Conducting Effective Discussion Sections

Graduate Student Teaching Orientation
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Workshop Outcomes

- Be familiar with ways to create an ‘open’ environment that encourages participation.
- Know some ‘active learning’ strategies for creating effective discussion sections.
- Know teaching and learning resources available.
Discussions -- What and When

- A discussion can involve an entire section period;
- A discussion can be set up by a summary of a lecture, a podcast, a set question -- other ways?
- Discussion can be intermittent in section.
Activity: What can we learn about good discussion sections from experience?

5 minutes:

- Find a partner or two.
- Discuss your experiences as a student or teacher in a small classroom environment.
- Identify activities or teacher and student behaviors that made it enjoyable and got you or your students learning. Identify frustrations.
- Record responses on handout and white board.
Good Discussion Experiences

Include:

- Allowing students time to answer.
- LISTENING to students.
- Being aware of body language and cues that students want to speak.
- Validating all answers and linking to previous responses when possible (show that what they say matters!)
Good Discussions include:

- Effective use of the room (e.g., if chairs are moveable, have them circle).
- Everyone can hear other comments.
- Students focusing on each other, not the instructor or visuals, such as PowerPoints.
- Involvement of all students.
How can we create open, safe discussion?
from B.G. Davis’s *Tools for Teaching*

- Emphasize the importance of considering different approaches and viewpoints.
- Establish rules for civil discussion -- ask the class to create the rules.
  - Monitor your own behavior in responding to students.
  - Respond promptly to distasteful remarks, even if joking.
  - Avoid singling out students as representative of a group or a school of thought.
How do you encourage participation?

- Wait at least 30 seconds for an answer.
- If one person is dominating, indicate “let’s hear from some others . . .”
- Ask students to pair and share first, then share ideas with the entire class.
- Other ideas?
Dealing with “right” and “wrong” answers:

- When the answer is correct, praise.
- If answer is incomplete, acknowledge what is right and ask for more information.
- When answer is unclear, try to rephrase, or ask other students to rephrase.
- When answer is wrong, ask for clarification, or thank student and ask for other thoughts.
- Other ideas?

- Buzz groups
- Panels
- Debates
- Brainstorming
- Case studies or problem based learning
Are our students learning:

**Tools for Assessing the Discussion and Remaining Questions**

- Quizzes
- Surveys
- One minute papers
- Homework problems
- Reflective journaling or free writes
Conclusions & General Advice

✓ Be prepared to teach and be prepared to be flexible.

✓ Clearly communicate the goal of the discussion and the expected outcome.
  
  • Goal: What are we learning about today and why?
  • Outcome: What will the student do to demonstrate having achieved the goal?

✓ Use active learning strategies to engage students in class.

✓ Reach & include all your students: support a ‘safe’ environment & vary your instructional strategies.
Center Resources

- Gregg Camfield, podcast from Center workshop last year: [http://crte.ucmerced.edu/node/19](http://crte.ucmerced.edu/node/19).