

Leading Scintillating, Stimulating, Substantive Class Discussions

Discussion adds a personal dimension to the learning process. It stimulates students to more actively engage with the course materials. It helps students develop their reasoning and communication skills. It encourages collaborative thinking and attunes students to a multiplicity of viewpoints and perspectives. It allows an instructor to get prompt, continuous feedback on students' understanding or misunderstanding of the course material. Above all, discussion can help students gain confidence in their intellectual abilities and learn how to evaluate a theory or synthesize ideas.

But successful discussions are hard to stimulate. Students tend to consider discussion inconsequential. Thus it is essential to insure that the discussion is substantive.

- Use the blackboard.
- Make the discussion goal-oriented. Explore questions; have outcomes.
- Don't stick to words: Use diagrams, charts, and other ways to bring the material to life.

1. Your role as a discussion leader

As a discussion leader you have many responsibilities:

- to set the agenda
- clarify concepts and issues
- promote discussion
- keep students engaged and the section on track, and
- handle problematic behavior

But remember: You are a facilitator and coach, not a lecturer. Your role is to guide, focus and structure the discussion. But the students themselves must have a chance to express their ideas and arrive at their own conclusions

2. Preparation is the key to leading a successful, substantive discussion

Preparation requires setting goals, specific objectives, and activities and questions to meet those objectives and goals.

3. Create rapport with your students and develop a sense of community

Use icebreakers: E.g. Ask a few questions:

- What adjective best describes you?
- What concerns or worries, if any, do you have about this course?
- Professionally speaking, what would you like to be doing 10 years from now?

4. Encouraging student participation

Why won't your students talk? There can be many reasons: They don't understand the question; they need time to formulate a



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response; they don't know the answer; they're bored; they weren't paying attention. Silence is a form of student feedback. How should you respond?

1. **Wait. Give the students time to digest the question and opportunities to respond**
2. **Give a hint. Invite the students to refer to the book or their notes or a peer.**
3. **Build a sense of classroom community. Use introductions and partner or group work.**
4. **Vary the kinds of questions you ask and use inclusive questions:**

--**Information questions:** Where? When? Who? What?

--**Diagnostic questions:** What's going on behind the scenes?

--**Challenge questions:** Why do you think that? How would you explain that? What's the evidence to support that? How could you persuade someone?

--**Action questions:** What would you do in so-and-so's shoes?

--**Summary questions:** How would you summarize the three most critical issues we have discussed?

--**Generalizing questions:** What generalizations can we make?

Some might require deduction; others might ask for hunches or imaginative leaps. Questions with many valid answers reduce anxiety over being wrong.

5. **Encourage students to draw upon their feelings, perceptions, and life experiences.**

6. **Reward student contributions and provide feedback**

- Look attentive
- Paraphrase what the student has said or ask a follow up question.
- Comment on the student's thinking process and point out what was valuable in the student's contribution
- Speak directly to the student and respond explicitly to him or her. Make eye contact and use his or her name, if possible
- Invite other students to add their reactions or reflections.

3. **Dealing with multiple ability levels**

- a. **Sequence your questions logically.** This is known as scaffolding.
- b. **Include visual support for information or instructions** you deliver aloud, including charts, graphs, key words)
- c. **Channel the energies of particularly zealous students** (for example, have them write down points that other students make on the blackboard)
- d. **Use small groups**—both of homogeneous and heterogeneous abilities.

4. **Running an Effective Discussion**

- a. **Begin your class with a bang -- and punctuate it with provocative questions or topics**
This might be a problem, a controversy, a film clip or illustration, a student question
- b. **Preview the material that you will cover**

c. Have students discuss the nature of a good discussion

- Discuss the three main categories of discussions: informational, interpretive, debate-oriented
- Who should students address?
- How can students disagree with one another in a civil manner

d. Vary what you do in class

- use images, film clips, news stories
- stage debates, use small groups, have student presentations

e. Try to get everyone to speak

- What did you learn from this week's reading?
- Do you consider yourself a romantic (for a class on romanticism)?

f. Five Ways to Ignite Discussion about a Text

1. Ask students what they think is the reading's primary value
2. Ask students what image or scene in the reading stands out in their memory
3. Ask everyone in the class to write down one question raised by the text
4. Ask each student to identify one quotation from the text that she/he found significant
5. Stage a debate

5. Common problems

Students direct all answers to the instructor

- redirect questions to other students
- ask whether everyone agrees
- help students see conflict as a good thing
- announce that you will be note-taker
- break the class into small groups

Non-participating students and excessive talkers

- Consider emailing discussion questions to the class ahead of time
- Pause before calling on a student
- Look for non-verbal signs of readiness to speak
- Turn statements into questions: Do you agree with that argument?
- Ask non-participating students to sum up what's been said

Instructor dominated discussions

- Avoid answering your own questions
- Be patient; wait for responses
- Be a moderator: summarize, re-direct, keep the problem in view

6. Consider offering a midterm evaluation.

- Sample questions:
- Do you look forward to attending discussion each week?
 - Are there any topics that you find particularly interesting?
 - What are the discussion leaders' major strengths and weaknesses?
 - One thing I want to tell you is....

7. Techniques for facilitating discussion

Brainstorming: Have students suggest ideas and then have the class build on the idea, embellishing it and suggesting improvements and modifications.

Provoke a debate. Present the class with genuine puzzles: look for a dilemma, a problem, a contradiction between two thinkers

Make the subject relevant. E.g. Father-child and sibling relationships in Lear

Break the class into small groups, where students can solve problems, rehearse arguments or critique rough drafts.

Give students Special Roles

- The problem poser
- The analyst
- The devil’s advocate (who challenges the analyst)
- The detective (who searches for unacknowledged biases and unsupported assumptions)
- The umpire

Share your “trade secrets” or “tricks of the trade”

- a. Note taking: Model a page of notes
- b. Ask the students to anticipate possible study and test questions
- c. Provide students with a model answer and ask them to critique it
- d. Have students generate a list of steps to solve a problem of a certain type

For a book:

- e. Read the book jacket and introduction
- f. Interpret the title
- g. Gather some information about the author and the time period in which the text was written

Five Reading Strategies

Almost no students enter college having received any explicit instruction in hermeneutics—the principles of interpretation (rather, they learn exegesis, or exposition). Only vaguely do they know about Marxian, Feminist, or Freudian interpretation, let alone Queer Theory, Postcolonial Theory, New Historicism Nor do students arrive at college knowing much about literary genres or conventions or the language of interpretation

Questions you might ask:

- How is it possible that two equally intelligent readers can arrive at completely opposing yet legitimate interpretations of the same text?
- Is there such a thing as an incorrect or “excessive” reading of a literary text?

a. All texts are political and ideological

Ideology refers to the system of beliefs, values, and ideas about the world that underlies the text).

Does the author advance these ideas self-consciously?

b. The text is about the human condition:

It’s a repository of cultural wisdom and human truths.

What does it tell us about human nature and the human condition?

What does it tell us about love, families, growing up

c. The reading experience

How does the author use language and style to engage and manipulate the reader?

How does the author make use of tone, story elements (plot, characterization, setting), literary conventions?

How might different readers—male, female, class, ethnicity—experience the text

d. Reading Between the Lines: Strategies to Discover a Text’s Hidden Meaning

Read suspiciously. All literature contains latent and manifest meanings, surface and hidden meanings.

Does the text contain any hidden meanings that are different from its obvious meanings?

Does the text have an allegorical meaning?

Are there read gaps in the text? Contradictions? Stray details that don't seem to fit? Oddities?

Does the text reveal any issues that the author might not have recognized?

Does the text critique any cultural assumptions—deliberately or accidentally?

e. The text as part of a cultural conversation

What does the text say about certain cultural conventions, assumptions, and ideologies?

How does the text participate in the construction of cultural assumptions?

How are categories like "femininity" or "masculinity" or "whiteness" or "blackness" or "civilization" or "nature" represented? What about race or class?

Is the text's position straightforward and single, or complex and multiple?

Does the text match and support the dominant views of its time, or criticize them, or subvert them?

What might original readers have known that later readers, or those from different cultures or groups?

What historical circumstances are present within the text or behind its pages?