

Strategies for Cultivating Effective Discussions

Leading an effective class discussion depends on many variables and requires introspection, attention to the tendencies of students, and extensive preparation. There is not a set formula for running a perfect discussion. As an activity that relies on the unscripted participation of students, discussions almost always bring with them a certain level of unpredictability. Below are a few strategies that can offer some structure to that unpredictability and help increase the likelihood of success.

1. **Be transparent about the role of discussion in the class.** Articulate to your students the purpose of the activity as it relates to the student learning objectives and their role in discussions.
2. **Set clear expectations for participation.** Communicate expectations for how discussions work in your classroom early and allow students to practice often using a balance of small-group and whole-class discussions.
3. **Emphasize your learning goals.** Clearly connect course and lesson learning goals to the discussion and reiterate those goals if the discussion goes off track.
4. **Make regulating student participation a common practice.** Practice strategies for curtailing discussion “dominators” and making space for other students throughout the semester.
5. **Use multiple channels for engagement.** Offer students multiple ways to participate that include non-verbal options (i.e., follow-up emails, pause questions). Never ask a student to speak for the viewpoints of a specific identity group.
6. **Model and teach appropriate language.** When necessary, discuss appropriate terms and language students should use before a discussion begins. If a student knowingly or unknowingly uses a term that is inappropriate, gently correct them and provide historical context if necessary. Avoid automatically assuming nefarious intentions.
7. **Give students material for inspiration and exploration.** Use carefully selected readings, sources, videos, to ground the discussion. Use the text to pull in students who are hesitant to engage and encourage students to return to the text if the conversation veers off course.
8. **Avoid catching students off guard.** Distribute questions in advance so students can prepare and think ahead or start a discussion off with a planned time for individual reflection and writing. If you plan to call on students, let them know, and do so compassionately rather than punitively.
9. **Address offensive, exclusive, or inappropriate comments directly and immediately.** Anticipate these moments and practice possible responses with colleagues. It is helpful to have general language in your syllabus that indicates how you will handle disruptive behaviors.
10. **Tie it all together.** Take the time to lead students through an intentional conclusion to any discussion. Revisit breakthroughs, impasses, misunderstandings, and conclusions before the class breaks for the day. Avoid assuming all students came to the same conclusions.

If you have further questions reach out for a consultation:
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