

Facilitating Discussion

Lafayette College, 4 February 2015

Preparing for and Engaging in Discussion

Carousel: Students form two concentric circles with equal numbers of people in each, with the students on the inside circle facing the students on the outside circle. Read aloud a provocative statement from an assigned text, or give students slips of paper with statements/problems/issues/challenges/formulas/hypotheses on them, and have the students facing one another talk for three minutes about the statement/problem/hypothesis/etc. Then ask one circle to rotate two or three steps to the left, either ask students to discuss the same statement/problem/hypothesis with a new partner or read or pass out another one, and have students talk with the new person they are facing. Rotate three or four times so students have the chance to talk to three or four different people. After students return to their seats, discuss insights they gained from engaging with several different people on the same topic or on the series of topics.

Think/Pair/Share: Ask everyone to take 60 seconds and write their responses or approaches to a statement, problem, question, etc. Then ask them to share what they wrote with person next to them. Then invite discussion as a larger group. Variation: Ask them to share with the larger group an insight they gained from what their partner wrote.

Silent Board Discussion: After you give the instructions, there should be no talking out loud at all during this activity. Write a key term or statement on the blackboard and circle it. Invite students to come up to the board and write definitions of or associations with the term by drawing lines out from the circle (like spokes from the center of a wheel), writing a response at the end of the spoke, and circling it. As responses are added to the board, students can draw lines out from those circled responses and “speak” to them. When students have finished writing, give them a few minutes to read what is up on the board. Then talk out loud about it, referring to what people have written. Variation: Ask students to return to their seats and write their insights/thoughts before talking.

Barometer: Designate a continuum with one extreme (at one end of the black/whiteboard or room) being “Strongly Agree” and the other (at the other end of the black/whiteboard or room) being “Strongly Disagree.” Read aloud a statement and students move to and stand at a point on the continuum that reflects their stance on the issue. Then ask several students to say why they are standing there. As students speak, other students or the speakers themselves can change positions, if what they hear or say changes their minds, and then they can talk about that. Repeat for multiple statements if desired. Afterwards, debrief/discuss what students learn from the activity. (If you plan to read statements that might make students feel vulnerable, be sure you have built enough trust in the class first.) Variation: Ask students to return to their seats and write their insights/thoughts before talking about the insights they gained through the activity as a whole.

Human Bar Graph: Like the barometer, but with a graph format (works well with larger groups). Designate values for the bars (Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree). Read statements and students line up within the bar that best captures their position, then look around and see where others are. Read a series of statements and have students relocate themselves each time, noting each time where others are. Discuss the patterns during and/or after the activity. What do they reveal about people’s perspectives on the issues/ideas/theories raised? (If you plan to read statements that might make students feel vulnerable, be sure you have built enough trust in the class first.)

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Responding to Excerpts/Problems: Select excerpts from texts or problems from homework sets, print them in large font on pieces of paper, and post those around the room on the walls. Have students walk around the room and write comments, critiques, questions, responses on each. As responses accumulate, students can respond to one another's comments. Once people have circulated, ask students to stand by the excerpt/problem they most want to discuss, asking also that they try to distribute themselves so each excerpt/problem has roughly the same number of people. Have them take the posted excerpt/problem with comments into a small group and discuss in preparation for returning to a large group discussion. (A less time-consuming version of this activity is simply to post the excerpts/problems, have students walk around and read all of them, then choose one they want to talk about, stand by it, and then divide into small groups and talk about it.)

Fish Bowl: Form an inner circle of desks at which 5-10 students sit. Form an outer circle in which remaining students sit. Have inner circle engage in a discussion of some key topic. Outer circle observes and takes notes. After 10-15 minutes, outer circle can either switch into inner circle (individual students in outer circle stand up and tap the shoulder of an inner student and replace him/her) and the discussion continues, or the outer circle can report on their observations of the inner circle discussion. (If you plan to have the inner circle discuss topics or issues that might make students feel vulnerable, be sure you have built enough trust in the class first.)

Embodying Concepts: Have individual students (if they are confident) or small groups attempt to embody or enact a principle/concept/formula/idea/social dynamic/chemical reaction/etc. Once they have tried it, talk about what kinds of insights or different kinds of understanding emerge from trying to embody rather than simply discuss something.

Doubting and Believing: Create a table that has three columns and 1-3 rows. Above the middle and right columns write "Doubting" and "Believing." In the far left column, write one or more provocative statements (e.g., "Multiculturalism is bad for women"). Have participants fill in everything they doubt AND everything they believe about this statement. They MUST find things to put in each column, even if they have to push themselves hard. To debrief the activity, talk about (1) what they learned from having to take up these two stances and (2) what they wrote regarding what they doubt and believe about the statements. The table looks like this (but with more space for writing).

Read Around: Have students choose a word or phrase from a text you have read. Go around the whole group and have each student simply say the word or phrase. Be sure to tell them in preparation that no one is to frame or explain their contributions in any way, just say them, and repetition is fine. It is key that people simply say the words and phrases and not excuse (i.e., "This might be silly, but..." or "I know Sally already said this, but...") or explain their contributions in any way. After everyone has spoken, talk about what people heard. (If the group is small, you can have them choose two or three words or phrases and go around two or three times, with the same guidelines [i.e., no framing, explaining, or excusing].)

Quick (Self)Assessments: Ask everyone to write on an index card one thing that they feel clear about from the lecture/discussion/activity and one thing that remains unclear or a question that remains for them. Collect these and use them to inform planning and/or start off the next class session.

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STANDARDS FOR EVALUATING YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO THIS COURSE

Why contribute? By enrollment in this course you agree to contribute to the education of your fellow students, and to learn from them and your professor in turn. Contributing during class sessions provides an opportunity to practice speaking and the skills of persuasion, as well to listen to, critique, and develop the arguments and analyses of your peers. You are also encouraged to contribute to the success of the class by contributing in other formal and informal venues.

What is contributing? Attendance is obviously a prerequisite for contributing but is not, in itself, a contribution. Nor is this evaluation a measure of whether you provide “correct” answers—many of the issues we will confront in this course have been vexing the human mind for millennia and while solutions would be welcomed, they are hardly expected. This evaluation will reflect, however, the **consistent, rigorous preparation of assigned material and the consistent, enthusiastic attempt to share appropriate interpretations with your peers and professor and to engage with their questions and interpretations with respect.**

Students finding it difficult to contribute for any reason should see me as soon as possible.

Contribution will be evaluated on a scale from A+ to C- or No Credit for unacceptable work.

- A Outstanding Contributions:** Contributions to the course are regular and reflect rigorous preparation. Ideas offered are always substantive, providing significant insights, and spur discussion in interesting directions. Challenges are well substantiated and persuasively presented. Contributions consistently engage the thoughts of fellow students in addition to the professor, spurring them to a greater understanding of the material. If these kinds of contributions were not brought to the class, the quality of course as a whole would be diminished markedly.
- B Good Contributions:** Contributions to the course are regular and reflect thorough preparation. Ideas offered are usually substantive, insights are interesting and/or provocative, complementary examples are well-considered. Challenges are usually well substantiated and often persuasive. Contribution to the class is not as consistent as the top category, but still substantial. If these kinds of contributions were not brought to the class, the quality of the course would be diminished.
- C Adequate Contributions:** Contributions to the course are infrequent but reflect satisfactory preparation. Ideas offered are sometimes substantive, and may provide generally useful insights but rarely a new direction for the discussion. Challenges are rarely presented, and are reasonably substantiated and may sometimes be persuasive. If these kinds of contributions were not brought to the class, the quality of the course, the quality of discussion would be diminished somewhat.
- NC Non-Contributions:** There are few or no contributions to the education of the members of the class. Hence, there is not an adequate basis for evaluation. In the absence of these contributions, the quality of the course, the quality of discussion would not change.
- NC Unsatisfactory or Damaging Contributor:** Contributions in class reflect inadequate preparation or else are undermined by improper comportment. Ideas offered are seldom substantive, provide few if any insights and never a constructive direction for the class. Integrative comments and effective challenges are absent. If these kinds of contributions were not brought to the class, the quality of the course improved. Disruptive, disrespectful, or distracting behavior has damaged the learning environment of the course.

N.B. NEVER refrain from making a comment or asking a question for fear of how a single utterance may effect your evaluation. This rubric evaluates contribution over the span of a semester, not your response to a given question, or even your performance on a given day. Most of the time, the only inappropriate questions or comments are those that are not made.

**OWN YOUR EDUCATION. BE BOLD.
LET YOUR INTERPRETATION/ANALYSIS/QUESTION BE HEARD.**

Suggestions for Engaging Students in Discussion

- ➔ Start the class with an opportunity for students to reflect in writing on a focused prompt. Write a statement or question on the board or project it on a screen — a statement or question that gets at the heart of what you want students to learn from the class session. It should be a complex and provocative statement, not a statement of “fact.” Have them write silently in response for a few minutes. Tell them you won’t collect these but will ask them to return to them at the end of class.

- ➔ At different moments throughout the discussion, ask students to stop and talk with the person next to them for a few minutes about what they think they understand or what they feel confused about. Then ask them to draw on those in the larger group discussion.

- ➔ Throughout the discussion, ask direct questions about how points made connect to the overall theme or issue or set of ideas you want students to understand for that day and within the larger context of the course. This kind of explicit making of connection signals to students what is important and helps them build a bigger-picture understanding.

- ➔ At different moments and/or near the end of the class session, ask for a volunteer — or more than one — to summarize what they think the key points of the class have been. After one person starts, others can add, and you can also add, being sure to affirm students’ contributions even if you have to modify or correct those (if you just say students are wrong, they won’t be as willing to offer their thoughts in future). Make sure this feels like a collective sharing of insights, not a competition or stressful need to “get it all right.”

- ➔ Near the end of class, ask students to return to what they wrote at the beginning of class and consider how they would respond to the same question or statement after the day's discussion and jot a few notes to themselves about that.

- ➔ Before they leave, have students write down on an index card one thing they understand better and one question that remains or has arisen for them during the discussion. Tell them that these are to afford them an opportunity to assess their own understanding and for you to get a sense of what they have learned and what needs to be revisited. Tell them you will collect these, and then do collect them.

Framing and Asking Questions

The following set of recommendations is informed by many conversations with students, who have described their experiences in a range of classrooms and identified what helps them participate and learn most effectively. Framing and posing questions that are at once clear, inviting, and challenging gives students the opportunity to put their energy into genuinely thinking and constructively participating rather than wasting their (and your) time and energy on worrying and guessing what is in people's minds.

Checking for Understanding

Try to frame questions such that it is not too difficult or daunting for students to speak up if they do not understand. Questions such as "Is that clear?" or "Does everyone understand?" imply/assume that you should be able to move forward. Instead, make the implication be that there might well be questions and that they are welcome:

- ⇒ Is anything I explained not clear?
- ⇒ Would anyone like me to go over any of that again?
- ⇒ Are there questions about what I just went over that I could address to help clarify?

Inviting Participation

Most faculty want multiple students to speak during class, not just the same few over and over again. Likewise, most faculty want a range of perspectives and interpretations brought into play, particularly those that provoke generative disagreement and deeper analysis. It is helpful to try to invite wider participation without putting undue pressure or conveying apparent criticism. If you say, "I haven't heard from some people" or "That wasn't what I had in mind," it suggests that those students who have been quiet thus far or have hazarded a contribution have failed you. Try questions such as these instead:

- ⇒ Does anyone want to speak who has not yet had a chance to say something?
- ⇒ That's an interesting interpretation. Can you point to where in the text you might find support for it?
- ⇒ Did anyone have a different perspective/take a different approach that you could explain to us?

Choosing and Signaling the Kind of Question You Are Asking

It facilitates student learning if you ask a range of questions at different levels of complexity and that require different kinds of understanding, and it helps students develop meta-cognitive awareness if you signal which kind of question you are asking. (See <http://www.unc.edu/learnnc/kinetic-connect/noframes.html> and http://pixxel.fhda.edu/hybrid/six_facets.html)

- ⇒ If you plan to ask a straight knowledge recall question, signal that: "I am going to ask a few recall questions to check that you understood some basic points in the text." Otherwise, some students think the questions are too easy and overanalyze (and often don't answer), thinking they are missing some complexity.
- ⇒ If you plan to ask a question that has a particular answer and that you have in mind, tell students that. Otherwise, they focus on trying to guess what is in your head rather than actually thinking for themselves.
- ⇒ If you want students to do some deeper, more complicated, more reflective, or more abstract thinking, signal that too and give them some time. If you ask a big question and don't give them time to think, or if one student speaks and sets the tone and focus, it is hard for others to engage. Try saying something like: "Take a few minutes before you say anything and jot down some thoughts in response to this question. After you've had some time to think, I will ask you to share your thoughts with others."

Strategies for Facilitating Discussions

The following is a set of recommendations for facilitating discussion offered by experienced Bryn Mawr College faculty members who teach across the disciplines.

Early in the semester

- **Consider having an explicit discussion/setting of class guidelines and aspirations.** How are people hoping discussion will work? (i.e., it's okay to say something you are not completely sure of — ideas are works-in-progress and people's ideas are evolving; people should not be held to their initial—or any—perspectives, since they are learning; people who speak easily need to make room for people who need more time; polite agreement is not generative; honest, respectful conflict can be, etc.)
- **Learn all students' names** in the first week; make sure they learn each other's names in the first two weeks; use their names in discussion repeatedly, so they know they are not invisible.
- **Find some way for students to hear their own voices in class early on** (by week 2 at the latest). Especially for shy ones, the inertia of not speaking can be a powerful deterrent on participation in discussion.
- **Consider ways to document discussion for in-class and future use.** How could you use the board to create an analytic framework for the discussion? To document its progress visually so that students can more easily follow and build on it? When does it make sense to ask a student to keep detailed notes of the discussion so that you can type/distribute those later?

Outside preparation for discussion

- **Provide frames, focal questions, or other guidelines for assignments** students must complete in preparation for a discussion. (Then, be sure to draw on these in class sessions, or students think it's simply busy work.)
- **Provide forum on Blackboard or Moodle** for students to prepare for discussion by exploring topics either with guided questions or more openly. (Again, be sure to draw on these in class sessions.)
- **Invite/require all students to email regularly** throughout the week posing questions about the readings/assignments. Draw on those questions in class.
- **Think about your goal for a particular discussion:** To get to a particular point? Just explore? What you want students to get out of and get to in the discussion.

Strategies for Facilitating Discussions

During class discussion

- **Strive to find a balance between** providing essential vocabulary/terms/ideas and creating opportunities for students to explore, share their ideas, and come to an understanding (without turning the process into a concealed lecture).
- Although you might have a specific goal, **be prepared to respond to student-initiated changes of directions**. Good discussions go places you didn't expect. You have to be ready for and happy about a new direction. Sometimes you have to figure out a way of managing it/redirecting it.
- If a key goal is to encourage all students to participate, **consider beginning with a brief writing activity** (so everyone has to think seriously and generate something to say) and then a go-round in which everyone shares an idea about the topic. This can then be the springboard for continued conversation.
- **Pair talk can be a good lead-in**, so that people have a chance to hear someone and also to articulate their own thinking before they're invited to share ideas with the full group.
- **Questions**
 - Pose **open, real** questions (not questions that have a single answer you already have in mind, unless you signal that you are asking simple recall questions).
 - **Give students time to think in silence** (and you be silent and patient) after you have posed a question; you may have thought through possible answers, but they are hearing the question for the first time.
 - If a student poses a question, **wait for students to take a shot at answering** (rather than supplying an answer immediately yourself); this helps students communicate directly with one another.
- **Help students take leadership** over portions of discussion.
- **When students speak:**
 - **Wait at least a beat for other student responses** before validating the comment yourself. Validation by other students is as important in generating real discussion as validation by prof (helps students communicate directly with one another); you can keep track of key points and come back to several at once to draw connections between them (see point about making connections). This way you can avoid persistent triangulation through you.
 - **Validate student contributions** (that doesn't mean you have to agree with them, but acknowledge them, work with them, build on them in a respectful way, rather than ignoring or dismissing them).
- **Make connections**
 - among student contributions (in the present class and in previous classes)
 - between student contributions and the readings/texts/assignments
- **Watch body language** to see who may want to contribute but needs you to create air space. ("Naomi, it looked like there might be something you wanted to add a moment ago...?")

Strategies for Facilitating Discussions

- Periodically, **reframe student comments as questions** or highlight a student question as ways to continue to refocus the conversation as inquiry.
- **Keep discussion focused**—discussion should be framed but within that frame students should have some space to explore. (Useful refocusing strategy: “Let’s think about how the point Leslie just made connects to what we’ve been focusing on today.”)
- **Consider when/how often to intervene**, keeping in mind your overall goals, the ‘flow’ of the discussion, how many students are contributing, etc.
- **Work to bring multiple perspectives into dialogue** and encourage rather than stifle the differences. (Useful prompts: “Does anyone have a different perspective on that?” “Did anyone have a different interpretation?”)
- Consider asking students what they are getting out of discussion and whether they are finding beneficial ways to participate as part of **midcourse feedback**.
- **Uses of text/media**
 - Encourage students to **consult the text** (or field notes or whatever), as appropriate. It’s important to reinforce their using the text to support their assertions
 - Don’t be afraid to **read the text aloud** and/or ask students to do so. Bring the language of texts under study into the discussion explicitly.
 - **Use media other than words** (drawing, diagrams, etc.) as tools for students to express understanding, question, summarize.
- Remember that students are working at the limits of their own mastery of the materials/ideas/methods. Validate this by helping them **identify specific challenges** they are experiencing with the texts/tasks at hand. Discuss strategies for tackling those challenges.
- **Pay attention to pace/speed**
 - Are you talking too quickly? too slowly?
 - Are you giving students time and support to engage with the material?

After Discussion

- Provide some **closure or overarching reflection**
 - Try to summarize key points or questions
 - Make connections to what you have addressed before and what might be coming next (provide continuity)
- Sometimes, especially **when discussions are rich and messy**, you don’t finish them in a day, and while you might want to wrap up to bring closure to that particular class period, you may also want to **return to the discussion in some way next class**. That could involve simply recapping key points or articulating next questions posed by the discussion, or it might involve devoting further time to discussion, perhaps with some kind of new focus generated by that initial discussion.

Strategies for Facilitating Discussions

Dealing with Particular Challenges:

If students don't understand a question and seem to be stuck (versus simply thinking)

- ⇒ Rephrase the question—say it differently; don't simply say exactly the same thing again. Then give them time to think again.

If students seem uncomfortable talking in a large group

- ⇒ Ask students to write their ideas down before you ask them to speak (ask them to take one minute and jot a response to a question, a definition, etc.).
- ⇒ Give students opportunities to talk in smaller groups before talking as a whole class (have focused questions for the groups and indicate that students will be expected to report back or draw on what they have discussed in the small groups).

If one or two students dominate and want to keep moving in new directions to the confusion of all

- ⇒ Try to acknowledge that they have interesting points but make explicit that it is important that everyone who wants to has the chance to contribute and that you need to keep focused (and state what you see as the focus)
- ⇒ Use some of the strategies on the handout called “Activities that Involve Movement and/or High Levels of Participation”
- ⇒ Use pointed questions/invitations

Invitations to include as-yet unheard voices:

- “Does anyone want to speak who hasn't yet have a chance to contribute?”
- “Amy, I know you wrote about this in your reflection. Can you add any thoughts?”

Invitations to different perspectives:

- “Does anyone have a different perspective on that issue?”
- “Did someone go about solving this problem in a different way?”
- “Did anyone have a different interpretation of the reading?”

Invitations to reflect, share, then include another's perspective:

- A variation on Think/Pair/Share, ask students to reflect briefly in writing, share their thoughts with a partner, then find something in what their partner said or made them think of to share with the class
- If students are not cooperating with class norms and your requirements
 - ⇒ Set them straight early. Public humiliation is always a bad choice, but you can ask them to see you outside of class and clarify your expectations. Try to enlist their constructive participation; try asking what they hope to get out of the discussions and what they think the best way might be for them to get that while also considering the needs of other students in the class.
- If you have very quiet students, especially in a class where participation is a key part of the grade
 - ⇒ Talk to them one on one, in conference, about strategies for getting into discussion. Begin this conversation by observing neutrally that they are quiet in class (“I notice that you tend to be very quiet in class.”) Then just wait quietly; let them lead the conversation. Your goal is first to learn how they are experiencing discussion, then to talk about strategies that would support them to participate. When you get to the second task, ask if there are strategies they have used in the past that worked for them.