

Educational Support Cell (ESC)/TLDE Tips & Strategies

Maximizing class discussions

Class discussion can really be an energizing component of your lesson—picture students actually speaking to one another, posing questions, and making

To support you with this interactive classroom environment, we have already published *Tips* for facilitating the guided discussion and creating a facilitated learning environment (see volumes 7 and 8, 2014). Visit: <http://soc.mil/ESC>

connections to the topics. However, what if you've planned for the experience, you've launched that perfect question, and all you hear is? Or even worse, the "discussion" lapses into periods of silence interrupted by you as you pepper the quiet void with repeats of the question, or begin to fill in your own perspective on the topic?

Here are some simple ways to maximize your class discussions.

Think. Pair. Share

As the title says, pose the question and ask that students just think for a minute. Some instructors choose to turn this **Think**, into a **Write** for enhanced accountability.

After an appropriate pause, ask for students to turn to the person to his/her left or right (or pair up by rows in a large classroom with Row 1 turning around to pair up with the person behind him in Row 2, etc.) and share what your thoughts were.

This gets students immediately discussing the information, and gives ALL students the chance to share in a very short time frame.

Pair. Share. Is also a great activity to call when you *do* ask a question and you *don't* get any responses—the **dead classroom** affect. If no one is responding, just call for a Pair-Share. The classroom should immediately break into the joyful chorus of socialized learning.

Evaluate your "hooks"

Designing a question or thought broad enough for meaningful discussion is not as easy as it may seem. Evaluate what you are using as these jumping off points for discussions. You don't have to have a question. Oftentimes a quotation, short scenario, or hypothetical situation can also generate the depth of thought and discussion we desire.

Be comfortable in the silence

Oftentimes the biggest inhibitor of a quality classroom discussion is the instructor. The average wait-time—the period of silence that follows an instructor's questions—is about 1.5 seconds.....though it

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may feel like minutes when you are the one who launched the question and are now standing there enveloped in the silence. Research suggests that if we wait three (3) or more seconds, the number of student responses increase, and the length of their responses increase. Three (3) seconds!

Embrace the silence. You have asked a good question (one that you've planned) and you have to allow your students the time to process that question and then formulate a reasonable response. Sure, if you've just asked a YES/NO sort of question, you should expect a quick "shout-out". But a response that necessitates some higher-order thought should take longer than 3 seconds to compose, so be patient.

If you feel that you need to repeat the question, or start clarifying it. **DON'T.** Your students will quickly figure out that when you ask a question you will actually answer it yourself if they just wait you out.

You may start to feel awkward in the silence, but know that your students are starting to squirm as well. If the silence gets too loud, you can always say "Pair, Share". You might even preface your question with a qualifying parameter such as "Take a moment to consider..." In this way, students understand that an immediate answer is not required and they have license to contemplate a response.

Make use of pre-assignments

If at all possible, have students interact with materials prior to the discussion to give them some knowledge of the topic. This enables you to start the discussion rather than to fill the need to first provide (or push) information to them.

Provide a question or two to consider with the pre-assignment. This will set the purpose for completing the reading prior to the class. Some possible questions that will provide fodder for discussions may include:

- What are the main themes of the reading? (Comprehension)
- Select a concept or principle in the reading, clearly define or describe it, and then indicate how it applies to you or something we've learned. Provide sufficient details to justify convincingly that the concept/principle indeed applies as you suggest. (Application/Connections)
- Identify two concepts or principles presented in the readings and, compare and contrast the two selections. Explain why you chose these to write about. If you wish, one of the concepts or principles may be selected from another reading, lecture, or discussion in this course. (Analysis)
- Write a critical perspective on some aspect of this reading, citing evidence that prompts you to agree or disagree with the author's perspective. Note that a critique may be positive, negative, or some combination of both. Your evidence may be based on personal experience, observations of others, reports of others, scientific findings, or logic. When citing evidence, identify the type(s) of evidence you are using. (Evaluation)
- Citing page number(s), quote verbatim a statement or brief passage that elicits in you some type of emotional response: excitement, frustration, surprise, confusion—or some combination of the aforementioned. Then identify your emotional response, describe the meaning(s) that the statement or passage has for you, and provide actual or possible reasons for your response. (Analysis)

To have a truly facilitative environment, you need to prepare for and implement effective class discussions. Have some "tricks" ready to get students interacting with not only one another, but also the materials and content at hand. This peer-to-peer or "social" learning is powerful and can enhance your classroom environment.

For additional assistance or to further this discussion, contact the Educational Support Group (ESC) at TLDE.