Facilitating Discussions
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Create a Climate for Success

1. Set the Stage
   • Set participation tone immediately
   • Build complexity (start small and build)
   • Get to know your students and their interests
   • Be explicit about value of interaction and how is relates to course content and assessment
   • Build in accountability to encourage participation
   • Address student complaints/resistance immediately & positively

2. Build trust
   • Establish a “classroom code” or “rules of engagement” and enforce (include students in developing guidelines)
   • Begin building relationships immediately
   • Build classroom community
   • Start small and build
   • Use inclusive language
   • Respect adult learning (students are autonomous, self-directed, and have life experiences)
   • Share stories to demonstrate that you identify with students

3. Practice Discussion Friendly Behaviours
   • Use students’ names; encourage students to learn each other’s names
   • Arrange room to encourage discussion; vary seating
   • Arrive early—stay afterwards
   • Use immediacy behaviours to encourage discussion (verbal/non-verbal cues that reduce the physical and psychological distance between instructor and students—smile, nod, move out from behind podium, move closer to speaker, look relaxed and interested)
   • Draw students’ special knowledge to encourage shy students

4. Plan a Strategy
   • What is the purpose of the discussion?
   • How will you organize the discussion?
     o Will the discussion include the entire class, buzz groups, think pair share, or a combination?
     o How will groups be determined?
   • Does the discussion require the students to prepare? What can you do to encourage student preparation? What will you do if students are not prepared?
   • How will you handle non-participation or dominating students?
   • How much time will you allocate to the discussion and how will flexible can you be with the time allocation?
   • What will you consider a digression? How will you handle digressions?
   • How will you handle student misconceptions/inaccuracies?
   • How will you synthesize the ideas at the end of the discussion?
   • How will handle disputes that may arise?
   • How will you build in accountability before, during, and after the discussion? (e.g. short assignment submitted in advance, groups report to class, written summary, class develops an exam question)
5. Share the Plan
- Make the agenda clear in advance
  - Require advanced preparation and guide students through the preparation by providing questions/theoretical framework
- Make explicit
  - How the discussion connects to course objectives, content, assessment, broader job skills (e.g. communication, collaboration)
  - Roles, responsibilities, behavioural expectations of students and the instructor
  - How students will be accountable and how the discussion links to course assessment (e.g. participation grade and/or how discussion will help them answer questions on an assignment, midterm, etc.)
- Provide
  - A clear structure for the discussion
  - Multiple ways for students to participate
  - Clear instructions for discussion activity (provide instructions both verbally and in written form--e.g. on a slide)
  - Guiding questions/theoretical framework that frame your discussion

6. Facilitate, Don't Dominate
- Be in control, but don’t talk too much
- Decentralize--invite students to address one another
- Model thinking, respect, language that you expect from students
- Pause to give time for reflection (Silence is okay! Some students need time to formulate their ideas.)
- Provide direction & maintain focus
- Summarize student responses to allow everyone in the room to hear what has been said
- Watch for discussion breakdown signs (hair--splitting, private conversations, participants refusing compromise, personal attacks, apathetic participation, repetition of points, ideas are attacked before completely expressed). Prevent discussion from deteriorating into a heated discussion with strategies such as:
  - “Let’s slow down a moment”
  - “Hold on. It’s not helpful to have more than one person talking at a time.”
  - “It seems like we need to identify the areas upon which we can agree. Let’s start there.”
  - “This discussion isn’t productive. Those that want to continue can meet after class. For now, let’s move on.”

7. Share authority
- Invite ideas for discussion
- Assign students to lead discussion on one or more questions
- Combine mini-lectures with discussion
- Delegate responsibility for discussion questions
- Have students design exam questions based on discussion
- Don’t take a stand one way or the other
- Make notes on board/designate note takers
- Bring closure (summarize what has been discussed; how it relates to course content and objectives; the information students are responsible for)

8. Don’t Fall into Common Questioning Pitfalls!
- Setting the bar too high initially.
- Failing to prepare questions in advance
- Failing to imagine student perspectives/responses and thinking about how you might respond (NB: You may not be able to anticipate all student responses, but taking the time to think about the material from the student perspective will better prepare you for discussion facilitation.)
- Asking too many questions at once
- Asking and answering your own questions
- Failing to probe or explore the implications of answers
- Rewarding rapid response from the same students
- Asking unconnected questions
- Failing to ask questions in a logical sequence
- Asking yes/no, vague, or leading questions
- Ignoring or failing to build on students’ answers

Question Types

Adapted from Davis (1993)
- Epistemological: questions probing how an author comes to know or believe something to be true
- Experiential: examines the text through the lens of relevant personal experiences
- Communicative: probes how the author conveys meaning and whether the approach clarifies or confuses meaning
- Political: examine how the text serves to represent certain issues or challenge others
- Exploratory questions: probe facts and basic knowledge
- Challenge questions: interrogate assumptions, conclusions or interpretations
- Relational questions: ask for comparisons of themes, ideas, or issues
- Diagnostic questions: probe motives or causes
- Action questions: call for a conclusion or action
- Cause-and-effect questions: ask for causal relationships between ideas, actions, or events
- Extension questions: expand the discussion
- Hypothetical questions: pose a change in the facts or issues
- Priority questions: seek to identify the most important issue(s)
- Summary questions: elicit synthesis

Strategies for Handling Students Who Monopolize the Discussion

Adapted from Davis (1993)
- Break class into smaller groups or assign tasks to pairs of students.
- Use a one-minute paper and then call on students to share their thoughts
- Avoid making eye contact with the talkative student(s)
- If one student has dominated the discussion, ask the other students if they agree or disagree with comments.
- “Let’s hear from some other students”
- Assign a specific task to the dominant student (e.g. summarize discussion, take notes)
- Acknowledge time constraints (“Outline time running out, can we pick up this discussion outside of class?”)
- If the monopolizing is a serious problem, speak to him/her outside of class. Indicate that you value his/her participation, but that you wish more students contributed.

Sources

Discussion Leading Guidelines, Stanford Teaching Commons,
“Discussions,” Eberly Center: Teaching Excellence and Educational Innovation, Carnegie Mellon,
https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designate/teach/instructionalstrategies/discussions.html
Leading Better Discussions, Center for Teaching Excellence, Duquesne University,
http://www.duq.edu/about/centers-and-institutes/center-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-and-learning/leading-better-discussions
McKeachie, McKeachie’s Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers, 2011
## Techniques to Structure Discussions


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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jigsaw</td>
<td>Topic/reading is divided into smaller pieces, subgroups are assigned a piece of the &quot;puzzle,&quot; subgroups report back to the facilitator; follow with group discussion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two-Column</td>
<td>Students consider two sides of an issue; responses are recorded in 2 columns. (e.g. acceptance of cultural difference looks like/doesn’t look like)</td>
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<td>4 Corners</td>
<td>Questions appear at four corners of room; students divided into 4 groups and move from corner to corner answering question. Follow with group discussion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forced Debate</td>
<td>Ask students to select one or the other of two opposite sides and defend their choice. Ask them to sit on one side of the table/room to represent their decision. Ask why they have chosen where they are. Invite student to change their place during the debate if they are persuaded.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cross-over debate</td>
<td>Ask students to select one or the other of two opposite sides and defend their choice. Ask them to sit on one side of the table/room to represent their decision. Students are then asked to argue for the opposite side.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buzz Groups</td>
<td>Small subgroups are assigned questions, subgroup leader records answers and then reports to the group.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concentric Circles</td>
<td>Group forms small circle within larger circle; inner circle discusses topic, outer circle listens; then reverse listening and discussion roles.</td>
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<td>Phillips 66</td>
<td>Six selected individuals allowed six minutes for topic discussion; followed by group discussion or six assigned individuals follow up on the discussion; or individuals count one to six and all sixes for the discussion group.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Picture Making</td>
<td>Group divided into small subgroups; each subgroup illustrates their discussion then explains the picture to the larger group.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socratic Method</td>
<td>Facilitator/subgroups lead discussion by asking questions; or subgroup or individuals follow a question and answer with another question.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Truth Statements</td>
<td>Subgroups decide on 3 true statements for a topic; subgroups present truth statements, other subgroups refute them or ask questions; library research after.</td>
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<td>Circle Response</td>
<td>Questions posed to members of a group seated in a circle; each group member in turn expresses a response.</td>
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<td>Colloquium</td>
<td>Advanced projected are planned and evaluated as they progress.</td>
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<td>Chain Reaction</td>
<td>Subgroups discuss a topic or presentation and formulate questions to be asked of the resource persons.</td>
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<td>Forum</td>
<td>Huddle Groups: Pairs or triads discuss specific issue for 2-3 minutes</td>
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<td>Listening Team</td>
<td>3-4 designated individuals listen and raise questions after a presentation.</td>
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<td>Reaction Symposium</td>
<td>3-4 individuals in turn give their reactions to a presentation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Screened Presentation</td>
<td>Subgroups develop questions for speaker or resource person to address either as the presentation progresses or at the end of the presentation.</td>
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<td>Mini Symposium</td>
<td>Subgroups each address a specific aspect of the topic through a concise presentation followed by questions from other subgroups.</td>
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<td>Reaction Sheets</td>
<td>Facilitator asks individuals to record their reactions as they listen, watch, or read; individuals then share reactions with the group.</td>
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<td>Brainstorming</td>
<td>Group thinks about a topic and gives their ideas; facilitator explains importance of no critical judgments, strive for quality of ideas, free wheeling wild ideas are okay, hitchhiking on another idea; follow with structured discussion.</td>
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<td>Clinic</td>
<td>Diagnosis, analysis and solving of problems by a large group or subgroups can work through the problem and then report to the larger group.</td>
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<td>Role Playing</td>
<td>Dramatization of a problem or situation followed by discussion.</td>
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