Strategies for Facilitating Class Discussion

Everyone – both teachers and students – know how deeply dispiriting a lifeless class discussion can be, and, too, how powerfully the best discussions can lure everyone present into a deeper and more enduring commitment to thinking about the themes and issues of the course. But exactly how can a teacher make discussion as lively as possible? Many might suggest that it’s a matter of dumb luck – the right combination of personalities, the right time of day, the right kind of weather. Here, however, are a handful of simple, common-sense strategies for cultivating the potential for valuable exchange in the classroom.

• To make sure students are prepared for discussion, give them discussion questions in advance and require, over the course of the semester, that they hand-in brief, written responses to, say, a third of these questions or maybe half of them; and these responses (which can only be turned-in for credit once per week and only during the week when that particular topic is under discussion) can provide the springboard for discussion as students read them out loud to each other and ask each other questions about what each wrote. On any given class day, there will be at least a handful of students who brought writing to class that can be used to spark discussion. These short papers (one or two pages) might be worth one point a piece, say, and students might have to turn in, say, ten of them over the course of the semester.

• If students seem particularly resistant to discussion, pause during class and ask them to write, informally and off-the-cuff, their responses to a particular question about the material, then, after, five minutes or so of such “freewriting,” have them share their responses with each other in groups of three for an additional five minutes, with the directive that they should pin down one point of overlap between their responses and one point of difference. Finally, have them share these points of connection and differentiation with the larger group as a segue into an open discussion.

• Create assignments that require students to use the Discussion Board feature of your course’s BlackBoard page, and then review those exchanges before class and use them to generate a set of questions that will carry the discussion further during the actual class-meeting.

• Lay out ground rules of civility at the beginning of the semester to steer students away from the possibility of silencing each other through rude or hostile assertions.

• Make a point of memorizing everyone’s name during the first day or two of class (learning them in rows or clusters makes this surprisingly easy), so soon thereafter you can not only call on each student by name but, as student-comments accumulate, you can connect one comment to another and another in ways that will increasingly help students talk to each other about the course-materials. For example: “Does everyone notice the way Jenny’s comment extends what Peter said a few minutes ago, and how both of these ideas were anticipated by Julie’s remark at the beginning of class? Doesn’t Frank’s idea seem at odds with these –
Frank, what do you think? Remind us of what you said about this. And Jenny get ready to make a rebuttal!”

- In guiding discussion, avoid overly general questions like “Are any of these ideas particularly compelling?” Also, avoid simple yes-or-no questions, as these will usually yield simple yes-or-no answers that don’t really move the discussion forward.
- Listen closely to what students say and, as you respond to their points, try to blend moment by moment encouraging, confidence-building talk together with more questions that probe more deeply or push for more elaborate connections between materials. This blend will both positively reinforce the students’ participation and push it to a new level. Example: “That’s a great point, Mark, but, if the authors of last night’s reading were here, what do you think they might say? Anyone?”
- Before starting class-discussion, open with a mini-lecture that concludes with several broad questions that sketch fundamental conflicts related to the material you’ve covered, and then ask students which side in each of these conflicts they support and why. Encourage them to persuade each other to adopt one or another side. If these conflicts are particularly complicated, create a handout that clearly maps them and distribute it to students and use it as a springboard for discussion.
- In the final few minutes of class discussion, ask students to write out informal paragraphs about the key items to have emerged during the discussion (“Which points that have arisen over the last 30 minutes are most important and why?”), and let them know ahead of time that this will be a routine feature of your class-meetings. These short in-class writings might be worth one-point each, and students can perhaps accumulate a total of ten points from them toward their final grade. This activity will likely increase their involvement in the preceding discussion.
- Always remind students at several points during discussion that the purpose of the discussion is to generate ideas for writing, that this is not idle chat but a very direct, material preparation for drafting their next major paper. As students share ideas, let them know which ones would be great to explore more elaborately in the paper or which ones might lead to a dead-end with regard to the readings they’ll need to discuss in that paper. And encourage them to take notes and even write at greater length while the discussion is unfolding.
- Jot down particularly worthwhile comments from students on the board.
- Try to articulate your own thoughts with explicit reference to particular comments made by particular students, as in “What I’m saying here is very close to what Suzanne said a few minutes ago, when she said that . . .” And, of course, make the same move when you pose questions.