

# Getting the Most Out of Class Discussion

Written by Daniel Clausen

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As both a student and an instructor, I have long been confounded by the uneven quality of class discussions. Some of my classes have had great discussions, eye-opening experiences where interactions between students and teachers led to truly unique learning moments. On the other hand, I have also suffered through discussions that were little more than platforms for dramatic posturing, ungrounded editorializing, or at worse students simply faking their way through the material. Most shockingly, I've found that this uneven quality has little to do with the level of the class – good and bad discussions seem to occur at all levels, introductory levels, advanced classes, even graduate classes. As a teacher, this has led me to think of some strategies for getting the most out of classroom discussions.

**Set Rules and Expectations.** Perhaps the most important thing one can do is to set rules for discussion. I have already discussed in a previous post the need for teachers to create solid foundations for civility in the classroom (see this article). I believe that instructors need to say in their syllabus what kind of remarks will and will not be tolerated. Teachers should also set expectations. For example, in my syllabus and during the first day of class, I tell students that I expect them have done the reading and be prepared to answer questions about the reading.

**Know When and When Not to Use Discussions.** Perhaps the second most important thing to keep in mind is when discussions (or other active forms of class participation) may not be appropriate. I have found that many instructors, especially those who for reasons of values love Socratic methods, tend to overestimate the ability of students to actively participate. In these situations, it may be preferable for the instructor to simply lecture or to ask for only limited amounts of participation from students.

An instructor can keep students engaged and focused in ways other than full discussions. Instructors can conduct spot polls, can have classes answer minimal pairs quizzes (choose A or B) in between lecture points, or use simple trivia quizzes to keep classes engaged.

**Provide Examples.** I also believe that the instructor should provide examples of good and bad discussion comments. The instructor need not be overly prescriptive. The instructor can project some examples on the board and have the class debate which are good and which are bad, and explain why.

**Encourage Active Reading.** In my own classes, I encourage students to read actively and to write notes in the margins. I also ask students to bring hard copies of their readings to class and on occasion even check their notes in the margins. I try to encourage them to refer to specific passages in the text when making points and to breakdown or expand on parts of their readings. I also ask them to write questions about confusing points.

**Create a System for Grading.** As an instructor, I have often found that students mistake quantity for quality in their participation. Students often think that if they are talking, their participation grade will be high.

Having a clear grading system is a way to hold students accountable. What I have done for a few of my classes is to create a simple grading card for each of my students. The card has 30 boxes (approximately one box for every class). In a small key is a system for grading. S = a claim Supported by something in the reading; C = an example of Critical thinking; E = Encouraging a classmate; and O is other. X = a kind of infraction. I also have a space for notes on the sheet. When a student participates, if it is a strong contribution, I write either S, C, E, or O in a box, followed by

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checks (the greater number of checks, the better the contribution was). If it is some kind of an infraction, I write an X followed by minuses.

In reality, I rarely write Xs, especially for low-level students. I simply make a note of something that needs to be remediated and if necessary discuss the infraction with the student.

I have found that the very fact of having a system encourages better classroom discussion, even when an instructor can't be overly-diligent about keeping records. Most students are so used to participation being an easy part of the grade that watching an instructor take notes on comments makes them reflect on what they're actually saying and whether it is a genuine contribution or not.

**Coach Students.** Having a system in place makes it easier to do what a teacher is supposed to do — teach. Using evaluation cards, or really any system that tracks student progress, allows instructors to find students who are struggling and coach them.

In some cases, students may struggle because of shyness or because of difficulties with the English language. In that case, instructors can talk with students in office hours and demonstrate effective forms of participation. In some cases, the brief sessions can reveal how much students actually know the material (and thus, may boost their participation grade).

**Consider Cold-Calling.** Perhaps the most controversial aspect of classroom discussion is the subject of cold-calling. Some teachers believe that cold-calling is little more than an act of terrorizing students, a kind of bullying mechanism for instructors who are unfamiliar with more subtle and ingenious pedagogical techniques. My own opinion is that students should feel a little uncomfortable in the classroom.

Cold-calling is a technique that I have come to rely on in situations when I believe that students aren't used to being held accountable. I use it as a method for reminding students that they are accountable for coming to class prepared, for contributing something to the classroom as a learning environment, and for being honest about the limits of their understanding. In this case, cold-calling can be a method for shaming (though I try to keep this element light) when I think a student is neglecting one of their responsibilities. More often than not, however, cold-calling is effective for demonstrating to students that it's okay to admit when something hasn't been completely understood.

*Instructor:* Can you explain to me what epistemology means?

*Student:* Um...well, I think...um....

*Instructor:* So, you're not sure what epistemology means?

*Student:*...

*Instructor:* Well, why didn't you say something? We should talk about it.

None of these tips is the silver bullet to cure all bad class discussions, but at the very least I hope they're a good starting point for discussion.

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### About the author:

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