

## Universal Design and Classroom Discussions

### Tips for Faculty

The first thing to do when focusing on classroom discussions is to make sure that you have clear goals for the discussions. What is the purpose of the discussion? This could range from the rather focused, “I want to be able to tell if they did the reading” to the higher level “There is much that they can learn from each other because of their varied backgrounds and interpretations of the material.” Once the goal of the discussion is clear to you, your second question may be if a class discussion is indeed the most appropriate method for achieving that goal. You may realize that other methods may be a better way to address the goal –or other methods can be used in addition to classroom discussions for those students who struggle with the discussion format.

To prevent members of classrooms from participating unevenly (and in some cases off-topic) it is usually wise to invoke a structure at the beginning of the class – some rules of class discussions. When setting up these rules, it is important to think of strategies that will apply to a full range of student abilities. From the outgoing student who dominates the conversation to the student who is too shy to participate at all, the set up should be established prior to the students walking in the door.

Introducing discussion rules to the class is often best started by explicitly establishing the goal(s) of the discussion (both verbally and in writing). Students who are relatively concrete or naive in their thinking may only see class discussion as a way to get desired points (and think that more is better, regardless of the quality) where other students may intuitively understand that it is a process to refine their thinking about a topic. Explicit statements on the goals of the discussion by the professor provide everyone equal footing for participation. However, though the goal is primary, structuring the discussion is also important for allowing all to have an equal education experience.

Some examples of classroom discussion rules (to be provided both verbally and in writing):

- 1) Everyone in the class has to share once before anyone else gets to share a second time.
- 2) Only one person shares at a time (seems elemental, but with some concrete thinkers, this specificity helps). Some have used a “talking stick” which means that only the person with the stick can speak. Some have used a ball of yarn where only the student with the ball can speak and it unravels as it travels from speaker to speaker (which can be useful, but sometimes distracting, in demonstrating discussion dynamics).
- 3) Students are limited to a certain number of sentences or a time limit in their sharing.
- 4) You will indicate to students when they are off-topic in their comments. Students may also get lost in details, so refocusing on the big picture may need to be done. Let them know ahead of time that it happens to everyone, it is not personal.
- 5) Let students know ahead of time which day they will be expected to participate.

6) Let students know ahead of time how long the discussion will last (e.g. "20 minutes, so keep your participation to 2 minutes").

7) Let students know that some students take longer to process information and/or questions than others so there will be times when the class will simply wait until everyone has had the time to mull over the question and form a response for it before anyone is allowed to speak.

8) Designate one student each time to take notes which highlight important points from the discussion. The student could review them with the professor and then they could be posted on Moodle for everyone or emailed to everyone in the class. This could be an aspect of the participation points.

9) Students who struggle to participate need for it to be as safe of an environment as possible. Indicate that points/grade may be docked for students who are not good citizens – and include snickering, intimidating, bullying types of behavior as examples. Let them know that such poor citizenship will be confronted and renounced in class. Repeated offenses may invoke more serious consequences. Also realize that sometimes this intimidating behavior and nasty commenting occurs outside of the classroom. Indicate that this is as problematic as doing it within the classroom.

10) When opinions are offered students are to say "I think" or "I understood it to say" and not use "telling others" or degrading phrases, such as "people should" or "if you read it closer, you would know that..." Faculty could help by being prepared to rephrase for the students during the first few discussions until the students are more thoughtful in how they express their opinions. Some students would also be helped by limiting the use of metaphors, sarcasm, and words with double meanings. Using words like "always" and "never" are ill advised for anyone to use, unless that is exactly what is meant.

11) Consider how you will handle classroom arguments. We all know that there are opposing views on a variety of topics- if students are likely to have opposing points of view in a classroom discussion, what additional suggestions can be made to have a respectful discussion. (E.g. If a statement is made that makes you angry, you must count to 20 before responding.)

12) Have visual cue reminders for rules that apply to all students. Perhaps a yellow card could mean "caution, you are getting off topic" or tapping your finger on your wrist (where supposedly a watch might be) means that the student is going on for too long.

13) If you are breaking a larger class into smaller groups, be thoughtful about how these groups are formed. Some students are simply left out, others with similar interaction patterns (e.g. dominate discussions) will gravitate towards each other and won't have anyone who can manage/supervise the discussion. It may be necessary to not allow them to self-select into groups in order for the time to be productive.

In addition to an established structure for all, it is important to discuss the individual needs of students with disabilities, particularly if they seem to be struggling with your structure. With a fairly inclusive structure, additional accommodations may not be as critical. For instance, the Asperger's student who

does not read social cues very well still knows s/he can only participate after everyone else in the class has participated. The student who has a social phobia knows that they must speak up once each week in class. Or perhaps you can allow a different way for this student to participate that is less threatening but still does not compromise your established goals.

If you can see in one-on-one interaction that the student takes time to process questions and formulate responses, give consideration about how you might restructure class to work with this. You may also note that a student does not look at you while processing so in class discussions you conclude that they are thinking rather than staring off into space. Note if the student lacks voice intonation that would clarify a point that s/he is trying to make. It may be particularly important to repeat or rephrase the student's discussion point for others.

Since some students find organizing a class discussion particularly difficult, it may be important to include an outline before and/or after a discussion which addresses the main points. It may also be important to step into discussions to re-establish the goals of the discussion, or to mark when one aspect of the topic has been completed and it is time to move on to another aspect.

You may find that it is important to physically restructure the class. The student in sitting in front may not realize that they are dominating the discussion because they can't see the body language of those sitting behind him/her. The shy student may find it easier to speak up if s/he can only see the professor's reaction. Even for students who don't have any disabilities, there are those that seem to "egg each other on" or physically isolate others from participating. Some students may have differing perspectives on appropriate personal space. Specifically indicating a boundary may be important (e.g. "You are not allowed to touch the other student during the discussion.).

However, by thoughtfully setting up classroom discussions and invoking some structure upon the process, it is likely that many issues will be prevented. This is the idea behind universal design and it is applicable to classroom discussions as well as many other classroom activities.

#### References:

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