



teaching learning committee
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Suggestions for Facilitating Discussions

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Discussion is central to active student learning in many courses. Nevertheless, facilitating a good discussion remains a challenge, even for experienced faculty. Listed below are suggestions that have been useful for teaching the College Seminar (CLS101V), a course that uses discussion as the central method of helping students strengthen critical thinking and communication skills. Although the seminar is a small course where all students are expected to participate in discussion, many of the suggestions apply to larger courses as well.

The following may sound like a list of orders—“Ask questions!” “Don’t lecture!”— but they are meant as suggestions for consideration rather than rules to follow.

- First, when the goal is to have a good class discussion, the facilitator should not lecture. Most students will happily remain silent as long as the professor does the talking. They may prefer a lecture to the hard work of participating in discussion themselves.
- A good class discussion involves students talking with students, not just with the professor. Thus, facilitators should resist the temptation to respond to every student comment.
- Ask questions, especially questions that call for answers involving judgment and explanation.
- Practice wait time. Since waiting even a few seconds for students to respond can seem a long and deadly silence, waiting may take practice and determination.
- Clarify issues under discussion. If students are repeating the same positions and arguments, summarize them, ask if anyone has anything to add, then move on. Or use the propositions under discussion as subjects for debate.
- Point to the text and help students learn how to use texts as evidence for their conclusions, e.g. *“Can we find a passage that supports that interpretation? Was there a passage in the text that made you come to this conclusion?”*

- Read passages out loud. Follow up with questions about the passage, or ask students to explain the passage in their own words.
- Let students ask the question that will open the discussion, and ask them to facilitate discussion until their question is adequately addressed.
- Ask students to form small groups and come up with several questions they would like addressed in class discussion. Put them on the board or ask students to write them down. Questions might be grouped around common themes and then discussed or picked at random for discussion. Since the questions they come from students, students will likely be interested in discussing them.
- On the first day of class, lay ground rules for a polite and safe discussion environment. This includes treating others with respect, avoiding personal attacks or disparaging others' questions. (In a survey of CLS101 students, the most commonly cited barrier to participating in class discussion was fear of being ridiculed.) Also, state your expectations for discussion. If everyone is expected to participate or if part of the grade depends on participating in discussion, make that clear.
- Allow and encourage students to play devil's advocate. By announcing that they are playing devil's advocate, students can safely challenge someone else's opinion without seeming to criticize.
- Ask the students to suggest ways to improve discussions. Use anonymous short evaluations/instant feedback at the end of the hour to find out how people think the discussions are going. "*What do you like about our discussions? What causes you to participate? What makes you not want to participate? How can we improve class discussions?*" Sometimes the students are quite angry that people come to class unprepared. It can be helpful to read such comments to the class.
- Talk with students who dominate discussion outside of class. You might compliment them on their enthusiasm, but also emphasize the importance of everyone participating. It is good practice for students who dominate discussion to spend a few class sessions just listening, or speaking only to ask questions intended to help other students develop their ideas.

- Work with quiet/silent students outside of class. Ask what would help them participate more. Do they like to prepare before speaking? Do they have trouble “getting into” a fast moving discussion? They may welcome your calling on them.
- Break the class into groups—silent students will often speak in a smaller group. Give the groups a question to discuss and ask the groups to report to the whole class.
- Have a debate. Some faculty assign students to defend a position contrary to their own opinion. This is good practice.
- Save 5-10 minutes at the end of class and ask each person who has not participated to make a comment about the discussion. Students are allowed to pass, but some will have interesting insights that show they were engaged, even though silent.