Leading a Discussion
University of Maine Graduate TA Orientation ~ August 28, 2019
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Note to participants: This sessions simulates different discussion formats and experiences. You will be participating in discussions about discussions. As you move through the different parts of this session, please take time to reflect on your own participation and consider how this may inform your future facilitation of discussions. For example consider the following questions:

- How does discussion begin and what is your reaction to knowing you will be a part of the conversation?
- How are conversation stimulated? Are materials and questions provided? How does that affect the flow of discussion and your participation?
- Who is talking/not talking? What other ways of participating are you observing (e.g., taking notes)?
- What different formats of discussion are you observing/participating in? (How) Does each format affect your participation and learning? What are you seeing about others' participation and learning?
- How are the facilitators assessing engagement with ideas during the discussion (e.g., listening in, asking for reports out)? How are facilitators engaging with ideas shared in the discussions?

Leading a discussion - Session plan

Goal: Demonstrate and critically reflect on principles and practices of leading discussions that enhance student learning

Basic idea: Model jigsaw with the big question being: How do you prepare for and facilitate a discussion that actually enhances learning? At the end of the session, each group shares their "guide" for leading a discussion (dominos map can be used to document synthesis with groups)

Materials needed:

- Short readings/handouts (no more than 1 page) for each "station"
- Handout/domino map for "mixed" groups
- Scratch paper & pens/pencils

Format/timing of the session:

- Form groups by counting off, 1-to-6
- 15 minutes at stations/expert groups (see stations below): read, write, share in group;
- Create mixed groups (each new group should have one person from each "station")
- 15 minutes sharing in mixed expert groups: What makes discussion work?
- 10 minutes to create dominos map in mixed expert groups: this is the "guide to leading a discussion" that will be shared with the large group; nominate someone from the group to report
- 20 minutes – share & ask questions/large discussion
    - How can you extend the impact of the discussion for students? How can they bring this knowledge to future assignments and learning?
    - What can you take away from this session to your own teaching practice?

Discussion "stations"

- **Station 1: Why is discussion a helpful strategy for learning** (possible short reading: https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/students-learn-participation-class-discussion/)
- **Station 2: Alignment** of goals, assessment, activities/discussion structure
- **Station 3: Equity and inclusion of voices** (adapt from here: https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190719_inclusive_teaching and here: https://instructionalmoves.gse.harvard.edu/calling-students-equitable-ways)
- **Station 4: Instructor's role** (regulate, rephrase, synthesize; selections from: https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190523-ClassDiscussion)
- **Station 5: The experience** – students will sketch out their experiences w/ discussion in school; there will be more open and more directed prompt questions; (one more directed question may be about what are the challenges and opportunities of opening a discussion w/ simply "let's talk about the readings?" & how having a discussion format may help)
- **Station 6: Discussion strategies and activities** (select from here: https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/speaking-listening-techniques/)

STATION 1: How does discussion enhance learning?

- Faculty Focus | Higher Ed Teaching & Learning - https://www.facultyfocus.com -

How Do Students Learn from Participation in Class Discussion?

Elise J. Dallimore, PhD, Julie H. Hertenstein, DBA, and Marjorie B. Platt, PhD

Despite numerous arguments favoring active learning, especially class discussion, instructors sometimes worry that discussion is an inefficient or ineffective way for students to learn. What happens when students make non-value added, irrelevant, or inaccurate contributions? What about comments from non-experts that may obfuscate rather than clarify understanding? What about students who speak only to earn participation credit rather than contribute substantively to the discussion?

In our recent study, 246 students shared their understanding of how participation in class discussions affected their learning. More than 70% of students perceived a positive relationship between their own participation and learning but additionally discussed the value of other students' comments for their learning. Finally, a number of students verbalized that when participation is required, they prepare more, and this preparation actually increases their learning.

The students further articulated five ways that participation enhances learning. To summarize, participation:

- increases engagement
    - require participation (prepare students by asking them to bring relevant examples from the media or take a stance on an issue)
    - connect discussion to students' experiential knowledge
- helps students retain and remember information
    - ask for end of class reflection in which students identify key concepts
    - ask students to identify the contributions of their classmates
- confirms what they have already learned
    - select examples and ask students to apply concepts to analyze the examples
    - present students with "problems"/case studies for group work
- provides clarification of prior learning
    - ask and answer follow-up questions & rephrase students' contributions
    - provide both written and oral feedback
- deepens their understanding especially through hands-on and application-based learning opportunities
    - ask higher-order thinking questions & begin with an overarching "big" question
    - don't forget to end with a synthesis, connecting the broader course objectives with the specific learning outcomes of the discussion and highlight again students' contributions

STATION 2: Aligning discussion with learning goals and outcomes

Like all learning activities, discussions need to be planned and purposeful. Planning a discussion involves consideration of both what content students should be learning/developing a deeper understanding of and what conversational processes should students be practicing (shaping the format of the discussion). Additionally, instructors should consider how the discussion aligns with the overall class goals and flow and how they will assess students' performance and/or participation during the discussion. Assessment does not have to be formal and summative (e.g., a test), it can be done through observations or student reflections, as appropriate to the objectives of the discussion. For example, if a goal of the discussion is to analyze a social process by identifying the key elements/factors and connections among them, a suitable assessment might be that students produce concept map as a result of small discussion. One of the ways in which such alignment can be ensured is to follow the principles of backward design as described in the excerpt below (Barkley, 2010)

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Barkley, E. F. (2010). *Student engagement techniques*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

STATION 3: Equity and Inclusion in Discussions

Excerpted and adapted from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* Advice Guide (https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190719_inclusive_teaching#3)

Teaching inclusively means embracing student diversity in all forms — race, ethnicity, gender, disability, socioeconomic background, ideology, even personality traits like introversion — as an asset. It means designing and teaching courses in ways that foster talent in all students, but especially those who come from groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

Get comfortable with periods of silence in your classroom. *Think-pair-share* is a gateway technique to active learning. (...) The thinking time is crucial for students to form and own their individual thoughts before pairing off and sharing. Otherwise, you risk seeing some students monopolize the discussion and others - overwhelmed and left behind. That could cause quiet students to prematurely accept other people's ideas before considering their own, and lead those dominating the discussion to think their contributions are more valuable. (...) We urge you to get comfortable with the silence so that all students have the time they need to think. Tell the class, "I'll give you two minutes to think or write silently, and then I'll prompt you to pair up with your classmates." Be prepared to repeat that every time you use this technique. If you know that you feel discomfort with silence (most of us do!), you may want to use a timer to regulate it.

Add structure to small-group discussions. A classwide discussion has its benefits, but not all students have the desire, confidence, or chance to participate. Small groups give students a low-pressure way to vet their ideas with peers. (...) Yet this technique is not as inclusive as it could be, if you leave it to chance that the teams will function well (low structure). Here are some ways to add structure to small-group discussion:

- Assign and rotate roles (e.g., reporter, skeptic, facilitator)
- Take time to teach students how to participate in small groups. Be explicit about some of the "rules," such as exchanging names and putting away their cellphones or laptops.
- Provide clear instructions on a screen or worksheet. (...) Many faculty members give a single oral prompt, but that leaves behind students who have hearing loss, who have learning differences, or who simply need to be reminded about the task at hand.

Allow anonymous participation. Not all participation and engagement in your course needs to be spoken. (...) Students who are introverts, who feel that they don't belong in a college classroom, or who hold a minority opinion on some issue may need to engage with the class in other modes besides public speaking. (...) Here are two ways to use unspoken, anonymous participation in class:

- Offer a prompt and ask students to write an anonymous response on a notecard. Ask them to swap cards, and then swap again. Start a class discussion with a few students reading aloud the card in front of them.
- Choose a classroom-response system (clickers, web-based polling) or a discussion board in which students are anonymous to one another but not to you as the instructor.

Slow down the dominant talkers (talk with people from Group D for strategies). Dominant talkers are typically more extroverted and willing to process material aloud. They may wander around a topic, figuring out what they think as they speak. More-introverted students need to gather their thoughts before sharing them in class. If suddenly called upon to speak without having had the opportunity to process their thoughts, introverts may perceive the instructor as engaging in hostile behavior.

STATION 4: Instructor's Role in Facilitating Discussions

Excerpted and adapted from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* Advice Guide (https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190523-ClassDiscussion)

Ask better questions. (...) Asking questions for which there is a single correct response may be a good way to check whether your students did the reading, but it's not an effective discussion starter. A good question is one that allows for multiple perspectives. It shows that the topic can be viewed from a variety of angles, even though they may not all be equally relevant or helpful. Here are four ways to do that:

- Frame the question to inspire a range of answers. Don't ask, "When did President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation take effect?" — a question with a single correct answer. Instead, ask: "Why did Lincoln issue the Emancipation Proclamation in the fall of 1862 but make it effective on January 1, 1863? What explains the delay? What factors led to the choice of these dates?"
- Ask students to apply a variety of theories or perspectives to a particular example. In a criminology course you might ask, "We've covered five theories that offer explanations of why people commit crime. Take the case of Bernie Madoff, the financier convicted of running the largest Ponzi scheme and the largest financial fraud in U.S. history. Which of the five theories helps us understand a white-collar crime like this one? How does the theory help us make sense of Madoff's crime?"
- Conversely, after illustrating a topic or concept, ask students to provide their own example: "We've just covered social-learning theory, and I provided you with an illustration. Give me a different example of someone learning new behaviors through observing and imitating others. Where and when have you have observed this in your experience?"
- Ask about process, not content. In some fields, like science and mathematics, there often is a single correct response. So instead of asking questions that seek the correct answer, ask about the process: "Here's a new differential equation on the board. What is a good first step in solving this equation? Where do we begin?"

Set the stage on the first day. Many faculty members spend the first day of class checking names against the class roster and going over the syllabus in hopes of clarifying expectations and procedures. The professor's voice is the only one heard that day. If you spend your first class session in that manner, you're signaling that the norm in your course will be civil attention. If you try to change students' expectations after, say, the first three weeks, they are likely to be surprised and may not adapt well. Instead, establish on the first day that you want them participating regularly in class (and what that participation looks like).

Control the rhythm. One way to ensure broad participation — not just reining in the dominant talkers but opening up the floor — is to limit who can speak, and how often. How you do that can be fun, not just restrictive. For example, try using:

- Poker chips: As students enter the classroom, they each pick up three poker chips. When they speak, they place a poker chip in a basket. Once they've used up their three chips, they may no longer contribute. To make sure everyone participates, require all students to use up their chips by the end of class.

- Nerf balls: Use an object like a Nerf ball to give students greater ownership of the discussion. Only the person holding the Nerf ball is allowed to speak. When the speaker finishes, he or she selects who goes next by tossing the ball to a classmate.

Make sure they don't miss the big points. Students often find it difficult, especially in their first year of college, to discern when a key idea or an important nuance is being communicated during a class discussion. Especially in the midst of a vigorous debate, students easily lose track of what they're supposed to take away from the discussion. Among the ways to counter that tendency:

- Sometimes the simplest strategies work best — like asking a student to repeat a key idea while you write it on the board.
- When a student makes a crucial point, overtly emphasize it by saying, "That's it. Did everyone hear what Omar just said?"
- Summarize the discussion of one topic before moving on to the next. That can also help keep the discourse on track.
- Shine a light on the "muddiest" point. A tried-and-true assessment technique, known as the "Muddiest Point," can help you clarify challenging concepts in a discussion and, at the same time, give reluctant talkers an additional opportunity to participate. Here's how it works: In the last few minutes of class, students write a brief summary of the topic or idea that they felt was the least clear in that day's discussion. It is often helpful to directly ask them to summarize either the "muddiest" or the "most important" point. Collect their comments as they leave. Then, before the next class, review the responses to see which topics you should revisit.

STATION 5: Reflecting on Experiences of Discussion

Take the time to reflect on, sketch, and discuss your prior experiences of discussions (either as a facilitator/instructor or as a participant/student). Some questions you might want to consider include:

1. What was the context of the discussion?
2. What were the discussion topics and how were they selected?
3. What was your personal interest in the discussion?
4. How did you prepare for the discussion?
5. What happened during the discussion itself?
    a. What were the questions like and what was their effect on the conversation?
    b. What was the format/structure of the discussion, if there was one? How did that affect the flow, content, and participation in the conversation?
    c. Who participated and how?
    d. (How) Was the impact of the discussion further extended beyond the particular session?
6. What knowledge and/or feelings did you carry with you after the discussion?

STATION 6: Strategies/Formats for Discussions

Discussions improve learning participation when they are intentional and purposeful. One way in which such intentionality can be accomplished is through a planned format. The strategies below offer ideas for structuring discussions (excerpted and adapted from "The Cult of Pedagogy" blog, https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/speaking-listening-techniques/).

Strategies requiring some preparation

AFFINITY MAPPING: Give students a broad question or problem that is likely to result in lots of different ideas, such as "What were the impacts of the Great Depression?" Students generate responses by writing ideas on post-it notes (one idea per note) and placing them in no particular arrangement on a wall, whiteboard, or chart paper. Once lots of ideas have been generated, have students begin grouping them into similar categories, then label the categories and discuss why the ideas fit within them, how the categories relate to one another, and so on.

SNOWBALL DISCUSSION: Students begin in pairs, responding to a discussion question only with a single partner. After each person has had a chance to share their ideas, the pair joins another pair, creating a group of four. Pairs share their ideas with the pair they just joined. Next, groups of four join together to form groups of eight, and so on, until the whole class is joined up in one large discussion.

GALLERY WALK/Conver-stations: Stations or posters are set up around the classroom, on the walls or on tables. Small groups of students travel from station to station together, performing some kind of task or responding to a prompt, either of which will result in a conversation. Students can record and post their ideas using post-its, so that when the next groups come to this station, they can continue adding and/or responding to the previous conversation.

PINWHEEL DISCUSSION: Students are divided into 4 groups. Three of these groups are assigned to represent specific points of view. Members of the fourth group are designated as "provocateurs," tasked with making sure the discussion keeps going and stays challenging. One person from each group (the "speaker") sits in a desk facing speakers from the other groups, so they form a square in the center of the room. Behind each speaker, the remaining group members are seated: two right behind the speaker, then three behind them, and so on, forming a kind of triangle. From above, this would look like a pinwheel. The four speakers introduce and discuss questions they prepared ahead of time (this preparation is done with their groups). After some time passes, new students rotate from the seats behind the speaker into the center seats and continue the conversation. VARIATION: Students identify stakeholders on a controversial issue and groups of students are assigned stakeholder positions. Groups spend some time researching and discussing their assigned position, after which a "townhall" follows.

FISHBOWL: Two students sit facing each other in the center of the room; the remaining students sit in a circle around them. The two central students have a conversation based on a pre-determined topic and often using specific skills the class is practicing (such as asking follow-up questions, paraphrasing, or elaborating on another person's point). Students on the outside observe, take notes, or perform some other discussion-related task assigned by the teacher. VARIATION: A larger group of students (5-7) is assigned ahead of time to be "in the

fishbowl." These students prepare for their participation by taking and submitting reading notes and developing their own questions and/or selecting quotes, which are then used to generate discussion (pulled out of a fishbowl or some other container lottery style). After the inner circle has had some time to have a discussion, people from the "outer" circle/the audience enter the conversation with their questions, comments, examples, etc.

On-going strategies for facilitating discussion in the classroom

THINK-PAIR-SHARE: An oldie but a goodie, think-pair-share can be used any time you want to plug interactivity into a lesson: Simply have students think about their response to a question, form a pair with another person, discuss their response, then share it with the larger group. Because I feel this strategy has so many uses and can be way more powerful than we give it credit for, I devoted a whole post to think-pair-share; everything you need to know about it is right there.

THE TQE METHOD: This protocol has students come up with their own Thoughts, lingering Questions, and Epiphanies from an assigned reading. Teachers who have used this method say it has generated some of the richest conversations they have ever heard from students!

ONGOING CONVERSATIONS: This strategy places students into one-on-one conversations, getting them to learn each others' names better and create a track record of what they talked about. Excellent for classes where you want to assess for discussion and help students get more comfortable with each other. LISTENING PAIRS VARIATION: Students are paired and have to first decide who will "speak" first and who will "speak" second. Each student gets 1-2 minutes as a "speaker" - this time is for the student to use however they'd like (i.e., if they choose to be silent, they can do so). The listener is not to interrupt, interject, or even offer any non-verbal feedback during the "speaker's" time. Then, the roles switch. This variation is especially helpful for controversial topics and difficult conversations, as the "talking"/thinking time is essentially for processing rather than coming up with set answers. In on-going classes, it works best if this becomes a regular practice, with which the students are familiar.

Directions for discussion at your "Station" (12-15 minutes)
You are each visiting a "station" that has important information about how to facilitate discussions that support student inclusion and learning. Each station is provided with a brief handout that summarizes principles or practices of facilitating discussion, or prompts you to do so, based on your experience.

At your station, please follow these steps:

- Take a few minutes (2-3) to review/read the handout at your station
- Take a minute to jot down your thoughts about the content of the handout: What stands out to you? What questions do you have?
- Talk with the other "passengers" at your station (10 minutes): What are the key take-aways for you and how would you apply them to your own practice of facilitating discussions?

When prompted, form new groups with "passengers" from the other "stations." Each new group should have one "passenger" from each of the numbered stations (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). In your new group, discuss what the take-aways at each one of your stations were and try to formulate a "travel guide" to "Discussion Facilitation." You are tasked with generating your own rich responses to the question of: **How do you prepare for and facilitate a discussion that actually enhances learning?** You may use the "dominos map" to track and record your ideas (handout will be provided separately).

Before a discussion…

After a discussion…

How do you prepare for and facilitate a discussion that enhances learning?

During a discussion…