

# Classroom Discussions

Classroom discussions should help students learn but getting students to actively participate can sometimes be a difficult task. Silberman (1996) asserts that to stimulate class discussion, “You first have to build interest!” How, then, can we make that happen? A number of strategies are presented here which can change the once “quiet” classroom into one that has lively and meaningful discussion.

*It is important to connect classroom discussions to course goals, objectives and students’ background knowledge.*

Barton, Heilker, and Rutkowski (n.d.) stress that our students should be “attentive and involved and engaged” to help them construct their own learning and engage in discussion. Burton et al. also point out that effective classroom discussion occurs when students talk with other students and not just the instructor (para. 7). Dialog among classroom peers can be monopolized by a few talkative students while other students sit back and passively observe. Helping to break the habit of rote, two-way responses between the instructor and the student while the rest of the class remains uninvolved can be achieved by implementing some of the strategies presented here.

Plan classroom discussions by talking about its purpose and stress the importance of hearing everyone’s “voice” in the dialogue. It is good practice, though, to never force students to talk if they are not comfortable. Talk with these students outside of class to ensure there aren’t underlying reasons for them not participating. Quieter students may assume a more active role in small group discussions so be sure to include break out sessions periodically during the semester.

Also, talk with the students about ways they can prepare for classroom discussions through required homework and textbook readings. It is important to also connect classroom discussions to course goals, objectives and students’ background knowledge.

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It is good practice to go over the ground rules for classroom discussion by describing roles and etiquette. For example, inform students that a major portion of the class grade will be based on active and meaningful participation and that everyone must be respectful of their peers and the instructor. Know how to curb students who dominate the discussion, those who bring about negativity, or students who joke around. Finally, teach students how to listen so they can effectively continue the discussion with a coherent dialogue.

## **Strategies for Fostering Classroom Discussions**

Excerpted from *Fostering Effective Classroom Discussions* by J. Barton, P. Heilker, and D. Rutkowski. Used with permission.

1. Set clear expectations for student participation in discussion sessions.
  - Do this at the beginning of the semester to set the tone of the class
  - Establish discussion “rules” such as “You are not allowed to say ‘I don’t know’ when asked a question. If you don’t know, think of a plausible answer, guess, speculate, wonder aloud.”

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*Prompt students recall of information by asking questions that refer to readings, prior discussions, and exam material.*

*Take the time to allow students to formulate an answer and avoid answering the question yourself or asking another student for the answer.*

- Require students to submit an **Entrance Ticket** when they come to class. Students submit the entrance ticket to the instructor if they have completed homework or reading – this ticket can help motivate to students to be prepared for class discussions. (See a sample *Entrance Ticket* as the end of this section)
2. Break the ice with informal talk outside of class.
    - Informally talk with student before and after class about non-class material such as their other classes, sports, and activities. Showing students that you care about them as individuals may help them to be more open to formal discussion in class.
  3. Control and use classroom space strategically.
    - Arrange the classroom in a circle or horseshoe to help stimulate discussion.
    - Move toward the person to whom you are talking but then move away as soon as they begin to speak so they become the center of the conversation.
    - Walk among the students during your presentation to encourage students to talk with you.
    - Sitting with your students helps the class become a community which can encourage discussion.
  4. Use eye contact purposefully and strategically.
    - Look directly at the person to whom you are discussing but then scan the class to encourage more dialogue.
    - Watch for non-verbal feedback to keep the discussion lively and meaningful—move on and change the subject when you see people drifting off.
  5. Avoid open questions; Call on individual students.
    - Directing questions to specific students rather than asking the entire class to answer will prevent students who tend to answer all the time from monopolizing the discussion.
  6. Ask good questions.
    - Prepare a list of questions to help drive the discussion. Mark those which are good and delete for future classes those which do not spur discussion.
    - Avoid yes/no questions. Instead, form questions which require students to analyze and interpret, beginning the question with, “Why do you think?” or “How would you?”
    - Include questions that lead to students taking a stand on a subject and lead these questions with, “What arguments, pro and con, can we generate?”
    - Prompt students recall of information by asking questions that refer to readings, prior discussions, and exam material.

7. Resist responding to your own questions.
  - Take the time to allow students to formulate an answer and avoid answering the question yourself or asking another student for the answer.
  - Ask the student to clarify the answer or add more information if it is not exactly what you are looking for instead of bypassing that student for another. A sure way to deter students from discussion is to quickly disregard their answer or comment.
8. Time and discussion management.
  - Plan on how much time you will provide for classroom discussions—and provide more time than what you think you will need.
  - How will you end a discussion if time runs out—will you resume the discussion during the next class period? Will you have students continue with the discussion in an online discussion forum you create for that purpose using Blackboard? Will you have students complete homework based on the discussion?
  - Prepare for disagreement among students, especially if the topic is controversial or gets out of hand. Providing and reviewing discussion policies and guidelines can help reduce flare-ups or heated discussions. Refer to step 1 above.

Silberman (1996) suggests a number of strategies to engage students in classroom discussions which are organized in an easy-to-follow overview, procedure, and variations. A few of these strategies are presented below.

- **Active Debate**—where every student is involved in the discussion and not only the debaters.
- **Town Meeting**—lightly defined, a town meeting is a meeting of the members of a town or community who discuss and act upon town business. In education, a town meeting can imply a meeting where the students are formed in a group (or the entire class) are welcome to voice their views on a subject in an egalitarian, participatory, and democratic way. The instructor can direct the conversation on a particular subject where students are involved in the creation of course policy, development of course assignments, or course calendar.
- **Three-Stage Fishbowl Decision**—this strategy can be used for practicing listening skills, where a group of students discuss and answer one question, which is then discussed by a second group of students before discussing and answering their own question, followed by a third group who discusses the second question before their own question.
- **Reading Aloud**—helps students focus, raise questions, and stimulate discussion of a selected book.
- **Trial by Jury**—sparks “controversy learning” which is stimulated by challenging viewpoints. (1996, pp. 83-92)

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**Summary**

Classroom discussions can effectively be implemented with careful planning and selecting topics which are interesting and relevant to students. Implementing one or more of the “tested” strategies listed here are suitable to engage students in discussions which are lively and meaningful. As Barton, et al. (n.d.) caution, attempting to implement all of the strategies at once would be “counterproductive.” Instead, select a strategy which would be easy to implement and appropriate for a course. Once the benefits are observed, try introducing another.

**References**

Barton, J., Heilker, P., & Rutkowski, D. (n.d.). *Fostering effective classroom discussions*. <http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/english/tc/discussion.htm>

Silberman, M. (1996). *Active learning: 101 strategies to teach any subject*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon. (This book is available in the NIU Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center)

**Suggested Resource**

University of Wisconsin Whitewater Learn Center (2009). *Plan classroom discussions at least as carefully as lectures*. <http://www.uww.edu/learn/diversity/classroomdiscussions.php>

**Entrance Ticket to Class**

*Entrance Tickets* can be used to encourage students to be more engaged in classroom participation. The ticket can be a simple Word document made available to students electronically in Blackboard. Provide information how students can use the ticket, if you will allow more than one ticket, how the ticket will count toward the final grade (will it count toward participation points, attendance or will the point count toward the final grade for an assignment or project?).

The Entrance Ticket below is an adaptation from a course syllabus, from Appalachian State University CI 3850 Literacy, Technology and Instruction [http://classdat.rcoe.appstate.edu/CI/3850\\_lp\\_f03/entrance\\_ticket.htm](http://classdat.rcoe.appstate.edu/CI/3850_lp_f03/entrance_ticket.htm)

<b>Entrance Ticket</b>	<b>Ticket # 1</b>
<b>This ticket must accompany the work listed below to gain access to the classroom on</b>	
Date _____	
for _____ <b>(Name of assignment, homework)</b>	
<b>Instructions:</b>	