

Discussion

BEST PRACTICES

IDEAS TO ENGAGE YOUR STUDENTS

Leading an effective discussion takes greater preparation than does preparing a lecture. This Best Practices will give you practical ideas and methods for leading an effective classroom discussion. Teaching by discussion can be a valuable means of helping students apply ideas and think critically.

DISCUSSION TYPES

CRITIQUE: Ask students to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of a statement and then suggest improvements.

CLASS DEBATE: Assign students to affirmative and negative positions on an issue.

THE SOCRATIC DIALOG: The instructor first asks a question and then one student answers before the teacher asks a new question. In this way, every other comment is from the teacher.⁴

BLIND MAN'S BLUFF: The instructor poses a purposely misleading statement. Ask the students to discover the false premise through discussion.⁴

MINUTE PAPER: Pose a question. Give the students one minute (or more) to write about the topic. Then open the class up for discussion.⁴

CONTROVERSY: Pose a controversial statement. Nothing stimulates discussion like disagreement.⁴

COMMON EXPERIENCE: Give the students all a common experience to discuss. i.e. movie clip, brief article reading, role play, etc.⁴

COMPARATIVE QUESTIONS: Ask students to compare theories, authors, research studies, etc.⁴

BUZZ GROUPS: Students are split randomly into small groups. A spokesperson is selected to report on the group's discussion results. A specific and short time limit may be given.⁴

TURN TO YOUR NEIGHBOR: Pose a problem. Each student turns to another classmate and discusses their answer for 20 – 30 seconds before opening for class discussion.²

THINK-PAIR-SHARE: Pose a problem. Students think alone for 30 seconds. Students then form pairs and discuss for a specified amount of time. Then invite individuals to share their thoughts with the entire class.²

THINK-PAIR-SQUARE-SHARE: Pose a problem. Students think alone for 30 seconds. Students then form pairs and discuss for a specified

amount of time. The pairs then team up with another pair for discussion. Then invite individuals to share their thoughts with the entire class.²

NON-PARTICIPATORS

There are several reasons why students might not participate.⁴ Some may include:

- Students habit of passivity
- Students don't see value of discussion
- Fear of criticism or looking stupid
- Boredom
- Lack of knowledge

HOW TO HELP NON-PARTICIPATORS

Don't assume that just because a student isn't participating that learning is not taking place. Be aware that many students learn better by listening to others.¹

- Set a participation expectation.
- Give opportunities for your students to get acquainted. If students know they are among friends they are more willing to participate.

- Reward infrequent contributors with a smile and encouragement.
- Ask general questions with no wrong answers. i.e. How do you feel about this?
- Poker Chip. At the beginning of class give each student a poker chip (or other item). For each comment they make they must turn in one of the chips. By the end of class they need to have used all their chips.

TIPS

ORGANIZE, SUMMARIZE, AND SYNTHESIZE: Use occasional summaries during the discussion. At the end of the discussion, summarize the points they have made and connect them to the original question posed.³

SET GOALS: Ask yourself when planning a discussion, “What key insights or ideas do I want my students to leave the discussion with?”³

DON'T FEAR SILENCE: Students need time to think. Pause long enough for a few students to raise their hand.³

ROOM SETUP: Setup the room for discussion. A circle works best.³

FEEDBACK: Thank them for their responses, build on what they said and add insight to their comments.³

EASE STUDENTS IN: Arrive to class early and engage students in small talk. If you get them comfortable talking early you can ease them into a class discussion.³

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION: Smiling and nodding are positive reinforcers. Show the student speaking that you are listening.³

REFERENCES

¹ Berge, Z.L. (1995). Facilitating computer conferencing: Recommendations from the field. *Educational Technology*, 35(1), 22-30.

² Green, T.D. (2000). Responding and sharing: Techniques for energizing classroom discussions. *The Clearing House*, 73 (6), 331-334.

³ Haugen, L. (1998). Suggestions for leading small-group discussions. Retrieved February 24, 2006, from Iowa State University, Center for Teaching Excellence Web site: http://www.celt.iastate.edu/teaching/small_group.html

⁴ McKeachie, W. J. (2002). *McKeachie's teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

