

Facilitating Classroom Discussions

Center for Teaching Excellence
Duquesne University

So you want to have a class discussion...

Why? What are your goals? Taking a few minutes to answer these questions while you are preparing for class will help to focus your efforts. Some reasons for holding a discussion might be

- To foster critical thinking about a text
- To help students learn types of questions to ask when engaging with content
- To develop a classroom community
- To solve a problem as a group
- To help students tolerate ambiguity and respect differences of opinion

Discussion can be more or less structured to meet your goals

more structured

less structured



Students will learn specific content

Students will develop skills such as interpretation, critical thinking, speaking, collaborative learning

The text being discussed is central and needs to be addressed in detail; deep reading

The text serves as a springboard for brainstorming and building ideas together

The teacher retains most of the control

Students and teachers share control

All students need to arrive at about the same conclusions

The group doesn't have to reach consensus, but each person needs to be involved in the thinking process and be aware of how he or she learns and contributes

Many first-year students have never engaged in a critical discussion.



Getting started

- Learn students' names (begin with table tents or name tags). Sit in the circle and tell students what to call you.
- Plan to be surprised by your students; invite new perspectives.
- Select topics that stretch the learners (but not too much!), and present a dilemma or complex issue that they can identify with. Choose topics that intrigue or provoke.
- When using written texts, number the paragraphs for easy reference. Keep it brief; 1-3 pages are plenty for a 30-45 minute discussion. You can use various kinds of texts: essays, cartoons, film clips, science lab objects, music, visual art...

Making the discussion work

- Begin with a broad question that most people in the group can respond to.
- Work from what students know to what they don't know. Ask for personal examples or ask them to review something they have already learned.
- Ask questions *you're* curious about. Be engaged yourself.
- You may want to begin with the "what" for basic comprehension and then move to "how" and "why."
- Contextualize abstract ideas in concrete examples. When discussing Kant's categorical imperative, give a real life example of a moral dilemma and ask students to apply Kant's ideas. Or, instead of asking students' views of Skinner's behaviorism, give an example of how it is used today and ask them to address the pros and cons of its application.
- Model respect for others' ideas. If you don't know how to respond to a comment or if a student says something that seems off base, repeat it for clarification and ask what others think.

Fostering critical thinking

- Ask students to support their claims. Where did they get the information? How trustworthy is the source?
- Good texts and discussion questions require thinking. Give students and yourself time to think during the discussion. Get used to silence. Ask them to refer back to the text, or write briefly on the topic first and then discuss it.
- Learn as a teacher to be quiet and listen, and carefully choose guiding questions. Model listening and building questions on what others say. It's not a debate.
- Students need to learn to express their thoughts out loud, but many will have a hard time getting "in." Watch body language. If students are giving superficial answers or a few are dominating, stop and have folks think or write a bit. This can increase the level of thinking of the whole group.
- For sensitive topics, be prepared with some discussion ground rules. The students might create their own – e.g., listen respectfully, comment on ideas, don't attack persons. It can be helpful when discussions get heated to have students write down their thoughts in class.



The questions you ask can open up or shut down the discussion.

Sample questions

- Avoid yes/no questions. Alternative: To what extent do you think...?
- How would you define _____ as it is used in this passage? How is that different from the way we usually think of it?
- Think about this paragraph (or concept). What does it mean? What makes you say that?
- You said “XXX.” Did I understand you correctly? Would anyone like to respond?
- What are the implications of _____ for _____? (e.g., applying a theory to our real lives).
- What would happen if?
- What do you think the next step in the argument (or scene in film) should be? Why?
- How might you account for the apparent contradiction in this text between _____ and _____?
- How could a sensible person have written this? (especially useful for texts that are from a different culture or time-period, and which seem distant to our students)



Take time to reflect. It's the key to learning.

Why reflect?

Generally, we don't take the time to reflect with students on the learning that takes place in our courses. Why start now?

- Research shows that learners learn better and can continue to learn on their own when they *know how* they learn.
- Teachers teach better when they have insights into their students' learning.
- Beginning college students find it difficult to know how and what to learn in a discussion. In the reflection, you lead them in taking *responsibility* for tying up loose ends and determining what's important to take away from the discussion. This may include writing.

Sample reflection questions

- What can we take away from this? How does it relate to what we learned last week? How does it relate to what you're learning in _____ (name another class; especially for those teaching in Liberal Arts learning communities).
- What were the issues you wanted to discuss that never came up?
- Do you have an opinion different from the general consensus of the group?
- Were there “aha” moments for you? When? Be specific.
- What did you observe about the process? How did this discussion help you understand the topic better than you could on your own?

- In what specific ways did your understanding grow or change?
- In what ways did you contribute?
- What might you do differently next time to increase your learning?

Facilitator's role in reflection

- Praise where praise is due to students (not unwarranted praise): e.g., I admire your ability to tackle such a difficult topic; your comments have made me change my understanding because I had never thought of it in this way before.
- Encourage students to continue taking responsibility: e.g., If there's an issue or portion of the text you want to discuss, it's your role to take us there as a group during the discussion. Let us know when you disagree with the group. If you're having trouble getting in, see me, and we'll figure out a way.
- If you like, briefly reflect on how you played your role – what you think you did well, what you are working on, what you learned.

How do you know when a discussion goes well?

- Look back at your overall goals for the lesson. Did students learn content and work on developing skills as you had hoped?
- Note what you did as a *teacher* – your posture and position in the room, the ways in which you invited students to participate, your quantity of talking, the kinds of questions you prepared, spontaneous questions you asked in the flow, active listening, clarifications and redirecting you provided.
- Note what *students* were doing: listening, referring to the text, providing life examples, refining their ideas, asking each other questions, building on others' comments, talking to one another, writing down ideas. Think about who participated and who didn't.
- There are good days and bad days. The same lesson plan works differently from one class to the next, so try not to take it personally.
- It's hard to both facilitate a discussion AND notice the dynamics at the same time. Ask a colleague to observe a class discussion and offer feedback. Or contact the Center for Teaching Excellence to get ideas or have a class observed (412-396-5177 or cte@duq.edu).