Leading Effective Discussions
In the Classroom[*]

Why Is This Important?

♣ Lectures and classroom discussions are about equally effective in helping students acquire factual and conceptual knowledge

♣ However, participating in discussions is more effective than listening to lectures in helping students:

  o Develop problem-solving skills

  o Retain knowledge for a longer period of time, and

  o Transfer knowledge to new and different situations

♣ Discussions also have more positive results than lectures in:

  o Changing students' attitudes

  o Motivating students to pursue further learning on a topic

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How Do You Facilitate Effective Classroom Discussions?

♣ Prepare students to participate in discussions by:

- o Explaining why you think class discussions are important, how you plan to use them during your course and (if you plan to do so) how you will grade students on participation in class discussions

- o Discussing the various methods and ground rules you will use to encourage participation (e.g., voluntary hand-raising, random calling on students by the lecturer, by seating order, permitting students to say, "I pass; please call on me later," etc.)

- o Creating an environment that encourages students to feel comfortable about speaking during class discussions (e.g., if possible, arranging chairs so that students can see each other; reassuring students that all questions and different viewpoints are valued; getting to know your students and helping them get to know each other; breaking large classes down into manageable smaller groups for discussions)

- o Alerting students if a class discussion will be based on a reading assignment … Asking students to take notes on the reading and/or write down some thoughts on questions that you intend to pose during the discussion … Asking students to write down questions to pose during the discussion

- o Listing out and posting the key questions that you want to cover during the discussion

♣ Ask meaningful, well-constructed questions that have *multiple valid answers* and will provoke discussion, while helping students explore the key concepts you want to cover. Types of questions include:

o Application questions that help students apply concepts, principles or generalizations in different contexts – *e.g., "How can you apply what you have learned about adult learning theory to your own teaching practices?*

o Analytical questions that encourage students to pull apart different elements of the material they have been learning about to draw comparisons and contrasts, identify causes and effects; reason through explanations or arguments; etc. – *e.g., "What are the key differences between the traditional noting system of teaching and the system of teaching you are learning about in this class?"*

o Synthesis questions that require students to integrate the elements of the material in new and different ways – *e.g., "Which of the interactive methods for engaging students during lecture sessions do you think might work best together in a lecture on art appreciation?"*

o Evaluation questions that require students to make informed judgments, using some combination of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis and/or synthesis – *e.g., "Which method of teaching is more effective in your opinion and why?"*

o Problem-solving questions that challenge students to use their creativity, as well as the knowledge they have gained – *e.g., "How would you go about designing a new course in your subject area that involves all of the levels of cognitive functioning in Bloom's taxonomy?"*

♣ Facilitate and manage student discussion by:

o Providing a common experience to get the discussion started – e.g., a reading, film, tape, exercise

o Asking stimulating questions

o Giving students time to reflect on your question rather than rushing to "fill the silence"

o Monitoring participation so that you don't call on the same few eager students too frequently

o Encouraging non-participating students to join the discussion by requesting that they read something out loud or posing a question that you know they will be able to answer directly to them

o Demonstrating your valuing of all student contributions in appropriate ways – e.g., praising correct answers, letting students know when they have brought up a perspective that is interesting/different/new/etc. for you, asking students to expand on their answers when they are incomplete, helping students understand the implications of an answer that seems wrong to you, asking students to explain their answers when they are unclear to you, asking other students to comment on a student's answer that is incomplete, unclear or incorrect rather than correcting the student directly, asking students to help each other with their answers

o Asking students for help when the room remains silent – e.g., Do they need clarification on what you are asking for? … Are you using terms with which they are unfamiliar? … Is the question too complicated?

o Leaving time to summarize key points before moving on to another topic

o Asking students to summarize the main points rather than always doing this yourself

o Having students write down the 3 most important things they learned from the discussion, as well as any questions they still have and pass these in anonymously … Reviewing these comments and questions and addressing misconceptions and questions during the next class.