

Class Discussion

Do you get “the silent treatment” when you try to generate class discussion? This article presents a lot of practical tips on getting students to participate in class discussion. Hopefully some will fit your situation.

To Think About

Set up a mindset of inquiry by beginning every lecture with one or more questions you’re trying to answer.

An interesting way to introduce topics you will cover in a class and to find out students' assumptions is to ask students to jot down answers to some questions on their own and then combine answers in a small group before presenting them to the class. As you present visuals, ask students what they see before you tell them what you see. As you show tabular data ask, "What do these data show? Where would you start? What questions do these data answer and how?" Use these devices to help students think about a problem as you introduce it. Wait for them to answer, rather than answering your own questions to avoid awkward silence—otherwise their reluctance to participate is reinforced.

Encourage discussion by asking questions as you teach, so lecturing becomes a conversation. Refer to assigned readings so their purpose is clear. Ask questions about the readings from time to time, and consider having individual students or groups prepare short presentations giving their interpretations of the readings.

End class with a series of questions that your lecture has raised or left unanswered, rather than summarizing “what we have learned today.” Ask students to volunteer these questions, and talk about what can be done to prepare to deal with them in the next class.

Set discussion expectations and increase student participation by involving students in setting discussion policies. Talk with the class to set ground rules for discussion, for such things as how people will indicate they are ready to speak, the order in which people will speak, how to be given adequate opportunity to reply to criticisms of one’s ideas without interrupting, appropriate tone, disputing ideas while respecting those holding them, number of times one person can contribute to one discussion, how often to use discussion, etc. Start the process by having students recall their most vivid experiences as discussion participants and making a list of agreed-upon characteristics of a good discussion. For each characteristic, get three specific suggestions to ensure that the characteristic is present. Or, use the “Golden Rule” approach of asking how they would like to be spoken to in a discussion, and use their responses to create a code of conduct, moving from general declarations to specific behaviours. For more details on conducting this activity, see Brookfield, p. 55ff.

Let students in on your teaching methods rationale. Explain your reasons for varying the traditional lecture style from the point of view of how it benefits them, specifically that cognitive psychology research shows that deep understanding that will enable to recall and use information after they have completed the course comes by explaining their understanding of concepts to others and refining them as they defend them against other students' understandings (Entwistle, 21). Students more willingly participate in class if they understand the rationale behind an approach that may be unfamiliar, and will hopefully begin to think more about how they learn and move down the road towards becoming self-managing learners.

Use discussion and modeling to teach students the skills needed to participate. Students may not yet have the skills required to participate effectively. A discussion about characteristics of effective participation can reveal undeveloped areas in your students: ask them how they have participated in previous courses, and whether they could use some assistance.

Don't fear silence. Tell students to use it productively. Use short periods of reflective silence as models for students to stop and think before contributing to discussion. Discussion is not continuous chatter, and pausing to think and collect ones' thoughts is part of the process. Tell students you need a minute to think about what you want to say next. Tell students they can use this time to think about what has happened in the previous 20 minutes and write down the most important or significant thing, the most puzzling assertion, or the question they would most like to ask. (It's a good idea to have students briefly collect thoughts on paper before contributing.) Students can then share their questions and ideas with other students in pairs, or with the class, or write them on paper and give to the instructor, who will read a random selection aloud.

Invite discussion and provoke critical thinking by deliberately introducing alternative perspectives. You could dramatize this by standing in different locations at the front when espousing different perspectives, and address other imaginary selves at these locations with "Student Name, what you're omitting is..." or "Of course, Student Name, you could represent it completely differently if you argued that..." Or, have colleagues with differing perspectives come and present them. The goal of these techniques is to challenge students to consider alternative views of the same set of facts, something that aids good discussion.

Introduce "assumption hunting." Model this first by listing assumptions upon which lecture assertions are made. Then have students hunt for the underlying assumptions on which their assertions are based.

Introduce "buzz groups" based on questions that invite students to make judgments on the relative merits, relevance, or usefulness of elements in the lecture. Some such questions may be:

- What is the most contentious question you have heard in today's lecture?
- The most important point?
- What question would you most like to have answered on this topic?
- Which assumption is the most poorly supported?

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- Which point is the most obscure or ambiguous?

Things to avoid:

- Don't start the discussion with a min-lecture. (This is different from lecturing followed by discussion then lecturing some more, which of course is fine.)
- Don't start the discussion with vague general questions, like "What do you think? Would anyone like to react? Who would like to start?"
- Don't always rely on the same few talkative students to start the discussion. Students will settle into a passive routine of letting those few carry the discussion and disengaging.
- Don't fear silence. Don't jump in to answer the question. Invite students to write down what they're thinking as a way of organizing their thoughts.

Things to do to encourage discussion participation:

- **Acknowledge nervousness** and fear of looking foolish and affirm that it's the quality of the thought, not the verbal polish that counts. By "acknowledge, I mean state specifically that this is what is happening. Such frank explanation helps students become more reflective about the discussion process and helps deflate the silent dread many may feel. This will also hopefully dispel the disengaging notion that discussion participants get high marks by impressing the instructor through glib chattiness, without necessarily understanding things completely.
- **Use a conversational tone** to create an atmosphere that encourages student participation by affirming student contributions and not criticizing student questions or comments in front of the class. Students take a risk when they talk and they need to know from what you say and your body language -- whether you hold yourself in a stiff or relaxed manner, for example -- that you respect them as students and value their participation. Consider moving closer to the students rather than speaking from behind the podium.
- **Let students answer questions.** When a student asks a question, instead of answering it yourself, ask for an answer from other members of the class.
- **Ask clarifying questions.** ("Can you say that another way? Is there a good example of that? What do you mean by that? Can you explain the term you just used? Is there another illustration of your point?")
- **Ask questions that request more evidence.** ("How do you know that? What data or research is that claim based on? What does the author say that supports your argument? What evidence would you give to someone who doubted your interpretation?")
- **Link and extend student statements.** ("Is there a connection between what you're saying and what N said a couple of minutes ago? How does your idea connect with N's earlier idea? How does your observation relate to what the group said previously? Does your idea challenge or support what we're saying? How does your contribution add to what has been said?")

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- **Make hypothetical changes to examples, problems,** etc. to make students draw on their knowledge and experience to generate possible outcomes. (“How might The Maritime provinces be different if they had declined to join Confederation? How might the move to voluntary airline safety compliance from mandatory government inspection and enforcement affect airline safety and profitability? If subatomic particles exhibited the characteristics of waves only, how would that affect our experience of matter at our level? If a new medicine were developed that would cure arthritis but cause a fatal reaction in 1% of those who took it, would you want it to be released to the public?”)
 - **Use cause-and-effect questions.** (“How would a 2 degree Celsius rise in average worldwide temperature affect ocean levels in Halifax and St. John’s? If we increase pressure on an inert gas, what will the effect be on its physical state?”)
 - **Make interventions that encourage more discussion.** You want to encourage thoughtful student discourse with each other, facilitated by you. Too many leading questions from you make the exercise more of a recitation rather than the exchange and modification of ideas and understanding. Develop a repertoire of facilitating responses, such as reflective statements and re-statements (not questions), non-verbal signals of encouragement, spoken validation, and expressions of how ideas fit together or conflict with each other. Create a student role of “designated listener” who will periodically restate in their own words the main ideas and how they are connected and/or conflict with each other, and rotate this role around the class to different students from time to time.
 - **Use class poll results to generate discussion.** Use clickers or coloured paper to vote on answers to questions (have the question distractors be based on common misconceptions), or have a class twitter feed. Show the results to students and discuss possible misconceptions. Have students defend their answers to each other in pairs or triads. Ask a similar question and see if the number of correct answers increases.
 - **Use online discussion comments to generate in-class discussion.** Set up online discussions in which students participate outside of class and refer to posts in class as discussion generators.
 - **Make sure everyone can hear.** Repeat student questions and answers as necessary, or delegate this to a student with a strong speaking voice.

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