

USING CLASSROOM DISCUSSION EFFECTIVELY

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BOOKLET

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Deanship of Skills Development

Using Classroom Discussion Effectively

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عمادة تطوير المهارات

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Using Classroom Discussion Effectively



Although lectures typically involve students being passive recipients of knowledge, a classroom discussion requires students to contribute to conversations, answer questions, raise questions, or offer opinions. Any learning that might take place in a classroom where any of the heterogeneous forms of class discussion are being utilized is expected to be active and interactive. In this booklet, I will define what a class discussion entails, discuss a range of learning-based purposes for using discussions in a college classroom, and then review a number of tips used for planning and managing classroom discussions to help foster maximum learning gains in students.

What is a Classroom Discussion?

Classroom discussion involves giving all students in the class an equal opportunity to contribute their ideas, knowledge, and opinions in a verbal exchange with other students and the teacher with the expectation that all students will participate in the process. Though this definition is broad, it includes some key components of an effective discussion. First, classroom discussions should involve the expectation that all students participate. Second, actions should be taken by the professor to ensure that all students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions during classroom discussions. In other words, just throwing out a closed-ended question about the material to the class, and knowing who is going to answer that question before you ask it, is not a classroom discussion.

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Many classroom discussions do not necessarily involve vibrant and energetic exchanges among a number of students in the classroom. In fact, many professors have probably seen the looks on their students' faces as they pose a question to the class. Most bury their heads waiting and hoping for the question to be answered by those few students who typically speak up in class (Korn & Sikorski, 2010). Perhaps those who bury their heads are actually hoping that the teacher is not so bold as to ask them directly if they know the answer to the question. These types of anecdotal thoughts about trying to generate classroom discussions are actually quite accurate according to the literature. Nunn (1996) found that only about a quarter of students in each class typically speak during discussions. In fact, on average, only about 2-3% of class time is spent engaged in classroom discussions in most college classrooms.

Given that teachers in college courses do not ordinarily spend lots of time creating and facilitating classroom discussions, an important question is what function classroom discussion might serve.

The Purpose of Classroom Discussions

Classroom Discussions Foster Meta-Cognition

First, and probably of greatest importance, is the fact that classroom discussions represent opportunities for students to practice their critical thinking skills (Garside, 1996; McKeachie, 1999; Rocca, 2010). Though the Internet and other media sources offer us mountains of information that can be obtained effortlessly, success in today's society undoubtedly boils down to more than just absorbing as much of this information as possible (Halpern, 2002). Rather, being able to select the most reliable sources of information, synthesize multiple types of evidence and information and then use this conglomerate of knowledge to solve real-world questions is what critical thinking is all about.

Thankfully, research has shown that teachers can create classes and classroom environments that foster the development of critical thinking skills in students that can then be applied to novel situations that they encounter in their work and family lives (Halpern, 2002). In particular, classroom discussions that require students to develop hypotheses about how to respond to a problem-based scenario and then offer a well-reasoned solution represents the essence of meta-cognitive processing. It is these types of classroom discussions that help students to "think about how they think" (meta-cognition) and immerse themselves in the processes that enhance their problem solving skills.(Korn & Sikorski, 2010).

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For instance, Halpern (2002) described a classroom discussion scenario where she told a detailed story that required students to identify a course of action they would take if an unidentified aircraft was headed toward their ship at sea during a time of high tension between two different countries. The exercise requires students to identify potential solutions to the problem that would be in the best interest of all people involved, and time is limited. Many students think quickly, and with great confidence, and voice their opinion to fire a missile at the incoming aircraft. Upon realizing that they would have shot down a commercial airliner with 200-300 innocent people aboard, students are engaged and interested in discussing the type of thinking errors and situational factors that may have led to them to arrive at the ultimately wrong decision. In this example, Halpern has undoubtedly tapped into the students' ability to use meta-cognition: to think about how they think.

These types of classroom discussions aimed at helping students to practice meta-cognitive processing take a considerable amount of time. These are not brief discussions; however, it is important to note that the time and effort devoted to these types of classroom discussions results in critical thinking skills that transfers to novel situations and problems (Halpern, 2002). Again, in the end, memorized facts alone are not enough for students to succeed in the real-world. In fact, when rating teaching effectiveness of colleagues, faculty members consider a teacher's ability to foster critical thinking in students as one of the most important ingredients for effective teaching (Buskist, Sikorski, Buckley, & Saville, 2002).

Classroom Discussions Foster Increased Comprehension

In a comprehensive meta-analytic review, Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey and Alexander (2009) found that multiple different types of classroom discussions resulted in dramatic increases in students' willingness to speak during class. More importantly, this active involvement by students during class discussion resulted in better comprehension of the text and lecture material. Although classroom discussions take a considerable amount of time and effort to create and facilitate, students truly learn from these experiences. In fact, given research in cognitive psychology over the last several decades (Halpern, 2002), it is probably of little surprise to note that talking about information to be learned helps students memorize and understand concepts and utilize learned material to solve problems.

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Classroom Discussions Provide Practice in Public Speaking

I encourage my students to talk and discuss topics in class through the implementation of a class participation grade, and much research support this initiative in fostering more student discussion in class (e.g., Rocca, 2010). Many students complain about this aspect of my grading. My response to these complaints is always the same. I know of very few occupations where an individual is expected to remain completely silent and inactive if they wish to progress within a company or within a graduate school program. I explain that significant salary raises are seldom given to those individuals who sit silently at their desks, finish their work in an adequate fashion, and rarely offer opinions on how things could change to maximize benefits for the company, customers, or clients. Fostering classroom discussions gives students the opportunity to practice their speaking skills and observe strategies used by other effective speakers (Garside, 1996; Rocca, 2010). In addition, given that we live in a diverse and global society with considerable competition for jobs and resources, engaging in classroom discussion can also serve the purpose of helping students feel more comfortable interacting with diverse groups (Rocca, 2010). Given that college courses may represent the last time students will receive feedback on their speaking, reasoning, and social skills, there is no reason why teachers should not encourage and reward students for involvement in classroom discussions. After all, generating a bit of discomfort in students is a small price to pay if it helps them achieve their career goals in the globally competitive job market.

Tips for Maximizing Learning Gains Achieved Through Classroom Discussion

Now that the value of including classroom discussions has been established, it is important to outline useful tips for creating discussion environments suited for maximum student learning gains. In all likelihood, given a professor's unique teaching philosophy and the discipline they teach, some of these recommendations may prove more valuable than others. After all, each teacher has his or her own style and learning goals for their students.

Establish Rules for Discussion

Your expectations for your students in regard to classroom discussions should be established on the first day of class. For shy students, professors should stress their willingness to support individuals in making gradual strides toward talking in

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class during discussions. Tips for managing anxiety and tension should be offered, as well as counseling services when levels of anxiety are seen in the student to be debilitating and impairing.

Once general expectations are established, ground rules for discussion vary from class to class. Davis (2009) suggested a number of strategies for maximizing the learning value of classroom discussions. For instance, assigning one member of the group to be the recorder of opinions and thoughts and one student to be the speaker of opinions or thoughts once the entire classroom reunites to discuss group work is advised. In fact, in order to keep students engaged and attentive to the task, I often tell students that I will assign the person responsible for sharing group work with the entire class about halfway through the exercise. That way, all students stay involved in the discussion in anticipation that any one of them could be called on to speak for their group.

Some teachers also find it worthwhile to provide education about active listening processes, managing conflicts when viewpoints clash, staying on topic during discussions and even how to make others feel comfortable sharing divergent views (Davis, 2009; Sikorski & Korn, 2010). With these types of tools, students may even feel more comfortable, even initially, participating and thinking about classroom discussions in a critical way. Other researchers have described the value of having a type of discussion debriefing, where groups reflect on how well the rules were followed and what was gained from the experience (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999). Perhaps, it is this group evaluation, coupled with education on the tools used to succeed and benefit from classroom discussions, that can leave students feeling more empowered and capable engaging in a process that some find disconcerting.

Forming Classroom Subgroups for Discussion

Given that research suggests that only about a quarter of students in college classes participate actively in discussions, forming smaller subgroups within a larger classroom can prove most useful. Korn and Sikorski (2010) suggested that forming small subgroups of 4-6 students creates environments that are less intimidating for students and more conducive to the active expression of opinions by all members of the group. In addition, it is often wise to form diverse subgroups of students who may not know one another, possess different beliefs and backgrounds or display varying styles and amounts of talking in class. In this way, not only is a more comfortable environment established for classroom discussions, but the opportunity for students to learn from others who may be different from themselves is maximized.

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Sometimes, though, it may not be feasible to break large groups of students into subgroups. Discussion is still possible in large classrooms and several adjustments can be made to maximize participation and engagement with the process with large classes. Of course, the risk of trying to generate discussions in large classrooms is that only a few students will share their thoughts and opinions. To combat this risk, teachers can give students a couple of minutes to write down their thoughts on a particular issue. Then, teachers can solicit the opinions of a few volunteers regarding what thoughts they wrote down. In this simple intervention, it is not necessarily guaranteed that all students in a large classroom will participate in the discussion, but it is more likely that most students considered the question and wrote down a response. As such, though not necessarily speaking aloud every time, each student is thinking about their thinking, using meta-cognitive processes.

Master teacher Bill McKeachie (1999) offered a couple of other useful ideas to pursue when attempting to generate discussions in large classes. Having classroom debates on a controversial topic can prove useful, especially when clear guidelines are offered. For instance, some students can be assigned to record the process of the debate and offer their opinions on the most viable arguments posited, as well as their reasons for arriving at a particular conclusion. McKeachie also described the use of the “fishbowl” technique, where 6-8 students in large classes are selected to discuss and debate topics covered in class over the last week. To maximize meta-cognitive gains, for all students, the teacher is advised to stress that students not participating in the actual discussion or debate are responsible for recording arguments, thinking about the process of the discussion and developing their own opinions.

Be Open to New Experiences

According to Halonen (2002), an important factor related to an effective classroom teacher is to remain open to experiences. In planning for and managing classroom discussions, this advice rings especially true. In allowing students to speak openly about their opinions and the benefits they derive from exchanging ideas with other students, instructors are essentially telling the student that they matter. For classroom discussion, being recognized as an authority figure or the only person who plans what is covered in each class is not important. Trusting the class, under the established discussion rules, to create and facilitate their own learning gains is important in establishing a sense of community and energizing students to learn in a way that is not nearly as comfortable and effortless as listening to a lecture. Even

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when professors have high expectations for student discussion and participation in individual classes, students will rise to the occasion when the expectation is clearly established, effective questions are posited, the teacher is available and prepared to facilitate the process and the professor offers affirming support and constructive feedback (Dallimore, Hertenstein, Platt, 2004; Rocca, 2010).

Teach Students to Ask Engaging Questions

King (1995) described a unique strategy for generating useful classroom discussions. Specific knowledge is offered to students on distinguishing between closed-ended, factual questions and open-ended thought-provoking questions designed to foster critical thinking. After receiving this information, students are broken into pairs and asked to construct several critical thinking questions based on the material covered in lecture and recently assigned outside readings. Members of the pair then take turns asking and answering critical thinking questions. This reciprocal peer questioning process facilitates critical thinking in individual students. When this practice is then applied to the rest of the classroom discussions throughout the semester, and students are graded on their ability to adhere to this model, more lasting learning gains are possible. For instance, some professors require students to generate viable critical thinking questions frequently and then ask students to share their critical thinking questions with the class while a lecture on the topic is delivered (Connor-Greene, 2005). In this way, a lecture becomes more than just information transfer. With well conceived critical thinking questions associated with the information transfer goals of the lecture, higher order processing, critical thinking, and meta-cognitive processing in students becomes more likely.

Being Supportive, Understanding and Just

In terms of the success of classroom discussions with regard to student learning and satisfaction, several personal factors of the instructor are worth noting (Rocca, 2010). Research suggests that professors should avoid sarcasm and making negative comments about the discussion-based contributions of students. Instead, professors should make eye contact, offer positive praise for student contributions to discussions, and even strive to participate actively in the discussions themselves. Although easier said than done, establishing a climate of mutual respect and positivity helps to encourage student participation in classroom discussions and maximizes their learning in the process.

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Using Online Discussions

In many classes, across multiple disciplines, professors will provide students with an online forum to engage in fruitful discussions about class material outside of class. Whether it be *Blackboard Vista* discussion pages, e-mail lists, or some other way to engage students in discussions outside of class, these types of initiatives serve many useful purposes. Most notably, online discussion pages for classes that meet in person can foster the development of a sense of community, much like you might see at a work site or within a graduate program. Online forums provide a safe and comfortable setting for shy students to share their thoughts. Finally, and not to be underestimated, it's a talking world. Providing more opportunities for students to get feedback on their opinions or thought processes, and benefit from listening to and thinking about the opinions of others, represents an invaluable learning experience applicable to the real-world.

Summary

- Classroom discussions can be pursued in a number of ways, but a couple of hard and steady rules can be applied:
 - Classroom discussions should involve the expectation of participation for all students.
 - Professors can do many things to create a comfortable environment for classroom discussions to take place.
- There are many important purposes for classroom discussion that are supported through mountains of literature:
 - Classroom discussions facilitate critical thinking and meta-cognitive processing.
 - Classroom discussions foster better comprehension of text and lecture material in students
 - Classroom discussions provide opportunities for students to practice their speaking skills, model other speakers and become more comfortable working with diverse groups of people.
- There are many ways that one can go about improving the discussions that take place in their classes, and these tips are readily applied across disciplines in academia:
 - Establish clear rules for classroom discussions.
 - Form subgroups of students within large classes when you can.
 - Be open to new experiences.
 - Educate students about how to ask critical thinking questions at the start of the semester, before classroom discussions are even initiated.
 - Be supportive, understanding and just.
 - Utilize supplemental online discussion boards .

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References

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- In one of the most influential writings in the field devoted to teaching in college, student and professor views regarding the most important behaviors exhibited by effective college teachers is reviewed and discussed.
- Connor-Greene, P. A. (2005). Fostering meaningful classroom discussion: Student generated questions, quotations and talking points. *Teaching of Psychology*, 32, 173-175.
- This brief article outlines a pedagogical tool designed to help students ask questions consistent with the assessment and evaluation of critical thinking. It is proposed that with tools to ask more thought provoking questions, it is more likely that classroom discussions and even personal critical discourses will be of greater learning value in facilitating meta-cognitive processing.
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- The article reviews factors identified by students that related to the increased effectiveness of a grading policy that included the expectation for classroom discussion in all students. Students suggested that factors like: actively

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facilitating discussions, asking useful questions, providing positive feedback to students and creating a supportive classroom environment was related to positive student views of the utility of class participation requirements in college courses.

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- This book represents a comprehensive guide for teachers of college courses to utilize in delivering effective lectures, managing classroom discussions, providing mentoring services to students and negotiating a number of other common pitfalls of college professors.
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- This article showed that students enrolled in lecture or discussion-based courses on interpersonal communication both featured commensurate gains in critical thinking skills. Yet, the author discussed the importance of interpreting these findings in light of the fact that lectures are more commonly experienced by students, and this fact may leave some students feeling uncomfortable with new activities in active learning classrooms, potentially hampering their learning ability. It is suggested that with more active learning activities being pursued by college professors in the future, greater gains in critical thinking may be seen in students enrolled in 'active learning' courses who become more comfortable with active learning approaches.
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- This book chapter provides a thorough review of referents associated with the display of presence during the course of delivering lectures and guiding discussions in college courses. Personality factors, behaviors and pedagogical innovations consistent with the display of presence as a college professor are examined and reviewed.

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- This article attempts to guide the reader through the literature in cognitive psychology that could prove most useful to a professor attempting to create classroom environments most conducive to teaching meta-cognition and other advanced thinking skills. Research reviewed suggests that specific types of classroom discussions increase meta-cognitive potential in students. Thinking and processing skills learned through these types of discussions have been found to transfer to scenarios encountered outside of the class. The chapter suggests that psychologists are in a unique position to utilize their expertise in cognitive, emotional and behavioral factors to uncover the most effective ways to impart knowledge to students.
- King, A. (1995). Inquiring minds really do want to know: Using questioning to teach critical thinking. *Teaching of Psychology*, 22, 13-17.
- In this article, the author reviews an innovative strategy for promoting critical thinking in students through classroom discussion activities. In short, prior to initiating the actual classroom discussion exercises, information is provided to students regarding how best to formulate the types of questions that promote critical analysis in others. With this knowledge, students are thought to be better prepared to learn more during class discussions and even promote more lasting types of synthesis and analysis skills in other students who field their well constructed questions.
- Korn, J. R., & Sikorski, J. F. (2010). *A guide for beginning teachers of psychology*. Retrieved from <http://www.teachpsych.com/resources/e-books/guide2010/index.php>
- This book was designed for beginning teachers of psychology. The volume is devoted to a number of issues important to facilitating student successes in and out of the classroom. For instance, chapters on delivering effective lectures, managing classroom discussions and developing a philosophy of

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teaching are featured. In addition, other chapters in this volume are devoted to documenting the successes of the professor in order to increase their chances of obtaining promotion and tenure. Toward this end, chapters on developing a teaching portfolio and landing a teaching job in academia are featured.

- McKeachie, W. J. (1999). *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, research and theory for College and university teachers* (10th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
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- Murphy, P. K., Wilkinson, I. A. G., Soter, A. O., Hennessey, M. N., Alexander, J. F. (2009). Examining the effects of classroom discussion on students' comprehension of text: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 101, 740-764.
- Through an impressive meta-analysis, authors review the evidence regarding whether implementing classroom discussions, across college disciplines, leads to enhanced comprehension of text and lecture material. In general, results revealed that classroom discussion is associated with increased comprehension of class material, and the size of the impact varies based on the type of discussion method pursued.
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- This article reviews a number of purposes of classroom discussions in the college classroom. An argument is made for professors to strive to make discussions a part of their classrooms, as research suggests that this valuable learning tool is only utilized for about 2-3% of class time across college courses.

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- Rocca, K. A. (2010). Student participation in the college classroom: An extended multidisciplinary literature review. *Communication Education*, 59, 185-213.
- In this impressive literature review, the author outlines the value and purposes of including classroom discussion across many different types of college courses. In summarizing the review, the author provides a number of concrete steps that a professor can take to implement effective classroom discussions.

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King Fahd National Library Cataloging-in- Publication Data

L.D. no. 1434/ 7310

ISBN: 978- 603- 507- 130- 7



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