APPROACHES TO ENHANCE IN-CLASS DISCUSSION

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“Cool Tools”
What are we starting with?

- What goes well with the discussions you have in class?
- What does NOT go the way you want with discussions?
- Get into triads and use the huddle boards to take notes
It is important to know what you want the students to get out of discussion – if you don’t know yourself, or are using discussion to “fill time”, you will not get the results you want.

Why do you have class discussions?
There is no ONE right approach, and even a solid approach gets old.

Having 3-4 different kinds of discussion rotating in a class offers variety to keep students engaged AND allows different students to participate.

What kinds of discussion approaches do you use?
Some Different Discussion Approaches

• Small group discussion with large group “report out” (think-pair-share) on a single question
• Posing different questions to small groups and having them report their thoughts
• In-class writing and then discussing what students write
• Reading out loud the writing students prepared before class and using that as a starter
• Fish-bowl discussion (some students designated to talk, others must just watch/listen and take notes)
PREPARING STUDENTS FOR DISCUSSION

• At the beginning of the semester
  ▪ Talk about the reasons you will conduct discussions, and what you want the students to get from the activity.
  ▪ Talk about the kinds of discussions you will hold and what your expectations of them will be.
  ▪ Have them engage in a discussion of what good discussions consist of, and have them set ground rules.
PREPARING STUDENTS FOR DISCUSSION

• Discussions work better when you have students actively prepare.
  ▪ Broad reading questions that you will use as discussion starters.
  ▪ Dilemmas, contradictions, inconsistencies, “puzzles” in your discipline – pose them for students to contemplate and then work through.
  ▪ Students’ experiences connected to the material.
  ▪ What other strategies can we use to help students be prepared for discussion?
There are many techniques to encourage student participation.

- Avoid calling on the “easy talkers” all the time.
- You CAN call on students -- don’t use it as “punishment” for their lack of participation, but build it into the expectations.
- Count off and have the “5”s or the “3”s be the talkers
- Allow for “passes” if a student does not want to participate.
Monitor your role and responses to students –

- Are you immediately responding to each student? That can shut down their communication with each other.
- Are you unconsciously “judging” responses in such a way that conveys to students that they are “wrong”?
- Are you asking questions with factual or right and wrong answers? These are discussion killers.
Deer in the headlights – are you asking something they can actually understand and engage with? Sometimes we don’t gauge student comprehension accurately.

The “over talker” – what do we do about conversation dominators, hijackers, or other over-contributors?

The silent students – what is keeping them quiet?
DON’T EXPECT PERFECTION

• Sustaining focused conversation is hard – things will not always go as you plan or wish.
• Sometimes getting off-track can lead to greater insights.
• If a discussion does not go as well as you would have liked, analyze it – what elements felt off? Have a colleague sit in and observe – they can perhaps spot problems you cannot.
• Don’t give up on a technique after 1 or 2 tries. This is hard, and it takes practice!
LAST QUESTION

• What is the one idea you are walking away with?