

## **Leading Discussions: ITeach Notes and Summary**

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#### **RATIONALE FOR USING DISCUSSION.**

1. Active learning encourages students to engage in material in a different way than the more passive activity of reading or listening to a lecture; it aids the learning process.
2. Allows students to try out ideas and theories with initial feedback from instructor and classmates that can be refined and developed in exams and paper.
3. . Demonstrating to students that their contributions are important can help reinforce the model of learning as a collaborative, constructive enterprise.
4. You can get prompt and immediate feedback about the assigned material and the extent to which the students understand or are confused by it.

#### **GETTING STARTED.**

Polling students for initial informal responses to an assignment makes for a comfortable beginning and can yield material for further discussion. In a small class, everyone in turn will have made a contribution. In a large class, responses from a good sample of contributors can serve as a rough inventory of potential subjects for future treatment.

Further discussion would be of familiar kinds for the subject matter: *Analytic*: what is the evidence for each of several views? *Methodological*: how do people in the field address questions like this? Or construction of a *Group Discovery* in which contributions serve as portions of an incrementally assembled view, nudged toward coherence by the instructor.

#### **STIMULATING DISCUSSION.**

**Advance Notice:** an e-mail message raising a question for all to consider at the beginning of the next class.

**Pro and Con:** Individuals or small (2-3 persons) teams can be paired against each other in several ways: 1) differing interpretations of a given text, or historical event, or personality disorder; 2) differing methodological or experimental approaches – what each tells us or fails to tell us; 3) analysis of study or commentary from an outside source – its strengths as seen by one side, its shortcomings as seen by the other. The latter two suggestions may be for more advanced classes, but the first should work at any level.

#### **Think, pair, share:**

This strategy was one we used in our discussion. Pose a question; ask students to jot down their thoughts; then have students get in pairs and discuss their answers before reconvening for class discussion.

**In-class writing:**

Ask a question, and give students the time to formulate a response in writing. This technique allows everyone to gather their thoughts and order them, and it is particularly effective to use when you have quiet students, whatever the cause (shyness, language difficulties, etc.). These students can now participate, even if their participation consists in reading what they wrote to the class.

**Discussion questions:**

Ask students to prepare questions about the reading. You can either have the students bring the questions to class and pose them, or the questions can be posted to a discussion board (like Telesis) in advance. Having the students formulate questions about the readings allows them to reflect upon them and be more prepared to talk about the material. Moreover, it can help you assess the level of the students' understanding.

**Online discussion:**

Using an online discussion forum, like Telesis, ask students to respond to the assignments. It's often helpful to pose a question to start the discussion, and have the students then get into a dialogue online, one that can be continued in class.

**CONTINUING DISCUSSION.**

Discussion may have its own momentum. Let it go if it has a brain. It's also possible to construct a bridge between classes by working from a summary of the previous one. The instructor can summarize, but delegating summary to students can give quieter ones an opportunity to participate in a sanctioned, useful way. As a rotating assignment, summary of the previous class also provides an opportunity to evaluate good or not so good listening , differences between what got said and what was heard. Alternatively, a “what have we learned?” “how far have we gotten,” “what have we agreed or disagreed on?” question can be useful at the beginning or end of any class.

**OVERALL ROLE OF THE INSTRUCTOR.**

Instructors' “styles” will differ as much as much as their students'. The general challenge might be described as working out a balance between, on the one hand, promoting students' positive involvement through openness to varieties of contribution and, on the other, appropriate use of the authority implicit in one's role. The first end might be achieved by trying to salvage something useable from any contribution – “Your last point, Sherry, works very well with Larry's notion that ....” A plausible reason for intervention might be to correct significant factual error or to reroute discussion away from a monopolist – “Let's see what someone else has to say.”

The real questions come up when an instructor believes that a student's contribution very much deserves to be challenged, nuanced, added to. Instructors often initiate a response indirectly -“You seem to be arguing that ....”? - then they seek help: “All agreed? Anyone else?” But an instructor who regularly adopts an adversarial, corrective role runs the risk of dampening discussion or implicitly encouraging rote orthodoxy.

It can be useful from the beginning to suggest that brainstorming is the important first stage toward discovery. We may all be handicapped when we have only ourselves to talk to. Then, after “all contributions welcome, we’ll see what survives” comes the sorting out - from incidental insights to arguable theses.

### **OTHER SUGGESTIONS AND TIPS:**

**Introduce discussion early in the semester, preferably the first or second class.**  
It's important to initiate discussion in the first few classes before students get comfortable letting you do all the talking.

**Don't be afraid of silence.**

Students need some time to think before responding, so do not feel uncomfortable with some silence after you've asked a question. If no one offers anything and the silence is becoming unbearable for you, think about rephrasing your question. Do not, however, answer your own question. That will set a dangerous precedent!

**Establish a classroom environment conducive to discussion.**

**Configure your discussion classroom so that students can see each other.**  
In order for students to speak to each other in a discussion and not simply respond to you, try to arrange the chairs so that students can see each other. If you are in a classroom with moveable chairs, a circle is a good configuration.

**Call on students by name.**

Using students' names will communicate that their thoughts and contributions are important. It will also encourage students to refer to each other by name and help establish a sense of community

**Sources Used (each of these books has an excellent chapter on discussion):**

Bain, Ken. *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Lang, James M. *On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching*. Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 2008.

McKeachie, Wilbert, and Marilla Svinicki. *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. 12th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

