight through the face-to-face exchange of information, ideas, and opinions. A lively, productive give-and-take discussion allows students to articulate their ideas, respond to their classmates' points, and develop skills in thinking through problems and organizing evidence using the language and methodologies of an academic discipline (McGonigal, 2005).

In large-enrollment courses, instructors can divide the class into smaller groups for discussion; see Chapter 18, "Encouraging Student Participation in the Large-Enrollment Course."

General Strategies

Clarify your expectations at the beginning of the term. During the first week of class and in the syllabus, define the role discussion will play in the course and describe students' responsibilities. Let students know that you expect everyone to participate, that discussion is a time to test ideas and new perspectives, and that the discussion will be more worthwhile if they come prepared.

Plan how you will conduct each discussion session. You will want to devise assignments that prepare students for the discussion, compose a list of questions to guide and focus the discussion, and identify appropriate in-class activities such as pair work and brainstorming. Have in mind two or three ways that you might begin the discussion, and leave time for an end-of-session wrap-up and synthesis. Because discussion patterns tend to gel early in the term, devote extra effort to the early sessions. (Source: Faust and Courtenay, 2002)

Sharpen students' discussion skills. Help students develop the attitudes and skills they need to participate. For example, identify the roles that make for lively, purposeful discussion, including "detective" (listening for unchallenged biases) and "umpire" (listening for judgmental comments). Explain that conflicts are a natural part of the discussion process, and describe ways to handle conflicts. Talk about

the value of staying on point and not succumbing to digressions. (Sources: Brookfield and Preskill, 2005; Kramer and Korn, 1999)

Sharpen your discussion skills. An effective discussion leader must be involved in the discussion but also mindful of the group process. You will need to serve as a gatekeeper ("Makayla, you've been quiet. Do you have something to add?"), a mirror ("The group seems to be focusing on . . ."), an observer ("Why do we drift into tangents whenever . . . comes up?"), a validator ("Great point!"), a negotiator ("Can we come to consensus on this?"), and a reality tester ("Do you realize how our comments can be interpreted?"). (Source: Forsyth, 2003)

Take cultural norms into account. Some of your students may have been taught to be silent and respectful in class; others may have been taught that interrupting and speaking loudly are natural when one feels passionately about a topic. Help your students by identifying ground rules for discussion and asking students who want additional guidance to see you after class. (Source: Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence and Intercultural Communication Center, n.d.)

Setting the Context for Discussion

Explain the ground rules for participation. For example, do students have to raise their hand to speak? If you will call on students at random, do they have a right to "pass" without penalty? If the class is small, you might involve the students in setting the ground rules. (Source: Brookfield and Preskill, 2000)

Ask students what makes for an excellent class discussion. Either in writing or small groups have students develop guidelines that they can refer to during the term. Faculty who have posed this question report that students paint a vivid picture of an engaged, energetic class: well-prepared students; wide participation; respect for different opinions; thought-provoking questions; and thoughtful listeners. (Source: teachers listserv of the University of California, Berkeley)

Give pointers about how to participate in a discussion. Explain that the purpose of discussion is exploration—the search for more information and new viewpoints to compare and test—not advocacy or battle. Stress the value of listening carefully, tolerating opposing viewpoints, suspending judgment until all sides have spoken, realizing that there may not be one right answer or conclusion, and recognizing when one has not understood a concept or idea. Tiberius (1999,

adapted from p. 64) recommends distributing a list of suggestions for discussion participants:

- Seek the best answers rather than try to convince other people.
- Try to keep an open mind and not let your previous opinions or ideas get in the way of your willingness to listen to others' ideas.
- Practice listening by putting into your own words the point that the previous speaker made before adding your own contribution.
- Avoid disrupting the discussion by introducing new issues; instead, wait until the current topic reaches its natural end; if you wish to introduce something new, let the group know that what you are about to say will raise a new topic and that you are willing to hold your comment until people are finished discussing the current topic.
- Stick to the subject and talk briefly.
- Avoid long stories, anecdotes, or examples.
- Give encouragement and approval to others.
- Seek out differences of opinion; they enrich the discussion.
- Be sympathetic and understanding of other people's views.

Assign preparation activities. Accompany a reading assignment with questions likely to arise during the discussion. Or ask students to conduct a "fact-finding mission" to search the texts for factual evidence that clarifies a particular concept or problem. Or ask students to come to class with a one- or two-paragraph position piece or several questions they would like to be discussed. (Sources: Clarke, 1988; Cross, 2002)

Starting a Discussion

Refer to the study questions. Begin the discussion by raising one of the study questions or by asking the class which of the study questions they found most provocative or most difficult to answer.

Phrase questions so that students feel comfortable responding. Open with a question that does not have a single correct answer. For example, instead of asking for a definition ("What is entropy?"), ask the students to mention something new that they learned ("What about entropy stands out in your mind?") or to give an example of the concept. Or give students a few minutes to write a response to the question "What is the most important word in the first (or last) paragraph of the reading? Why?" and begin the discussion with that question. (Sources: Kloss, 1996; Lowman, 1995; McKeachie and Svinicki, 2006)

Ask for students' questions. Tell students to come to class with one or two questions about the reading: "Bring a provocative, intriguing question and a sentence or two about why you would like the question to be discussed." From these questions, pick one at random to start the discussion. Or have students divide into small groups to discuss their questions. (Source: Frederick, 1981)

Pose an opening question and have students divide into pairs to discuss. Give pairs, trios, or small groups of students an explicit task: "Identify the two most obvious differences between today's and last week's readings" or "Identify three themes common to the reading assignments." Give the groups a time limit and ask them to select a spokesperson who will report back to the entire class. (Source: Frederick, 1981)

Pose an opening question and have students spend five minutes writing a response. Beginning a discussion with a short writing task gives students time to think and enriches subsequent discussion. (Source: Lang, 2008)

Ask students to recall specific images from the reading assignment. Ask students to volunteer one memorable image, scene, event, or moment from the reading: "What images remain with you after reading the account of Wounded Knee?" List these on the board and explore the themes that emerge. (Source: Frederick, 1981)

Pose a controversial question and have students take a position. Ask students for pro and con arguments or strong examples that support each position. You can also ask students to argue the counterposition to a point they agree with. This approach can lead students to understand the complexities of a controversy, rather than simply reinforce their initial views. (Source: Budesheim and Lundquist, 1999)

Brainstorm. In a brainstorming exercise, anyone can contribute an idea (no matter how bizarre or far-fetched), and each idea is written on the board or screen. Free association, creativity, and ingenuity are the goal; no idea is questioned, praised, or criticized during the exercise. Use brainstorming to encourage students to produce a range of possible causes, consequences, solutions, reasons, or contributing factors. After a set time (five minutes, for example) or when students have run out of ideas, the group begins to evaluate all the ideas.

Ask students to respond to a brief questionnaire. Post or distribute a brief set of questions and use the signed responses to open the discussion. "Amir, I see you answered the first question in the negative. Ebba, I note that you disagree

with Amir" or "Minh, your answer to question four is intriguing. Can you tell us more?" (Source: Davis, 1976)

Have students write a few facts on index cards. Hand out blank index cards and ask your students to write down two or three facts about a given topic; these cards are not signed. Collect the cards, shuffle the deck, and draw a card at random. Read one fact from the card and ask students to comment or add related information. (Source: Devet, 1995)

Use sentence completion exercises. Brookfield and Preskill (2005) suggest the following prompts: "The question I'd most like to ask the author is ___"; "The idea I most take issue with is ___"; "The part of the readings that is most confusing is ___."

Guiding the Discussion

Take rough notes. Use these for summarizing the session. You might also note areas that need clarification as well as students' comments that can be used to segue to other points.

Keep the discussion focused. List the day's questions or issues on the screen or board so that the class can see where the discussion is heading. Brief interim summaries of the discussion are helpful, as long as the summaries do not cut off the discussion prematurely.

Use nonverbal cues to encourage participation and maintain the flow. Eye contact, nods of approval, and other signals will help keep students engaged. To shift the mood and pace, you can move around, sit down, stand up, or write on the board. (Sources: Faust and Courtenay, 2002; Rosmarin, 1987)

Return the discussion to the key issues. Redirect a discussion that gets off track: "We seem to have lost sight of the original point. Let's pick up the notion that . . ." or "This is all very provocative, but we also need to talk about the government's response before we end today."

Listen carefully to what students say. Be attentive to (adapted from Christensen, 1991):

- *Content, logic, and substance.* Does the student see the strengths and weaknesses of his or her point? Has something important been left unsaid?
- *Nuance and tone.* Does the student sound confident or doubtful, engaged or indifferent?

- *Context.* Does the student's comment build on previous points and strengthen the flow of the discussion?
- *Consensus.* Do students agree or disagree with the student's comment?

Clarify students' misunderstandings. Don't let the discussion become bogged down in confused statements: "Let's clear up this misunderstanding before we continue"; "We've covered some important points so far. Are you persuaded or troubled by this line of thinking?" (Source: Lowman, 1995)

Vary the pace and tone. To spark participation, ask specific rather than general questions, or call on students who tend to express strong opinions. To calm a discussion, pose abstract or theoretical questions, slow the tempo of your voice, and avoid calling on opinionated students. (Sources: Christensen, 1991; Rosmarin, 1987)

Be alert for signs that a discussion is faltering. Expect one or two lulls in the discussion, but be prepared to move on when students' attention is wandering. Signs that a discussion is foundering include excessive hair-splitting or nitpicking, repetition of points, private conversations, refusals to compromise, disruptive attacks, and apathetic participation. Introducing a new question or activity can jump-start the discussion. (Source: Tiberius, 1999)

Avert heated arguments. Remind students that intellectual conflict is essential to academic discovery, but also point out the importance of cooperating, avoiding personal attacks, and being tolerant of divergent points of view. If a discussion risks becoming too heated, offer a calm remark ("Let's slow down a moment" or "Wait. It's not helpful when five people speak at once") and move on. (Source: Johnson and Johnson, 1997)

Bring closure to the discussion. Announce that the discussion is ending: "Are there any final comments before we pull these ideas together?" Use your closing summary to emphasize two or three key points and to provide a framework for the next session. (Source: Clarke, 1988)

Assign students to conduct the summary. At the beginning of the discussion, select one or two students to be the summarizers of the major issues, concerns, and conclusions generated during discussion. Or tell the class that you will call on someone at the end of class to summarize. This strategy encourages students to listen more carefully because they may be called upon to give the summary.

Ask students to write down and submit the question uppermost in their minds. During the closing minutes of class, ask students to list one or two questions and to turn these in anonymously. Use these questions to start the next class meeting.

Evaluating the Discussion

Ask yourself a few evaluative questions. After class, spend a few minutes thinking about these questions:

- What portion of the class contributed to the discussion?
- How much did you dominate the session?
- What was quality of students' comments?
- What questions worked especially well?
- How satisfied did the group seem?
- Did students learn something new about the topic?

Occasionally save a few minutes for the students to assess the discussion. Ask students to discuss or write their responses to the following questions: What is going well with class discussion? What could be improved? Are you satisfied with your participation in class discussion? (Source: Hollander, 2002)

Video-record the discussion. If you want to make a detailed analysis of how you conduct discussions, video-record a session. One way to analyze the recording is to note who undertakes which of the following activities (adapted from Davis, 1976, pp. 85–86):

- *Initiating:* proposing tasks or procedures, defining problems, identifying action steps
- *Eliciting:* requesting information, inviting reactions, soliciting ideas
- *Informing:* offering information, expressing reactions, stating facts
- *Blocking:* introducing irrelevancies, changing the subject, questioning others' competence
- *Entrenching:* expressing cynicism, posing distractions, digging in
- *Clarifying:* clearing up confusions, restating others' contributions, suggesting alternative ways of seeing problems or issues
- *Clouding:* creating confusion, claiming that words can't "really" be defined, remaining willfully puzzled, quibbling over semantic distinctions, obscuring issues

- *Summarizing*: pulling together related ideas, offering conclusions, stating implications of others' contributions
- *Interpreting*: calling attention to individual actions and what they mean
- *Consensus proposing*: asking whether the group is nearing a decision, suggesting a conclusion for group agreement
- *Consensus resisting*: persisting in a topic or argument after others have decided or lost interest, going back over old ground, finding endless details that need attention
- *Harmonizing*: trying to reconcile disagreements, joking at the right time to reduce tensions, encouraging inactive members
- *Disrupting*: interfering with the work of the group, trying to increase tensions, making jokes as veiled insults or threats
- *Evaluating*: asking whether the group is satisfied with the proceedings or topic, pointing out implicit or explicit standards the group is using, suggesting alternative tasks and practices

As you observe your students' behavior and your own, think about ways to increase productive activities and decrease counterproductive ones. Ask a trusted colleague or a faculty development expert on your campus to analyze and review your recording with you.

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