

# Discussions that Teach



GPS Workshops -Practical Pedagogy

- Have you led undergraduates through a discussion before? If so... How did it go? Were there any struggles?
- If you haven't led undergraduates through a discussion, does anything about this pedagogical strategy make you nervous?
- Why do you think students participate or not participate in discussions?

**Take a few minutes to write down your thoughts on these questions, and we will discuss it...😊**

# Why use discussion in your classroom?

- Those doing the most work are doing the most learning (Barkley, 2010).
- Students become co-constructors (Howard, 2015)
- Peer-to-peer interactions improve student performance (Howard 2015)

# Common reasons students don't participate

- Introversions or Shyness
- Cultural Differences
- English as a second language
- Previous bad experience
- Peer Pressure
- Lack of preparedness or knowledge
- Negative cues from the instructor
- Lack of interest
- Fear of failure

# Preparing for Discussion

- **Get them talking early and often**
  - Fosters community, trust and safety
- **Establish class norms around discussion**
  - Meta discussion about discussions
  - Establish etiquette
  - Explain how participation will be gauged
    - Provide examples of ideal contributions
    - Offer multiple ways to participate

# Preparing for Discussion

- **What are the goals or objectives of the discussion?**
  - What content are they learning?
  - What skills are you wanting them to develop?
  - **Communicate these to your students!!**
- **Think about the class context and challenges**
- Large or small
- Online vs. In-person
- Difficulty of material
- Sensitivity of material

# Strategies to Get Students Involved



# Let them Warm Up

- **One Minute Paper**

- Allows students to collect thoughts and formulate a response

- **Sentence Completion Exercises**

- What struck me most about the text...
- The idea I took issue with...
- The most confusing part was...

- **Think, Pair, Share**

- **Prepare or arrange questions by complexity (recall, application, analysis)**

# Assign Students a Role

- **Discussion Starter** (pose topic or questions)
- **Theme spotter** (identify what is not explicit)
- **Devil's Advocate** (challenge consensus)
- **Textual Focuser** (requires support and evidence from peers)
- **Detective** (call out biases)
- **Umpire** (ensure civility)
- **Recorder** (keeps track of conversation)
- **Reporter** (voices findings and summary of discussion)

# Assign Students a Conversational Move

- **Make a comment or ask a question that shows you were intrigued by something someone else said.**
- **Link two other classmates' contributions together.**
- **Build on what someone else said and explain how these ideas connect.**
- **Make a comment that paraphrases a point someone else made.**
- **Ask a cause-and-effect question.**
- **Express appreciation for the contribution of a classmate.**
- **Disagree with someone respectfully and constructively.**
- **Explain why a classmate's comment helped you better understand the reading or topic.**
- **Ask a question that encourages a classmate to elaborate on their thought.**

# Try out Different Structures

- Fishbowl Discussions
- Regular cohorts
- Snowball discussions
- Chat Stations
- Silent Discussions

# Leave Room for Reflection

- Add a pause (even in the middle)
- Continue the discussion using a different modality
- Leave time to debrief and summarize discussion themes and main takeaways
- Allow time for students to self-reflect
- Gather feedback

# More Facilitation Tips



# A Discussion off the Rails

## Off-Topic

- Pause and Summarize
- Ask students to provide evidence or examples to illustrate or clarify confusing commentary

## Incivility

- Don't Panic
- Interject and summarize arguments, then move to a different participant or group
- Model active listening, clarify assumptions, and discern context
- Defer to outside of class

# Keeping your Voice Balanced

## Signs you are speaking too much...

- Some students never talk
- Talkative students have gone quiet
- Students display uncertainty about contributions
- You respond to every student (Let them respond to each other)
- Students resist direction of conversation

## Signs you are speaking too little...

- Discussions lack focus and/or a critical edge (surface level)
- There is no disagreement or position taking
- Students spend most of the discussion voicing opinions and their own emotions, and not citing text evidence or theories

# Let's Reflect

What is one concrete strategy from today that I will use to improve discussions in my classroom in the future?



# Resources and articles

## Discussion Guides:

[Columbia University Discussion Guide](#)

[Questions to Facilitate Dialogue](#)

[Harvard instructional moves videos: Facilitating Discussion](#)

[Brown Discussion Guide: Difficult Discussion Situations](#)

[List of Discussion Strategies](#)

## Articles and Research:

Barkley, E.F. (2010). [\*Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty\*](#). Jossey-Bass.

Gooblar, D. (2019). *The missing course: Everything they never taught you about college teaching*. Harvard University Press.

Howard, J. R., & Weimer, M. (2015). *Discussion in the college classroom: getting your students engaged and participating in person and online* (1st ed.). WILEY.

*How to Hold a Better Class Discussion*. (2019, May 23). The Chronicle of Higher Education.

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-to-hold-a-better-class-discussion/>

Teacher, T. S. (2017, April 13). *Students Who Don't Participate in Class Discussions: They Are Not All Introverts*. Scholarlyteacher. <https://www.scholarlyteacher.com/post/students-who-dont-participate-in-class-discussions>