Toward Good Class Discussions

I. Lay the Groundwork by Establishing Community from the Start

• Learn students’ names the first week.
• Have the students create LARGE name cards on Day One or Two, to be placed in front of them every day for two weeks.
• Do exercises that lead students to learn each other’s names the first week.
• Design an opening activity to ensure that everyone speaks on Day One.
• Create a class roster, copies to all, with names, and (optional) phone numbers and e-mail addresses.
• Determine a physical arrangement of furniture, if possible, that encourages discussion—and then stick to it, even if it means rearranging every day. (The students do the furniture moving.)
• Have a meta-discussion about discussion: let the students define good and bad discussions while you take notes. Intervene to ask them to make important distinctions (e.g., between “regular contribution” and “domination”). Use this list to generate standards by which the class periodically evaluates its discussions.

II. No Cold Starts

• Have students arrive with something written—response paragraph or short paper, discussion questions, summary, etc.; an object; an article or advertisement from popular media; notes from quick interviews with five other students, etc.
• Assign five minutes’ freewriting at the start of class, focused on the day’s topic or reading. (This can also be useful midstream in a stalled discussion.)
• Have every student (or teams of two or three) launch class once, with a five-minute presentation or exercise for the class.
• Make every class task-oriented from the start.

III. Other Strategies

• Small groups, strategically organized: they break down resistance, bring out quiet people, remove aggressive people into their own group, allow quiet people room to speak, etc.
• Agendas and objectives: small- or whole-group discussions should have these. Choose scribes and reporters to take notes and summarize.
- Strategic Anonymity: if a subject seems especially difficult to deal with, have students respond on index cards or slips of paper that are then redistributed and read aloud.
- De-centering: remove yourself as focus. Leave the room initially or intermittently; take notes on the blackboard, refuse to return eye contact of the student talking only to you, or redirect that student to the group as a whole, refuse to answer questions, saying, “What do the rest of you think?”
- Observers: have a student act as observer, taking notes and reporting at the end of class what s/he saw.
- Referees: have a student act in this role, intervening when interruptions and digressions occur.
- Consciousness raising: ask students to identify, on paper, the other students they consider to be leaders in the class and to explain why. This gives you good information and raises their awareness of class dynamics and contributions.
- Ritualized inclusiveness: periodically go around the room once, everyone responding to a given question or passage. This is also a good class starter. No one may speak a second time until everyone has spoken once; thus lots of data get out on the table and everyone is forced to listen before speaking. Allow people to “pass” if they wish.
- Role-plays, planned or extemporaneous: discussion can be liberated when students are assigned a position rather than having to “come out” about their own. This also encourages flexibility, empathy, tolerance for alternate truths, and critical thinking.
- Power tools: use your authority strategically and consciously to bolster an unpopular point of view, to voice a point students may be fearful of making, to give voice to the silent, to describe class dynamics, to restate a garbled or confused but worthy insight, to clarify significant points and major areas of disagreement emerging from the discussion. Model respectful disagreement and comfort with diversity.
- Silence: once in a while, let it be. It goes on for much less time than you think.

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**Ten Ways to Get Participation at Any Time**

_from Mel Silberman's “Active Learning: 101 Strategies to Teach Any Subject,” published on the web page of the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence, St. Cloud State University_

1. Open discussion: ask a question and open it up to the entire group without further structuring. (This is probably the most common and least effective way to start a discussion.)
2. Response cards: pass out index cards and request anonymous answers to your questions.
3. Polling: Design a short survey that is filled out and tallied on the spot, or poll students verbally.
4. Subgroup discussion: break students into subgroups of three or more to share and record information.
5. Learning partners: have students work on tasks or discuss key questions with the student seated next to them.
6. Whips: go around the group and obtain short responses to key questions. Sentence stems (e.g., “One change I would make in the United States is . . . “; “What I wish had happened at the end of this novel is . . . “;) are useful in conducting whips.
7. Panels: invite a small number of students to present their views in front of the entire class.
8. Fishbowl: ask a portion of the class to form a discussion circle, and have the remaining students form a listening circle around them. Bring new groups into the inner circle to continue the discussion.

9. Games: Use an exercise or quiz game to elicit students’ ideas, knowledge, or skill. TV game shows like Jeopardy can offer models.

10. Calling on the next speaker: ask students to raise their hands if they want to contribute; you call on the first speaker, who then calls on the second speaker, and so forth.