Leading Effective Discussions

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A discussion is “a productive exchange of viewpoints, a collective exploration of issues” (Nielson, 2003, p. 105); it is not a lecture.

A) Preparation: Planning the Discussion

• Know something about your group.
• Establish a few achievable objectives for the discussion (keep in mind that the discussion represents valuable class time, not just an opportunity to chat).
• Consider the pros and cons of discussion as a technique. Is it a discussion the best way to achieve your instructional goals?
• Select a compelling subject to frame the focus of your discussion.
• Do you need to teach people how to discuss? What about the “rules” and limits?
• Consider the “rules” for yourself. What are your limits and what is your role? Will you need to provide some structure (i.e. a jigsaw activity) to encourage conversation? Will you break the group into small discussion units?

B) Opening: Initiating the Discussion

• Review the “rules” and/or basic principles related to the discussion.
• Create a welcoming atmosphere to establish trust (and participation).
• Know and use the participants’ names.
• Consider providing a common orienting experience (video, reading, lab exercise).
• Follow your plan, but be willing to deviate and explore students’ interests, questions and teachable moments.
• Use open-ended and higher-order questions (because these encourage conversation and divergent thinking and likely lead to a discussion).
• Anticipate, expect, tolerate, and learn from opposing views.

C) Middle: Maintaining the Discussion

• Try to weave a fabric of involvement in the room (in other words, use students’ ideas and back off center stage). This might be called “active listening and reflective talking” (McComas)
• Avoid “ping pong” (back and forth) conversations between the students and the instructor.
• Scaffold questioning from the more concrete to more abstract ideas.
• Respect opinions since almost any response contains value and is the product of some individual thinking and the possibility of future contributions (but don’t give all equal credence). As much as possible, let the students’ comments and questions shape the flow of the discussion.
• Consider plans to encourage the widest level of participation (choosing students randomly, waiting for volunteers, moving through the class roster, etc.)
• Monitor the conversation to ensure that it is on task. Look for verbal and non-verbal clues to make the determination about next steps in the discussion. When is it useful to intercede?

D) Closing: Concluding the Discussion
• As the discussion naturally ends or the allotted time is over, summarize the main points of the conversation (with reference to the goals you had for the discussion).
• This could be accomplished with assistance from students who did not actively participate as much as some others (to give them a final chance to make a contribution).
• Thanks the participants for their involvement (to encourage their positive response to future discussions).

E) Reflecting: Planning the Next Discussion

• If possible, get some feedback from a few students to help you perform more effectively next time.
• Debrief yourself by making a judgment about how well you performed and what you could do differently.
• Be sure to note any particularly useful questions that you asked to guide the discussion (particularly those that were originally unscripted but were “invented” during the discussion).

Reference for the Quote