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| Teaching Commons

How to Get Students to Talk in Class



DECENTRALIZE

- Get them talking to each other, not just to you.
- Literally tell them to address their comments to each other.
- Try not to respond to every student comment; instead ask the class what they think about what has just been said.
- As an icebreaker, ask a question for which there is no single correct answer and go around the table with it. (Example: What is the first adjective that comes to mind when you think of the protagonist of this story? Or: On a scale of 1 to 10, rate the effectiveness of Allied military leadership in 1916.) With this strategy, you can begin the discussion with 100 percent participation, and you can subvert the usual hierarchy by inviting two or three of the more passive students to explicate their answers.
- If the discussion group is large, divide it into smaller units, each one dealing with the same or separate problems in the reading. Float from group to group, giving guidance and answering questions when needed. When the period is nearly over, leave about twenty minutes to reassemble the class and have the small groups report to each other.

SHARE THE AUTHORITY

- Have students nominate topics for discussion at the beginning of a class. These can be problems, confusions, interesting points, or basic ideas in the text. List the nominations and let the group pick those they want to cover.
- Delegate responsibility for bringing in discussion questions to students (use a sign up sheet, grade the questions, work on the art of good question crafting).

CONSIDER YOUR QUESTIONS

- Try not to use rhetorical questions or “yes/no” “agree/disagree” questions.
- Pose an either/or question, e.g., “Is the frontier or the industrial revolution more important for an understanding of American character?” Have the class divide physically into those who favor each side and those who are undecided. Have the pro and con sides debate the issue, with the undecided free to contribute at any time. Instruct students to move to the other group if they change their view during the debate. This kind of debate can encourage intellectual flexibility and help students clarify value positions and levels of argument.
- Use material “in hand” to stimulate discussion. You can pass out poll results, historical documents, pictures, etc. Material in hand is easier to discuss than readings done and perhaps forgotten.

Learn More About Effective Questions

GIVE THEM TIME TO THINK

- Silence is okay, really!

RESOURCES

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Leading Discussion Groups

Teaching Plan Elements for Small Groups

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- Begin the class by giving students five to ten minutes to write on a topic relevant to the discussion. This will give them time to gather their thoughts, particularly with complex material. It will also reinforce the utility of writing for sorting out one's thoughts.
- If they seem to need more time to think, ask them to turn to a classmate and brainstorm some responses to your question for two or three minutes.

RESPOND TO "OFF TARGET" COMMENTS ENCOURAGINGLY

- Even if the comment is completely wrong or "off the wall," thank the student for sharing their idea and—this is your creative challenge of the day—find a way to link their concept back on the correct track of discussion.
- A repertoire of encouraging comments is useful here: "Thank you for those thoughts on the matter. If you were to approach the concept from a slightly different angle, you might see that..." or, "I'm glad you brought up that idea. It reminds me that one of our concerns here is actually..." or, "With a bit more development, we could turn that idea around to the point that..."
- After class, take the time to talk with the student who made the erroneous comment and discuss the issue with him or her then. This will reinforce that you want people to take risks with their ideas in class, and yet you are committed to helping your students understand the material correctly.
- A graphic display helps students keep track of an argument and think schematically. For example, put a certain outcome or viewpoint on the board and ask the students to work backwards through the most plausible causal chains or logical defense. Let students explore multiple pathways.

USE STRATEGIC BODY LANGUAGE

- Literally push your chair away from the table during the discussion, signaling that the forum is now theirs.
- Nod your head encouragingly, place your hand over your mouth when a student is speaking (this signals that you are not going to interrupt them; it also helps give the impression of open consideration and reserving judgment).
- Try not to cross your arms or frown when students are speaking; these are discouraging signals.

TAKE NOTES WHEN STUDENTS ARE SPEAKING

- This shows them that you value what they say and are learning from them.
- Taking notes allows you to remain engaged in the discussion without dominating it; it also helps you ask students questions when you want them to clarify their ideas.
- Taking notes helps you remember what the students said so that you can refer to their comments later, which also shows them that you value their ideas. This will encourage them to speak in the future.

USE ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Solo free write: give them time to jot down some ideas in response to a problem or question before you expect them to have an answer ready.

Think-Pair-Share: ask them to turn to the student next to them and discuss the problem or question you have posed; after this, they will have some ideas to share with the class as a whole.

Small Groups: put the class into groups of three or four and have them assign a scribe/spokesperson who will present the ideas they generate. Give them problems to solve or questions to answer or material to analyze from different perspectives. Sample small group exercises

Skills building activities: help students engage actively with the material through creative exercises that help them build critical skills.

SEE ALSO

Small Groups and Discussions