

Nine Ways to Improve Class Discussions

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I once heard class discussions described as “transient instructional events.” They pass through the class, the course, and the educational experiences of students with few lingering effects. Ideas are batted around, often with forced participation; students don’t take notes; and then the discussion ends—it runs out of steam or the class runs out of time. If asked a few days later about the exchange, most students would be hard-pressed to remember anything beyond what they themselves might have said, if that. So this post offers some simple suggestions for increasing the impact of the discussions that occur in our courses.

1. Be more focused and for less time – It’s easy to forget that students are newcomers to academic discourse. Academics can go on about a topic of interest for days; hours, if it’s a department meeting. Students aren’t used to exchanges that include points, counterpoints, and connections to previous points with references to research, related resources, and previous experience. Early on, students do better with short discussions—focused and specific. Think 10 minutes, maybe 15.



2. Use better hooks to launch the discussion – Usually discussion starts with a question. That works if it’s a powerful question—one immediately recognized as a “[good question](#).” Prompts of that caliber require thoughtful preparation; they don’t usually pop into our minds the moment we need them. But questions aren’t the only option. A pithy quotation, a short scenario that requires content application, a hypothetical case or situation, a synopsis of a relevant current event—all of these can jump-start a discussion.

3. Pause – Stop the discussion and ask students to think about what’s been said so far, or ask them to write down what struck them as a key idea, a new insight, a question still unanswered, or maybe where they think the discussion should go next. Think short pauses, 30 seconds, maybe a minute.

4. Have note takers – Ask whether there are two or three students who’d be willing to take notes during the discussion. Then post their notes on the course website or otherwise distribute them. This should count as class participation! It gives introverts a way to contribute comfortably. You might encourage some extrovert who has tendency to over-participate to make your day by volunteering to quietly take copious notes, which he or she could use to summarize the discussion when it ends.

5. Talk less or not at all – Too many classroom discussions are still dominated by teacher talk. You will talk less if you assign yourself a recorder role. You’ll key in on the essence of comments, record the examples, and list the questions. You’ll be listening closely and will probably hear more than you usually do because you aren’t thinking about what to say next. Or you can function as the discussion facilitator. Recognize those who are volunteering. Encourage others to speak. Point out good comments that merit response. Ask what questions the conversation is raising. Challenge those with different views to share them. Do everything you can to make it a good student discussion.

6. End with something definitive – Return to the hook that launched the discussion. Ask some students to write a one-sentence summary of the discussion. Ask other students to list the questions the discussion has answered. And ask a third group to identify unanswered questions that emerged during the

discussion. Finally, use what students have written to help them bring closure to the discussion.

7. Use the discussion – Keep referring to it! “Remember that discussion we had about X? What did we conclude?” Refer to individual comments made during the discussion. “Paula had an interesting insight about Y. Who remembers what she said? Does it relate to this topic?” And if you really want students to listen up and take discussions seriously, use a comment made in the discussion as the frame for a short essay question on the next exam or quiz.

8. Invite students to suggest discussion topics – If the suggestion is good, reward the student with a few bonus points and ask him or her to launch the discussion by explaining why it’s a topic that merits discussion.

9. Discuss discussions – Briefly is fine. “Why do teachers use them? What keeps everyone listening? How do they help us learn?” Or do a debriefing of a discussion that just occurred. “So, the discussion we just had, say we’d like to improve it. What would you recommend?”

I welcome your suggestions for making the most of discussions. Please share in the comment box.

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