

Using Discussion Questions Effectively

Compiled by Lauren V. Kachorek with help from Kirsten Olds, CRLT, 2009

GENERAL STRATEGIES

Start with Open-Ended Questions – these types of questions help begin a discussion because they encourage multiple viewpoints. They also tend to invite students to share their opinions, which can generate additional topics or define crucial issues. “What struck you as most successful / problematic about the characters in *Little Women*?”

Ask Questions with Multiple Answers – this is the most straightforward method of encouraging student participation because it removes the students’ fear of answering incorrectly. Instead of asking, “Why is the ending of *Little Women* a good one?” ask, “What are other ways in which Louisa May Alcott might have ended *Little Women*?” While this type of question does not ask students to recall details from the ending of the book, it does promote critical thinking because it forces them to put together an argument that the details of the book will support.

Utilize Follow-Up Questions – when students respond with an answer that is very brief or short, don’t miss the opportunity to ask a follow-up question: “Can you tell me more?” or “Why do you say that?” or “How did you come to that conclusion?”

Know Which Types of Questions Do What – certain types of questions will elicit different responses from your students. Identify the purpose of your question and plan to ask it at an appropriate time. For example, introductory questions may ask students to recall factual material or comprehend difficult ideas in the reading while higher-order questions may ask students to apply, analyze, synthesize, or evaluate the material.

Relate the Material to Students’ Lives – often it can be advantageous to ask questions that are only loosely related to the topic at hand. Consider asking questions that will encourage students to relate on a more personal level: “How does Holden Caulfield appeal to a contemporary audience? Did any of you relate to his struggles?” or “Did this character remind you of anybody you know?”

Ask About the Content, Not the Participant – instead of saying, “Does anybody have any questions?”, “Does everyone understand?” or “Does everyone see how I came to this conclusion?” try to frame this question in language that doesn’t single out the student for his/her lack of comprehension. Instead try, “What is the most difficult part of understanding this concept?” or “Could someone rephrase what I just said?” or “What were other possibilities people were considering when I shared this analysis with you?” Asking students to rephrase reminds them that nobody has a perfect understanding of the concept and that often there is no single “right” way to look at an argument or interpretation.

Use Small Groups—pair students or group them in threes or fours, and let them discuss a question or topic.

This encourages participation from all students, even those who may be hesitant speaking up in a whole-class discussion.

Pause after Asking a Question—allow 10 to 20 seconds wait time after asking a question that requires higher-level skills (such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation). For a complicated question, you might also ask students to paraphrase the question in their own words before responding.

Decentralize—encourage students to talk to and respond to one another. Use a “rotating chair” model in which students call on each other instead of you calling on them.

OPENING DISCUSSIONS

How you open your discussion can set the tone and momentum of the day's class.

Self-Presentation – how the discussion leader approaches a discussion section has a large impact on how the activity will go. Are you interested in what you are teaching? If so, let it show! If not, is there a way you could introduce the content that will make it more exciting for your students?

Frame the Discussion – this is your best chance to take information from the last lesson or lecture and connect it to THIS discussion. Tell students 1) Where they have been 2) Where they are at the moment, and 3) Where they are going.

Clarify your Discussion Goals – Instructors can let students know what the goals are for a particular discussion section. Write them on the blackboard for later reference.

Offer a Shared Point of Departure – Begin a discussion by giving students a place to jump off. For example, you could start class with an introductory type of question, a particular passage from a text, or you could ask them to write a minute paper on a topic of your choosing. Better yet, you could use email or cTools to ask students to respond to a question the night before – thereby allowing you to begin with an example in their own words.

Model Behaviors for the Students—model the skills you want to develop, including active listening and civil and courteous communication.

CLOSING DISCUSSIONS

How you close a discussion can determine what students will “take with them” from the exercise.

Return to the Discussion Goals – tell students what you have accomplished during your discussion, and what they may expect for the next discussion or lecture. If possible, try to clarify how the discussion relates to the lectures or the readings.

Summarize Important Points – Identify three important ideas that came from the discussion and let students know why they were important. Or use a [Classroom Assessment Technique](#) to gauge students' comprehension, synthesis, or application of the material.

Ask Students a Closing Question – this sets the stage for the next discussion or lecture and could be a good way to help students relate the discussion content to future exams.

Assign Reading or Homework – another good way to close a discussion is to summarize what you expect your students to accomplish before you see them next.

Make Yourself Available – Often students have lingering questions or ideas about the topic that were not fully articulated in a discussion setting. Remind them that you are available after class, by email, or in office hours if they have any questions.

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