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"Can We Talk?": Strategies for Successful Classroom Discussion

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Leading Class Discussion

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John Bird

Open vs. Closed Questions

- Closed questions lead to specific answers: What? Who? When?
- Open questions lead to speculative answers: Why? How? So what?
- Closed questions are useful to pin down specifics
- But open questions are the best for full discussion
- Good to begin with closed questions and move to open questions—then repeat and vary

Questions, Not Answers

- Make sure your questions are actually questions, not answers
- Not good: “Slavery and states’ rights were really important causes of the Civil War, weren’t they?”
- Better: “What is the significance of the slavery and states’ rights as causes of the Civil War?”

The Sound of Silence

- One of the biggest mistakes instructors make is asking a question and then answering it immediately
- Don't panic—wait for the students to think
- Rephrase the question if you think it was not clear
- But WAIT! Be silent and they will answer (eventually)

The Importance of Listening and Feedback

- You must listen intently to student answers to guide a successful discussion
- Don't be thinking so much about the next question that you ignore what students are saying
- Give good feedback, both through comments and body language
- Listening is the key to the flow of the discussion

Guiding Without Directing

- Leading a discussion means being the guide rather than the director
- When a discussion goes well, your role becomes akin to a traffic cop
- Don't over-prepare notes and questions: doing so will move you toward forcing the discussion rather than leading
- Have a plan, but make it minimal—be ready to follow new paths
- Live in the moment and go with the flow

Event/Object/Meaning

- For a good discussion, follow the pattern event/object/meaning
- Before students can discuss and analyze, they must have experienced the object of discussion—in other words, they must have had an “event”
- The event is usually reading or preparation before class
- But students often skip the “event”

Event/Object/Meaning (cont.)

- If you get a sense that students are not prepared, recreate the event: read a passage, or have them read aloud (better)
- If visual or aural, look or listen again
- When you are sure the students have experienced the event, move on to the object
- DON'T try to jump right to meaning: “What does this mean?” “Why is this important?”

Event/Object/Meaning (cont.)

- Instead, examine the object: the text, the chapter, the painting, the theory, etc.
- Ask closed questions to make sure students understand the object: “What are the five stages that Piaget outlines?”
- Move to open questions about the object: “How does stage one operate?” “How do these stages relate to your experience?”

Event/Object/Meaning (cont.)

- Continue asking closed and, more often, open, questions about the object
- The discussion will move toward meaning naturally if you guide the student through fully discussing the object
- Allow the students to arrive at meaning—multiple meanings, multiple conclusions—don't just stop at one

Problems

- Students who talk too much
- Students/classes who won't talk
- Bad Questions/Bad answers
- Digressions

Students Who Talk Too Much

- Call on other students
- Make a comment such as, “Now don’t let Jason do all the work.”
- Announce that you want to hear from everyone who has a comment before you hear from anyone twice
- If the problem persists, have a private talk with the student, thanking him or her for the contributions, but pointing out why it is important to have everyone participate

Students Who Won't Talk

- Try eye contact with reluctant students
- Call on specific students, if you feel comfortable with that
- Comments such as, “Now let’s hear from someone who hasn’t talked yet.”
- Try group work or writing first; students will be more comfortable sharing with the whole class if they have already done some thinking

Classes Who Won't Talk

- Some classes will be stubbornly silent; remember to wait them out
- Silent classes may be unprepared or not engaged: remember event/object/meaning—make sure that they have experienced an event
- Group discussions can break down the class reluctance—you must provide clear questions
- Writing BEFORE answering can break the silence

Bad Questions

- We all ask bad questions occasionally; regroup and rephrase
- Remember to mix closed and open questions, generally starting with closed questions and moving to open—and then repeating the process
- Think about your questions right after class—if the discussion was good, what kinds of questions did you ask? If not so good, what were your questions?

Bad Answers

- When a student gives an answer that is clearly wrong or the result of illogical or sloppy thinking, resist the urge to correct immediately
- Turn the bad answer back to the class: “What do you think about what Mary said?”
- Gently guide the students back to better answers: “Is that what the text says? Do you think you understood that correctly?” Students can often figure it out for themselves

Bad Answers (cont.)

- Sometimes an answer is so bad that you should just move on...

Digressions

- Don't be alarmed at the first sign of an apparent digression—the discussion might go down a path even better than the one you planned
- If the discussion begins to get way off track, gently lead it back: “That’s an interesting interpretation, but let’s go back to the text. What is the main point of the third paragraph on page 147?”

Variations

- Group discussions
- Written discussions
- Mini-discussions
- PowerPoint discussions

Group Discussions

- As noted above, group discussions can be very valuable: they break the dynamic of the class, they put students in control, they involve more students, and they allow reluctant students to participate
- Consider making permanent groups for your class if you will use group discussion often—students will become more comfortable with people they get to know
- It helps to have a group leader, in both permanent and temporary groups

Group Discussion (cont.)

- Groups must have a clear task—an object to analyze, a problem
- It helps to provide a list of questions—students will wander aimlessly without them
- Move from group to group and help them stay on track, on task—pose new questions as you visit the group
- Have a class discussion after the group discussion to share ideas and make sure the whole class is on the same page

Written Discussions

- As noted above, writing can be a good way to spark discussion
- When you ask a question, rather than ask for an oral answer, ask the students to write the answer—then call on volunteers
- You can conduct a whole class or a big part of it as a written discussion, what I call a “write around”

Write Around

- In small groups if the class is large, or in a circle if the class is smaller, pose a question and have the students write an answer
- (I always sit in the large group, and sometimes in a small one, and write too)
- After a few minutes, tell them to pass their paper to their left, read the answer, then respond in writing
- Repeat for another cycle or so, then pose a new question
- At the end, students get their papers back, full of discussion

Mini-Discussions

- If you lecture as your main way of teaching, build mini-discussions into your lecture
- Stop after making a big point (your lecture becomes the “event”), then conduct a discussion
- A lecture punctuated with three or four mini-discussions will hold student interest better and help them to better engage with the material and think rather than passively receiving

PowerPoint Discussions

- PowerPoint can be mere information and a set of closed questions
- Try using a “Reverse PowerPoint”: make the bare bones of an outline, then have students fill in the bullet points (preferably, have one of them type in the content)
- Work discussion questions, closed and open, into the PowerPoint—pause and have a discussion during the presentation

Evaluating Discussion

- I don't really evaluate discussion, as in grade it—I assume that discussion has its own value in student learning
- Dave Rankin, former director of the TLC and the HMXP trainer, advocates giving the students note cards, on which they write down every day how they participated
- Several colleagues have some good rubrics for evaluating discussion, which I will can share
- There are many good rubrics online

Conclusions

- Class discussion is one of the best ways for students to take control of the class material, to think about it deeply, and to become engaged in the class
- Some people are better than others at leading discussion, but all of us can get better with good techniques and with practice
- Remember the main points of open questions vs. closed questions, waiting for answers (silence), and event/object/ meaning
- When a discussion goes well, it can be among your most rewarding teaching experiences—it's worth the risk and the pitfalls!

Materials

- Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* (Jossey-Bass, 1999) LB 2331 .B679 1999 [the best book on class discussion that we have in our library, as far as I can tell]
- The Art of Discussion Leading (video from the Derek Bok Center at Harvard—but you can find parts of it on YouTube) LB 2393 .A77 1995

Materials

- A worksheet from Carleton College, for students leading discussion, but has some good tips for instructors too:
<http://apps.carleton.edu/curricular/history/study/leaddiscussion/>
- From the TLC at Hanover College, taken from English professors at Virginia Tech, Fostering Effective Class Discussions:
- <http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/english/tc/discussion.htm>

Materials

- Good on group work, from *Tools For Teaching* by Barbara Gross Davis (we have this book in our library, and it is good):
- <http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/collaborative.html>
- From Columbia University, good guidelines for leading discussion:
- <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/tat/pdfs/discussions.pdf>