

Tools for Leading Discussion Sections

Here's a short list of activities you can use in discussion sections to help motivate active learning, and to also help you assess whether your students are understanding the material.

Focused Listing (what I termed 'organized brainstorming' in my presentation) – you can pose a question and allow students to think about the answer. Students can work on it individually first, then discuss it in their table groups, and then you can create a whole class list – asking each individual to contribute, but allowing students to pass. In general, this involves asking students to produce what they know. It can be used to assess what they remember from a prerequisite course (e.g., "List all the components of ___" or "List all the historical influences on ___"). These can also be used to assess what students have gained from a reading assignment, a lecture, or from a previous class discussion.

Each-One-Teach-One – This activity allows students to be 'experts' on a sub-topic in their groups. I've used it in the past as a means to review before an exam, but you can also use this as a way to cover a multifaceted topic without having to lecture on it yourself. The idea is that each small group will have students who present (to the group) on all topics that need to be covered. *There are a couple of ways to implement this:*

1. In class, you assign 'brainstorming' groups that discuss (and take notes on) a specific topic in depth. You then send a representative for each of the brainstorming groups into a newly formed group (I'll call them home groups, for simplicity).
2. Several days before section, divide the class into four or five brainstorming groups and assign each group a topic. Let students know how long they'll have to present the information to their home group, so they can prepare appropriately.

Once students are in their home groups, each member has a limited amount of time to share their information. I've also asked the brainstorming groups in the past to post the information they had on a Blackboard discussion board I've created. This way, students can use this information to review for exams.

Small group discussion about reading – I do this at the very beginning of class on a regular basis. The discussions don't have to be longer than 7 minutes, but this format helps in holding students accountable to their group mates so they prepare better for class.

Minute Paper – at the end of either lecture or section, you can ask students to write a "minute paper" about the main topic of the day. You then collect the papers and see where the group stands as far as their understanding of the topic and their ability to paraphrase the main ideas (*this is a great idea to do in conjunction with your professors and the other TA's – you can have the 'minute paper' written at the end of lecture and have students submit the paper to their TA on their way out of class. This way, the TA can make sure to cover the appropriate topics during discussion section*).

Think-Pair-Share – This is similar to the focused listing activity, but can take a much shorter amount of time. You can pose a question (this is especially good for open-ended questions), and tell students to think about their answer for about 30 seconds to a minute. Then, you pair them up and tell them to discuss their answers with their partners for a minute or two. You can then ask for three or four volunteers to share their answers (or their partner’s answers) with the rest of the class. This activity gives all students time to think through the question(s) asked and provides for a low-stakes chance to share their answers/opinions with a single classmate before doing so with the rest of the class. It also allows you to place quieter students with more talkative students (if needed).

Muddiest Point/Clearest Point – At the end of class, you can ask students to tell you what was one thing they learned in section (clearest point), and what topic/issue/point was most problematic for them to understand (muddiest point). Once you compile the muddiest points, you might find that a large group of students finds a specific topic difficult. You can then choose to either cover the topic in the next discussion section, tell your professor about it (at which point s/he might opt to cover it during lecture, or you can point your students to online resources or post more information on the topic on Blackboard.

There were also a couple of topics that you guys had questions about which I hadn’t thought of covering. Here they are, with brief suggestions and online resources for the ones I’ve found:

1. Setting a respectful classroom environment

It’s important to remind students that we all come with ‘baggage’ – we have different background and we’ve all had different experiences. It is especially important to remind students of ways to appreciate these differences in classes where topics of identity, race, ethnicity and gender come up.

- <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/getArticle.cfm?id=2429>
- <http://www.oncourseworkshop.com/Getting%20On%20Course015.htm>
- http://cet.usc.edu/resources/ta_resources/discussions/environment/index.html

3. Staying on topic, and redirecting the discussion once you’ve gone off-topic

Not all discussion that veers from the lesson plan is bad. However, it is important that you are able to assess when it is time to get back to the lesson plan. I often use Powerpoint as an organizational tool to make sure that I remember where I was before we went in a different direction. I also then feel more responsible to at least try and accomplish what I’ve set out to cover.

- http://cet.usc.edu/resources/ta_resources/discussions/flow/index.html

4. Coordinating information delivered in multiple sections taught by multiple TAs

One thing I'd suggest to do is to set up a weekly meeting time for TAs to agree on topics/activities to cover during sections (in addition to meeting regularly with the instructor(s) for the course). During these meetings, you can decide exactly what to cover and divide the responsibilities between the TAs – say, one TA can be in charge of a handout covering topic 1, while another TA comes up with leading questions for a beginning activity to cover topic 2, etc. Make sure you're all on board with using the same activities and covering the same material so there are no discrepancies in information students are getting in the different sections.

-http://trc.virginia.edu/Publications/Teaching_Concerns/Spring_2002/TC_Spring_2002_Cronmiller.htm

Here's a list of some books that the CTL (and Albertsons Library) have for reference:

Bain, Ken. *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004.

Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas: the Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Davis, Barbara Gross. *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.

McKeachie, Wilbert James, Marilla D. Svinicki, and Barbara K. Hofer. *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

Some helpful websites:

Boise State CTL: www.ctl.boisestate.edu

(especially the A-Z topics here: <http://ctl.boisestate.edu/resources/links/a-z.asp>)

FAQs about discussions: <http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/bib/faqdisc.htm>

Teaching through discussion: <http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/Bulletin/Discussion.html>

Leading Discussions: http://cet.usc.edu/resources/teaching_learning/discussions.html

Puzzle Maker: <http://puzzlemaker.discoveryeducation.com/WordSearchSetupForm.asp>

Powerpoint activities (Jeopardy, Who Wants to be a Millionaire, Hollywood Squares):

<http://teach.fcps.net/trt10/PowerPoint.htm>