

The Sounds of Silence: Designing & Assessing Effective Discussions

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This session will examine:

- Is discussion the right pedagogy?
- What makes discussions effective?
- Setting rules of engagement
- How to grade discussions
- Designing a discussion

Discussions are...

“In literature on teaching, the term ‘discussion’ usually refers to a diverse body of teaching techniques, which emphasize participation, dialogue, and two-way communication.”

-- William Ewens

Is discussion the right pedagogy?

Summary: is it the right pedagogy?

- Fits your learning outcomes
- Goals of the pedagogy fit
- Instructor owns a broad range of skills (“people management”)
- Instructor comfort with unpredictability
- Physical space/online skills

Learning outcomes

- Cognitive goals:
 - Exploring and brainstorming
 - Defending a position
 - Considering multiple perspectives
 - Evaluating evidence
 - Problem-solving
- Social/emotional goals:
 - Democratic and collaboration skills
 - Crossing cultural boundaries

Pedagogical benefits

- Reaches all three levels of interaction – student-content, student-instructor, student-student
- Higher levels of reflective thinking and creative problem solving
- Higher retention
- Students often prefer active engagement with content

Skills instructors may need

- Addressing views divergent from your own
- Challenging factual errors
- Drawing in students
- Managing time
- Keeping on track
- Managing emotions
- Dealing with disruptive, belligerent, or domineering students

Discussion may not be best when:

- Question has only one correct answer and one right way to get there*
- Convey or clarify information
- Insufficient time, space, technological skills
- Path exists that you don't want to take
- Disruptive students are a problem
- No time to design

What makes discussions effective?

Obstacles to Effective Discussion

- Students do not know enough about the subject
- Students do not know the purpose of the discussion (e.g., learn from one another vs. demonstrate their knowledge)
- Students do not know how they are expected to interact (e.g., answer a question, ask questions, build on others' comments, challenge others, etc)
- Inequitable participation (student who talks too much, or not at all; only 4 out of 50 students talk)
- Students are inhibited (e.g. fear of being evaluated, fear of looking foolish, not able to keep up with the discussion, fear of conflict, uneasy talking about topic with strangers, etc.)

Effective design

- Set ground rules to govern interactions
- Clarify your expectations
- Establish the purpose
- Prepare the groundwork
- Group students to fit goals
- Ask discussable questions
- Give students time to think
- Involve students equitably

Develop student skills

- Part of the groundwork
- Identify the necessary skills
 - Reading in a discipline
 - Evaluation
 - Collaboration
- Consider using a student self-evaluation (see handout)

Setting Discussion Ground Rules

Why set ground rules?

- Your actions seem less arbitrary
- Can deal with disruptive students
- Helps class stay on task
- Helps students manage emotions
- Teach students democratic and collaboration skills (self-policing, consensus-building, civility)
- Safety (not the same as comfort)

Ground-rules buy-in

- How-tos:

<http://www.tolerance.org/activity/ground-rules-discussion>

<http://thoughtsonteaching-jdunlap.blogspot.com/2007/05/discussion-ground-rules.html>

- Common items:

<http://www.safercampus.org/blog/?p=2831>

<http://thoughtsonteaching-jdunlap.blogspot.com/2008/04/some-guidelines-for-discussion.html#links>

Designing a discussion

Planning a discussion

- Identify the learning outcomes
- Identify your pedagogical goals
- What sets students up to discuss?
 - Out of class
 - In class
- Draft your questions

Purposeful Discussion Activity Ideas

- Analyze a specific problem
- Start with controversy
- Show video clip, slide, current event, etc. for focus
- Assign sides/role-play
- Collectively create a chart or resource
- Compare and contrast
- Give new ideas and examples
- Explain opinions backed by research
- Share research findings and reactions
- Give questions ahead of time
- Break a large issue into smaller parts

Types of questions that don't work

- “Guess what I’m thinking” (you have a specific answer in mind; results in guessing)
- Yes/No and Leading questions (one response, at best)
- Info retrieval (look up the answer; one response at best)
- Rhetorical (own your beliefs; if you believe based on evidence, back your argument)

Asking good questions

- Beyond factual recall
- Open-ended
- Use question prompts
 - <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/EQM0048.pdf>
- Types of questions – Factual, Convergent, Divergent, Evaluative, and Combination
 - <http://www.uwsp.edu/education/lwilson/learning/quest2.htm>

Assessing Discussions

NSSE* 2008 Results

- First year students and seniors report lower frequency of asking questions or participating in class discussions than our system, Carnegie class, and National comparison groups.
- First year and Senior students report lower frequency of discussing class ideas/concepts outside of class when compared to our Carnegie and National comparison groups.
- Yet First Year and Senior students report a positive impact of UWL experience on ability to “speak clearly and effectively” at levels above all 3 comparison groups.

*National Survey of Student Engagement



Assessment vs Grading

- Assessment understood here as the collection of information to understand and improve student learning. Focus on the overall impact of the discussion method across all students in the course rather than in individual student skill.
- Grading focusing in individual student performance leading to a score or grade.
- Puzzler: you could make use of a strategy to achieve both, like a rubric.

Challenges to assessing

- Identification of students' pre-course level of the abilities/skills/knowledge you hope to impact through discussions in your course.
- Identification of your focus of the assessment on the specific knowledge, skills, attitudes you hope to build through via your discussions
- Choice to focus on group process and or product (focus on both?, who provides the data?)
- Use of assessment to help improve discussions (formative) vs. assessment of end result of impact of discussions (summative)

Assessing Discussions

- Instructor Completed:
 - Group or Class Level Rubric: Monitor the classes activity, note levels of desired achievement of goals, review and feed information back into your planning process.
 - Individual Rubric/Checklist that could be summed to the small group or class level.
- Student Self-Assessment:
 - Discussion Evaluation Form: early and later in term report on basic discussion skills & behaviors.
 - Content Driven Form: Pre-post on specific knowledge that discussion was desired to build.

Grading Discussions

Set clear expectations

- Not an attendance grade
- Do you need to grade everything?
- Be clear about *what* you are grading
 - What constitutes “class participation”?
 - Why are you grading on “class participation”?
- Individual or whole-group, or both?
 - Tie this decision to your goals
 - Include a divorce clause for long-term groups
- Consider grading product, not discussion

Sample discussion rubrics

- https://academictech.doit.wisc.edu/ORFI/otr/images/discussion_rubric2.pdf
- Online Course:
 - <http://www.uwstout.edu/static/profdev/rubrics/discussionrubric.html>

Tips for success

- Learn student names
- 10-second rule (“wait time”)
- Seat students facing one another
- Avoid jargon
- Be able to say “I don’t know”
- Promote students helping students
- Deal with “over-talkers”
- Summarize, summarize, summarize