FACILITATING DISCUSSIONS

Northeastern University
Center for Advancing Teaching and Learning Through Research

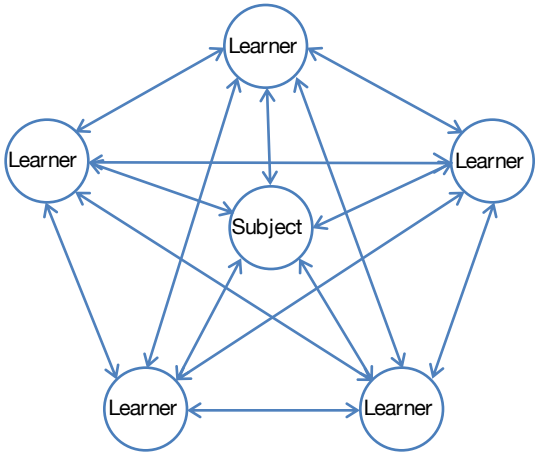
GOOD DISCUSSION DEEPENS LEARNING

Classroom discussion takes many forms, from whole-class interactive teaching in a large class, to deep dialogue in a seminar, to leaderless student conversations in small groups. Regardless of the size or format, certain factors can influence the extent to which a discussion "works" to deepen student learning.

TIPS

Facilitation is a different set of responsibilities and skills than lecture. The facilitator's role is to create an atmosphere in which students feel it is both expected and comfortable to engage. To achieve this, hold discussions as early as possible in the semester so that this expectation is communicated, and act to prevent students from feeling "shut down" by yourself or their fellow students.

In a good discussion, everyone is learning—even the facilitator. If interaction becomes a process of students guessing at a right answer, ask them to tell you more about the thinking that is leading them to their answers. Investigating student thinking can bring surprising insights (Palmer, 2007).



Adapted from Palmer (2007)

Structure shapes the experience. Good discussions include—but don't rely on—spontaneous engagement: structure increases the odds of a substantial discussion. Structure can be as simple as a pre-planned list of questions or something more strategic, like decision-making activities where the class must come to consensus on something specific.

Even brief discussions in pairs or groups can increase engagement. Students can experience class discussion as a kind of public speaking, which commonly causes anxiety. You can help reduce this anxiety by allowing them to talk in smaller groups before speaking to the class as a whole. These activities can be as quick as a 60-second "think-pair-share" or longer, more structured group activities (Ueckert & Gess-Newsome, 2006).

Waiting has its rewards. When teachers wait at least three to five seconds after a question, they allow time for greater engagement and achievement. Unfortunately, teachers behaving "normally" only tend to wait about one second (Tobin, 1987).

Accountability for preparation is vital. Good discussion occurs when all participants "bring something to the table." Accountability activities to ensure student preparation can take place either in or out of class: some teachers require students to bring brief "QQTP" writings that must include a Quotation, a Question, and some Talking Points about the reading (Connor-Greene, 2005). Others use individual-then-team tests, which have been shown to improve individual learning (Vogler & Robinson, 2016).

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SOME RESEARCH

Effective discussion demands that we explore our own views in order to articulate them and compare them to others—it forces cognitive elaboration, can reveal the "illusion of understanding," and has important socio-emotional effects upon learning (Do & Schallert, 2004; Palincsar, 1998; Svinicki, 2004).

GETTING STARTED

Questions less likely to provoke discussion	Questions more likely to provoke discussion
1. **Yes/No**: "Was Napoleon actually short?" 2. **Factual**: "What's the only state with a unicameral legislature?" 3. **Multiple**: "What are some of the noble gases?" 4. **Elliptical**: "How about that reading?" 5. **Leading**: "Do you think *Ulysses* is over-rated?" 6. **Guessing**: "Where do you think I'm from?"	1. **Analytic:** "How can we account for the popularity of reality TV?" 2. **Causal:** "What connection is there between smoking and lung cancer?" 3. **Compare/Contrast:** "How are Thoreau and Emerson different?" 4. **Personalized:** "What would you say to someone who thinks that if there is no God, all is permitted?"

Adapted from *Stanford Teaching Commons* (teachingcommons.stanford.edu)

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