

10 Strategies for Effective Discussion Leading

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1. Memorize names the first day

Have your students write down on notecards their names, phone numbers, majors, hometowns, and any other relevant information. Sometimes it helps to break the ice by including a personal question: What is your favorite movie? Where is the most interesting place you've traveled? Can you provide a piece of information about yourself which is entirely unique and which you would be willing to share in public?

2. Outside the classroom

Within the first few weeks of the class schedule brief, fifteen-minute office hour appointments with each of your students. While it is best to have a stock of work-oriented questions at hand (what are your expectations for this class? what are your ideas for the first paper? what have you thought of the first meetings or texts? how does this class relate to your future career interests?), these meetings are best conceived of as an opportunity to extend the personal introduction. This will make students feel both more comfortable and more accountable. If they feel like you have invested time in them, they will feel obliged to invest more time in the class and will do their best not to let you down.

3. Small-group exercises

Also within the first few weeks, try designing and implementing an exercise which requires breaking students up into small groups for discussion. This enables the more shy students to try out their voices, so to speak, in a smaller, safer setting; it also helps the students to get to know each other better and consequently improves the overall dynamic. The discussions should center around specific, preferably written instructions which you will provide, taking them through the steps of analysis necessary for a fruitful discourse. You might, for instance, provide them with a series of questions, or give them a thesis and ask them to put together two or three arguments both in favor of and against it. You might provide broad suggestions for how such arguments might take shape, or point to specific textual moments which are especially relevant. Most importantly, students should be aware that they will be required to report their findings to the group as a whole towards the end of the class. You might wish to encourage more quiet students to be the speakers for their groups. Reporting the work of others is often a less intimidating way to practice public speaking.

4. Body language

Used in moderation, active, affirmational body language can be instrumental in establishing a comfortable atmosphere. Raising your eyebrows, nodding your head or tilting it to the side, and maintaining eye contact with the speakers are all ways of showing curiosity and interest. Avoid hunching over or resting your chin upon your hands as this can inhibit your ability to project your voice and enunciate clearly. Avoid negative gestures, like turning your back partially or leaning predominately to one side of the classroom, crossing your arms across your chest, or checking your watch (keep your watch on the desk in front of you so you can refer to it

unobtrusively). One should also be attentive to the body language of one's students. Insofar as it is possible, always arrange the room so that you can see the face of each student at all times. Fidgeting, furrowed brows, and earnest eye contact are often signs from students that they wish to speak but need a little bit of encouragement. Do not hesitate to call on such students, but do not force them if they freeze up.

5. Ask invitational rather than inquisitorial questions

If students feel like the questions presented to them have single right or wrong answers, they will be very hesitant to speak. The embarrassment of being wrong outweighs the approbation of being right. Insofar as it is possible, try to ask questions without right or wrong answers, favoring instead those which have a wide latitude for interpretation. "What do you think?" is better than "What is?." "What are some of the relevant qualities of the figure we are discussing?" is better than "Is the figure we are discussing specifically this or that?."

Sometimes, of course, it will be necessary to ask questions with right or wrong answers. You may want to get certain facts or arguments straight for the whole class. Even then, phrasing can help make students less anxious about providing a wrong answer. You could, for instance, encourage students who have given wrong answers by praising them for taking the risk of speaking out.

6. Democratization of Voices

Direct discussion so that no single voice dominates and, similarly, so that no single side of the classroom dominates. Let your students know from the start that this is your goal. If this means responding to hands out of order, allowing the student or the side which has spoken less to speak before another who has had their hand raised longer, do not hesitate to do so. If no hands are forthcoming, attempt to draw students out with questions related to things they have written or comments they have made outside of the classroom. Most students will rise to the occasion when asked to speak, particularly if the question presented gives them wide latitude, but some will remain steadfastly silent. You might talk to these more shy students outside of class, encouraging them to use the discussion section as a chance to practice public speaking and asking them what you can do to help them feel more comfortable.

7. Intelligent restatement

The conversational ideal is not triangulated: in other words, talk passes freely between the students rather than, after each statement, returning to the gravitational center of the teacher. But a generous restatement of what a student has said ("let me see if I get what you're saying...") can be very helpful, particularly if the student's comments have been confused, leaving the speaker feeling insecure and the class feeling in the dark. Putting a new spin on their comments, or even reinventing them slightly, while always attributing the ideas to them or their original inspiration, can do much to improve a group dynamic.

8. Variety

It is best not to allow the section format to get into a predictable rut, for one's own sake as well as for the students'. Teachers burn out and students get bored when repetition is the rule. If section tends to run so that the whole group discusses one topic together, break them into small groups occasionally. Some weeks let them come into section simply having done the assigned readings; other weeks give them study questions a few days in advance emphasizing what issues and questions they ought to be ready to discuss. The greater the variety the better. Use the blackboard: draw pictures, create diagrams, at the beginning of class write up mysterious phrases or key words which will pique their interest and become clear as the discussion proceeds.

9. Have your own agenda which culminates in a moment of closure

Be careful about allowing the students to run the classroom unaided. Many teachers parcel out to students over the course of the semester the task of opening the class with a short presentation that is designed to set the framework for subsequent discussion. Some students do brilliantly; some do not. This disparity can establish an invidious atmosphere if you are not careful. While one should always have the flexibility to allow students to surprise one and to take the conversation in unexpected and fruitful directions, one should also always have an endpoint of some sort in mind. "Sign-posting" for your students (explaining where the class has been, where it is going, how the day's discussion relates to the section) can help everyone focus more productively on the topics at hand. In the last five minutes of class it is also a good idea to be prepared to give a mini-lecture developing an argument or theme which can tie together and even summarize the discussion which has preceded it, as well as pointing to new and even counter-intuitive ideas which the students can take with them outside of the classroom.

10. Student presentations

If you do want to experiment with student presentations, you should probably make them short. Most importantly, make sure that students do not read aloud to the class from a prepared document. It is often helpful to have one student be responsible for reporting on a reading assignment that the class as a whole has read. They might bring in a written outline of the assignment's main points and distribute this to their peers, but then they should proceed by talking conversationally about the topics at hand. They could, for instance, explain why they think the assignment is relevant to the class, or even express confusion and explain why it seems in conflict with previously read material.

These techniques are not exhaustive, but they will help to create a classroom environment in which students feel safe to express their ideas freely and to risk being wrong. And that, ultimately, is one of the most important things a discussion leader hope to accomplish.

More reading on this topic can be found in the CTL Library located in the Mason Room at the Smith House.