

Leading an Effective Discussion

(adapted from "How to Get Students to Talk in Class," Center for Teaching and Learning, Stanford University, and from the "Learning through Discussion 1.1: Strategies for Section Leaders," Graduate Teaching Center, Yale University)

Open the conversation

- Tell students what you plan to accomplish for the day. Highlight one main question or no more than three main points. Focus on ideas and skills.
- Tell students why the topics or questions are relevant to mastering the material, to understanding larger issues, and to doing well in the class (writing the paper).
- Define terms. Establish the facts on which the discussion will be based.

Decentralize: Get students talking to one another

- Tell students to address their comments to each other.
- Use the "rotating chair" format in which students call on each other instead of you calling on them.
- If you choose to call on students, give them one free pass in section, or allow them to defer a question to another student.
- Try not to respond to every student comment; instead ask the class what they think about what has just been said.
- Turn your back to take notes on the board while students talk to one another.

Share the authority: Use student work

- Encourage student facilitators or student presentations.
- Ask students to prepare a discussion questions, and then frame the discussion around their questions.
- Assign weekly reading responses (free-form or directed), and ask students to share or clarify their comments in class.
- Use mini-lectures interspersed with discussion and active learning.

Ask questions strategically

- Try not to answer your own questions.
- Try not to use rhetorical questions or "yes/no" and "agree/disagree" questions.
- Occasionally, stop the action and ask students to take a stand on a particular question. Ask them to justify their positions.
- As the discussion becomes more complex, ask students to refine each other's answers and arguments.
- Stop and review as needed. Make specific references to students' comments.
- Keep time, and use a timer to keep students on track.
- Keep track of valuable threads that the class does not follow: they can be great paper topics

Give students time to think

- Silence is ok, really!
- If students seem to need more time to think, ask them to turn a classmate and brainstorm some responses to your question for two to three minutes.

Respond to off-target comments encouragingly

- Even if the comment is completely wrong or “off the wall,” thank the student for sharing their idea and – this is your creative challenge of the day – find a way to link their concept back to the discussion.
- A repertoire of encouraging comments is useful here. “Thank you for those thoughts on the matter. If you were to approach the concept from a slightly different angle, you might see that . . .” or, “I’m glad you brought up that idea. It reminds me that one of our concerns here is actually . . .” or, “With a bit more development, we could turn that idea around to make the point that . . .”
- After class, take time to talk with the student who made the erroneous comment and discuss the issue with him or her then. This will reinforce that you want people to take risks with their ideas in class, but that you are also committed to helping your students understand the material correctly.

Use strategic body language

- Push your chair away from the table during the discussion, signaling that your students now have the floor.
- Avoid crossing your arms or frowning while students are speaking; these are discouraging signals.
- Take notes while students are speaking, and then refer to their comments later.

Encourage your students to be active learners

- Incorporate pair or small-group activities into section discussions.
- Stage a debate.
- When you discuss an issue on which students may have differing perspectives, assign one side of issue to each end of the room. Have students stand anywhere between the two ends to indicate their stand on the position (standing by the wall would indicate strong agreement with one side; standing in the center of the room would indicate indecision or ambivalence).
- Ask your students to imagine themselves in the shoes of someone they’re studying. Have them describe the experience of the individual in question or role-play with other students.

Conclude the conversation

- Use a stopwatch or kitchen timer to end the discussion and begin wrap-up.
- Ask students to write for 1-5 minutes at the end of discussion (The One-Minute Paper). Ask an important question about the material or ask them to write down a main point that they learned or a big question that remains. Students may keep these as summaries of the day's work, or they can turn them in for you to use to start the next class.
- Review the class's accomplishments and preview challenges. Point back to the overall goals. Highlight great responses.
- Describe your expectations for the next section, and what students need to meet them.