Getting the Most from Class: 
Ideas & Tips for 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 some simple assessment techniques for identifying student learning needs and determining if learning goals have been met to create a responsive, tailored learning experience.
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 your or your students learning. Identify frustrations.
- Record responses on handout and white board.
How can we create open, safe discussion?
from B.G. Davis’s *Tools for Teaching*

- Emphasize the importance of considering different approaches and viewpoints
- Be clear that you value all contributions while simultaneously upholding standards for rigorous thinking
- Encourage all students to participate, plan to enable this
- 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 can we focus what happens in the classroom?

- Plan each class!

- Share with your students the
  - Goal of the class – what the class is designed to achieve
  - The rationale for the goal and what they will be doing to achieve it.
  - The learning outcome - what they will be able to do to demonstrate they have achieved the goal.
Beyond ‘open’ discussion: Alternative, Active Learning Instructional Methods from Reaching All Students

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

**Tools for Assessing Student Attitudes & Needs**

- 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 day’s activities 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.

✓ Assess for and acknowledge student learning needs: have they achieved the goal/outcome? Am I meeting their needs?