Effective Classroom Discussions[1]
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"The prototypic teaching method for active learning is discussion."
Svinicki and McKeachie (2011, p. 36)

What is a discussion? No one seems to define it. Lowman (1995, p. 159) suggested: "(A) useful classroom discussion...consists of student comments separated by frequent probes and clarifications by the teacher that facilitate involvement and development of thinking by the whole group." In this paper, *discussion* is defined as two-way, spoken communication between the teacher and the students, and more importantly, among the students themselves.

This paper primarily addresses discussion in small classes that meet one or more times a week, or in smaller classes that meet one or more times during the week as part of a course consisting of one or more large lectures each week. Discussions can take the form of recitation, dialogue, and guided or open exchanges. However, many of the suggestions in this paper should also be useful for shorter discussion sessions as part of a lecture class, since discussions are an effective way to get students to actively process what they learn in lectures (Lowman, 1995, p. 161).

Further Readings. This IDEA Paper relies heavily on three books: Davis (2009), *Tools for teaching* (pp. 95-111); Forsyth (2003), *The professor's guide to teaching* (pp. 89-103); Svinicki and McKeachie (2011), *McKeachie's teaching tips* (pp. 36-54).

Other helpful books devoted entirely to discussions include Bligh (2000), *What's the point in discussion?;* Brookfield and Preskill (2005), *Discussion as a way of teaching;* Christensen, Garvin, and Sweet, (Eds.) (1991), *Education for judgment: The artistry of discussion leadership;* Kustra and Potter (2008), *Leading effective discussions.*

Strengths and Limitations of Classroom Discussion Approaches

Discussions are well suited to facilitate a number of course goals. As stated by Lowman, "(I)n addition to clarifying content, teaching rational thinking, and highlighting affective judgments, discussion is particularly effective at increasing student involvement and active learning in classes" (1995, p. 164). Discussion engages students in what they are presented with in lectures or other class assignments. Discussion approaches are effective in developing students' thinking skills and higher-level learning such as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom et al., 1956), and also creativity (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001; Bligh, 2000).

Discussion can help students acquire better communication skills as they learn to present their ideas clearly and briefly; it also provides opportunities to practice listening to, and following what, others are saying. In addition, discussions can contribute to students' affective development by increasing their interest in a variety of subjects, helping to clarify their values, and aiding in recognizing — and perhaps changing — some attitudes.

As a teaching method, discussion permits students to be active in their own learning, which increases their motivation to learn and makes the process more interesting. And finally, discussion provides feedback to you about your students' acquisition of learning through questions, comments, elaborations, and justifications. These interactions allow you to plumb the depths of students' understanding.

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[1]This paper is an update of IDEA Paper No. 15, *Improving Discussions* (Cashin & McKnight, 1986).

Like all teaching methods, discussion approaches have their limitations as well as their strengths. Discussions are *not* an effective way to cover a significant amount of content, and they are time consuming, requiring more preparation and class time. However, even when you are very well prepared, the discussion may not follow the direction you anticipated, resulting in less control. To some extent, you must go where the students' questions and interests take the group, which may not be consistent with your initial plan.

It can also be difficult to get students to participate in a discussion, particularly when some of them may not even know *how* to effectively participate. Finally, a topic may be very controversial or elicit excessive emotional reactions. Discussion is a complex teaching method that requires careful planning and preparation for both you and your students (Brookfield and Preskill, 2005). A number of authors provide additional details about the strengths and limitations of discussions (see Bligh, 2000, chap. 1-4; Brookfield and Preskill, 2005, chap. 2; Forsyth, 2003, p. 93).

Even with the challenges of discussion approaches, a number of strategies can make them more effective and maximize their benefits.

Creating the Expectation for Student Participation in Discussion

If at all possible, create a physical environment that supports discussion. Arrange the seating so it is easy for everyone to see one another, ideally in some kind of circle or curve, making yourself part of the group (e.g., not behind a desk, but seated with your students). Padded chairs can help, if they are available. Help students get to know each other and get them to talk during the first class session. Bligh (2000, pp. 173-177) provides further guidance about the physical environment.

Early in your course, perhaps during the second class, share your expectations for participation, both verbally and in the syllabus, including the ground rules for discussion. For example, students are to come to class prepared, and to have read the assignment or completed the appropriate research; they are to participate in the discussion and test their ideas and conclusions; they should raise their hands (or, alternatively, you will call on them randomly).

Below are the stages of a typical classroom discussion, which are based on the steps in problem solving found in almost any general psychology textbook.

- Define the question, topic, or problem to give the discussion focus.
- Have students suggest possible answers or solutions.
- Collect relevant information or data that might help answer the question(s) at issue.
- Evaluate positions argued by, or solutions proposed by, the students during the discussion.

- Try to have the group reach a decision about the best position to start with or the best solution to try, based on the discussion. (See Svinicki and McKeachie, 2011, p. 42, for a related approach; and Bligh, 2000.)

To ensure that students take discussions seriously, you may need to adjust your existing reward system (Brookfield and Preskill, 2005). If you will grade students for participation, explain how. Consider self-evaluations, peer-to-peer evaluations, and rubrics that behaviorally describe expected and unacceptable levels of participation (see Davis, 2009, pp. 110-111, for suggestions).

Teacher's Roles

Get to know your students. Obviously this applies to all forms of teaching, but it can be particularly important for successful discussions. Along with the class roster, you probably have information about your students provided by the registrar's office — study it. Ask students about their background and their goals (Cashin, 2010, p. 3). In IDEA Paper No. 39, Fleming (2003) describes a number of strategies to help you develop rapport with your students.

Be prepared. An effective discussion requires much more preparation than an effective lecture. In a lecture, you can decide what you will cover. In a discussion, you should be prepared to explore any issue reasonably related to the discussion topic. This means you must know the topic very well. Be ready to address potential issues or questions that the students might bring up. Outline your possible answers or responses.

Begin the discussion. Many times, and certainly the first time, you as the instructor will begin the discussion. Svinicki and McKeachie (2011) discuss a number of ways to start the discussion — with a question, a controversy, or a common experience. Choosing something from the students' "real life" is one tactic. Providing a common experience by means of a reading, film, or similar example of mass media is another. Ensure that your students have sufficient information to make the discussion productive.

Facilitate the discussion.
- Be patient, since discussions take time to get started. Allow for pauses and silence. Although silence may feel socially awkward, it gives both you and the students time to think. You may need to train your students (and yourself) to feel comfortable with silence.
- Listen to what each student says.
- Observe who is — and is not — participating.

Ask Questions. Ask a student for clarification, or to support his or her comment or opinion; use *open-ended* questions (that cannot simply be answered by a "yes" or a "no" or one word); ask *divergent* questions (where there can be more than one *acceptable* answer). However, do *not* question a single student too long.

Deal with conflicts. It is important *not* to ignore conflicts. First, try to clarify what seems to be the disagreement; it might simply be a cognitive misunderstanding. Listing the pros and cons visually (e.g., whiteboard, handout, discussion board) can be helpful. If the conflict involves many students, let the group talk about their disagreement in some manner. (See also Kustra and Potter, 2008, pp. 59-65.)

Provide summaries. Periodically during the discussion, and certainly at the end, provide a summary and perhaps some conclusions of the discussion. Verify group consensus and check to see whether *all* the students do actually agree: "Does that statement reflect what *all of you* think?"

Reflect on what took place during the discussion. After the discussion, think about what worked well and what you might do differently. Think about which student(s) did or did not participate in the discussion. Which of them contributed most? Did any student(s) dominate? What was the quality of the students' comments? And especially, what did the students learn?

Further Readings — Asking and Answering Questions. Cashin (1995), IDEA Paper No. 31: Answering and Asking Questions; Davis (2009), chap. 12 and 13; Forsyth (2003), pp. 72-74; Kustra and Potter (2008), pp. 31-38; Svinicki and McKeachie (2011), chap. 5.

Students' Roles

Students should be prepared. In keeping with your expectations, students are to come to the discussion prepared. Typically, this means that not only are they to have read the assignment, but thought about it in the context of the topic being studied.

Students should participate. Assuming that discussions are a required part of the course, students must participate. Totally silent observers do not earn full credit in such a course. This does not mean that silent observers do not learn anything, but the students who participate learn more, which is the purpose of a discussion class.

Students should explain with clarity. One purpose of discussions is to allow students to test their ideas and conclusions. This requires not only that students develop ideas, but that they explain their ideas or conclusions with clarity, and where possible, with reasonable brevity. Forsyth (2003, p. 101) suggests that students should make statements brief and clear, and ask for clarification if they don't understand what someone else has said.

Students should listen. Student participation involves not only speaking, but listening to what other students are saying, and either indicating some level of understanding or asking for clarification. If you see that some students are so eager to make their own points that they do *not* listen to what the previous speaker has said, you might introduce a rule that no one may make his or her point without first

paraphrasing what the previous speaker said — to that speaker's satisfaction. (See also Bligh, 2000, pp. 32-33.)

Fostering Participation

First, what are some obstacles to student participation? Svinicki and McKeachie (2011, pp. 44-45) discuss five barriers to good discussion: habits of passive learning; fear of appearing stupid; trying too hard to find the answer the teacher is looking for; failing to see value in the discussion topic or process; and wanting to settle on a solution before alternatives have been considered.

Davis (2009, p. 107) outlines six faulty assumptions students often hold about discussions: one must argue for only one position; knowledge is really just opinion; personal experience is the real source of knowledge; issues should not be discussed unless there is agreement; individual rights are violated when ideas are challenged; and individuals in a discussion should never feel uncomfortable.

Davis (2009, p. 99) also lists nine pointers you can give your students about participating in discussions. For example, students should seek the *best* answers instead of trying to convince others of the correctness of *their* answers; they should try to keep an open mind rather than stick to a previous opinion; and students should stay with the present issue before introducing a new one.

Several other specific strategies can promote participation in discussions.

Ask general (divergent) questions. Questions that can have more than one acceptable answer (e.g., "What is your opinion about...?") can lead to more discussion. In addition, give students your questions about the reading *before* you will be discussing them. (See Svinicki and McKeachie, 2011, pp. 47-48.)

Avoid looking *only* at the student talking. Although it may seem counterintuitive to look away, and eye contact does tell a student that you are paying attention, looking too long at one student can seem threatening. Also, you need to monitor how the other students in the group are reacting.

Control excessive talkers. Even though the students who talk the most are sometimes the "better" students, avoid automatically calling on them first, even after a seemingly long silence. Ask to hear from someone who hasn't said anything yet. If one student's excessive talking becomes a problem, you may want to talk with that student about it outside of class. (See also Brookfield and Preskill, 2005, pp. 169-177.) Sometimes the excessive talker is you (or me) — the teacher! Videotaping a class and watching it later may provide useful information about this (as well as many other aspects of your class). (See also Brookfield and Preskill, 2005, pp. 193-200.)

Ask for examples and illustrations. This is particularly important when discussing complex ideas, or concepts students often have difficulty understanding.

Allow for pauses and silences. Sometimes in American culture, we act as though there should never be a quiet time in our conversations. Silence, even for a minute or more, allows the students, and you, time to think. This "wait time" is especially helpful to students who are more introverted and may not be getting an opportunity to participate (Davis, 2009).

Be sensitive to feelings and emotional reactions. Some topics may generate strong negative — or positive — feelings, or you may notice that a student is becoming upset or angry as the discussion progresses, any of which may become obstacles to learning. Ideally, the student will bring up the problem so it can be discussed. To prompt this, you may simply wish to say, "You seem to have strong feelings about this." Or you may need to explore: "Would you say some more about that?" You may want to talk to the student after class.

Encourage and recognize students' contributions. Listen carefully to each student's comments, sometimes paraphrasing to show that you understand. Give students a chance to clarify what they meant, or link Student B's comment to something Student A said.

Further Readings — Effective Groups and Specialized Activities (can be used with discussion classes as well as groups that are part of large classes). Bligh (2000), pp. 105-188; Brookfield and Preskill (2005), chap. 6; Davis (2009), chap. 21; Forsyth (2003), pp. 103-110; Svinicki and McKeachie (2011), chap. 14 and 15.

Conclusion

You should *not* consider the suggestions in this IDEA Paper to be prescriptions — things that you *must* do. Rather, think of them not as *answers*, but as *questions*. Ask yourself, "To what extent might these suggestions help the students in my class?" You are the teacher — you are the one to decide.

Further Readings — Facilitating Online Discussions. While the focus of this paper is on classroom discussions, a number of authors have suggestions for effective use of discussion via technology. See Brookfield and Preskill (2005), chap. 11 and 12; Davis (2009), pp. 497-503; Forsyth (2003), pp. 233-260; Svinicki and McKeachie (2011), chap. 17.

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