

18 Discussion Facilitation Strategies

(V) = Balances **voices** heard (D) = Encourages **depth** of discussion (C) = Focuses on the **content**

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Three Tokens

(V)

Prior to class distribute 3-5 tokens to each student (any kind of cardboard card, playing cards, Legos, stones, etc.). Once class or a certain part of class discussion begins, students "spend" their discussion tokens each time they speak, placing them in a "recycle" container or at the top of the table in front of them. Once they have used all their tokens, they no longer may add comments to the discussion. This activity helps control students who tend to dominate discussions; they will consider more carefully when a comment is worth making. Quieter students have more space to talk and are motivated to engage.

Adapted from description available at <https://citl.indiana.edu/files/pdf/Dictionary-2014-Equal-Participation-Strategies.pdf>

Circular Response

(V) (D)

Students sit in a circle so that everyone can see everyone else, and each person in turns takes no more than 3 min. to talk about an issue or a question that the group has agreed to discuss. Speakers are not free, however, to say anything they want. They must make a brief summary of the preceding speaker's message and then use this as a springboard for their own comments. In other words, what each speaker articulates depends on listening well to the preceding speaker as much as on generating new or unspoken ideas. Students must respect the following six ground rules:

1. No one may be interrupted while speaking.
2. No one may speak out of turn in the circle.
3. Each person is allowed only 3 min. to speak.
4. Each person must begin by paraphrasing the comments of the previous discussant.
5. Each person, in all comments, must strive to show how their remarks relate

to the comments of the previous discussant.

6. After each discussant has had a turn to speak, the floor is opened for general reactions, and the previous ground rules no longer apply.

A variation on this activity is to denote 2 or 3 students to not participate, but rather, to listen carefully to all contributions, taking notes where necessary, and to end the exercise with a synthesis of the discussion's highlights. They recount key points and recurring themes, giving everyone involved some sense of the whole.

As described in *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* (2nd Edition) by Brookfield & Preskill, Chapter 4, Section 7 (Kindle Version).

Think-Pair-Share (TPS)

(V) (D)

Think-Pair-Share is a short activity designed to engage students in thoughtful consideration of a topic, and may serve effectively as a warm-up to instruction and class discussion on new course material. First, students individually **think** for a few min. about a question posed by the instructor, then get together for a short period in groups of 2 (**pair**) to 4 students to discuss their thoughts, and 1 or more groups **share** the results of their discussion with the class or another small group. In addition to engaging with course content, students can reflect before speaking, and share their ideas in a low-risk situation before participating in full class discussion. Thus, both the quality of class discussion and students' comfort in contributing to class discussion may improve. TPS also allows instructors to assess students' initial knowledge and to modify instruction to bolster understanding and clear up misconceptions.

Adapted from description available at <https://teachingcommons.stanford.edu/resources/learning/learning-activities/think-pair-share>

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Affinity Mapping (V) (D) (C)

Give students a broad question or problem that is likely to result in lots of different ideas, such as "What could be some effective keywords when researching the topic of alternative energy?" or "What literary works should every person read?" Have students generate responses by writing ideas on post-it notes (one idea per note) and placing them in no particular arrangement on a wall, whiteboard, or chart paper. Once lots of ideas have been generated, have students begin grouping them into similar categories, then label the categories and discuss why the ideas fit within them, how the categories relate to one another, and so on.

Adapted from Gonzalez, J. (2015, October 15). The big list of class discussion strategies [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/speaking-listening-techniques/>.

Concentric Circles Dialogue (V) (D)

Students sit or stand in two concentric circles facing each other. Begin the session by asking students to introduce themselves to their partner. The session is a series of questions (generally 4-6) pertaining to each person's experience of their religious or spiritual tradition. Participants frame their responses in "I" statements. Only one person may speak at a time. Each partner is asked the same question in a given time frame (2-5 min.). The facilitator designates partners to begin with the inside or outside circle, and gives a signal when it is time to switch partners. After both partners have answered the question, the inner or outer circle moves around the circle until each participant has a new partner. With each rotation, ask deeper questions. Sample questions: What is your religious/spiritual tradition and what are you most proud of from that heritage? Growing up, what did the adults in your life teach you about religious differences? When and how did you first become aware of religious differences?

Today, what is your greatest fear in interreligious dialogue? What do you hope to gain from interreligious dialogue? Lastly, evaluate the experience with the group: How was that exercise for you? What was the most challenging? New insights?

The questions will vary from the examples given here to match the curriculum.

As described at

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/teth.12141>

Concrete Images (V) (C)

It is obvious, of course, that discussions go better when specific references are made. Yet I think we often need help remembering the content of our text. A few min. at the beginning can guarantee that the sophisticated analysis we seek will be based on specific facts. Go around the table and ask each student to state one concrete image/scene/event/moment from the text that stands out. No analysis is necessary, just recollections and brief description. As each student reports, the collective images are listed on the board, thus providing a visual record of selected content from the text as a backdrop to the following discussion. Usually the recall of concrete scenes prompts further recollections, and a flood of images flows from the students. A follow-up question is to invite the class to study the items on the board, and ask: "what themes seem to emerge from these items?"; "what connects these images?"; "is there a pattern to our recollected events?"; "what is missing?" This is, obviously, an inductive approach to the text. Facts precede analysis. But also, everyone gets to say something early in class and every contribution gets written down to aid our collective memory and work.

As described in The Dreaded Discussion: Ten Ways to Start http://www.indiana.edu/~tchsol/part%201/part1%20materials/The_Dreaded_Discussion.pdf

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Generate Questions (D) (C)

Ask students to generate discussion questions independently. Prompt suggestions:

1. If you could ask the author 3 questions, what would they be?
2. What are the most pressing questions that need to be explored regarding [a particular idea, area of knowledge]?

Categorize and/or prioritize the questions.

Ways to do this:

1. Post on newsprint around the room and have students "vote" checkmarks.
2. Have students talk in small groups to identify the top 1 or 2 questions for larger class discussion.
3. Post on newsprint around the room, have students read all, then ask for similarities and striking differences.

As described in *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* (2nd Edition) by Brookfield & Preskill, Chapter 4, Section 4 (Kindle Version).

Circle of Voices (V) (D)

Ask 4 or 5 students to form a circle. Provide up to 3 min. of silent time to organize their thoughts. During this time, they think about what they want to say on the topic once the circle of voices begins. Then the discussion opens, with each student having up to 3 min. of uninterrupted time. During the 3 min. each person is speaking, no one else is allowed to say anything. It can help to just move sequentially around the circle (reducing stress of having to decide whether or not to try to jump in after another student has finished speaking).

After everyone has shared, initially, open discussion begins with one rule: Participants are allowed to talk only about other people's ideas that were expressed in the circle of voices.

As described in *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* (2nd Edition) by Brookfield & Preskill, Chapter 4, Section 7 (Kindle Version).

Complete a Sentence (D) (C)

Ask students to complete whichever of the following sentences seems appropriate:

- What struck me about the text we read/lecture we heard to prepare for the discussion today is ...
- The idea that I take most issue in the text/lecture is ...
- The most crucial point of last week's lecture is ...
- The part of the text/lecture that I felt made the most sense to me is ...
- The part of the text/lecture that was the most confusing is ...

Have students share in groups of 4 or 5. Just have them jot notes about which responses they wish to hear more about. Once everyone has shared, students can ask questions regarding the statements that most intrigued them.

As described in *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* (2nd Edition) by Brookfield & Preskill, Chapter 4, Section 4 (Kindle Version).

Hatful of Quotes (V) (C)

Prior to a discussion, the facilitator types out 5 or 6 sentences or passages from the text onto separate slips of paper (there should be duplicate copies). These are put into a hat and each student is asked to draw 1 of the slips out of the hat. Students are given a few min. to think about their quote and then asked to read it out and comment on it. The order of contribution is up to the students. Because the same quotes are used, students who go later can build on, affirm, or contradict what a peer has already said.

As described in *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* (2nd Edition) by Brookfield & Preskill, Chapter 4, Section 7 (Kindle Version)

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Jeopardy (C)

Competition can motivate students to prepare for and participate in discussion. You can create a free board on Jeopardy Labs (<https://jeopardylabs.com>). Questions can be fact-based or application based. Students play as individuals or in teams. It is important to discuss why an answer is correct, as not all students may understand the reasoning for a response. Be sure to explain the game of Jeopardy, as it may not be familiar to all students in your class (including how to answer in the form of a question). Provide time limits for each question. Rotate which team gets to select the category/point value (or use buzzers to “ring in”). Allow other teams to “steal” the points if the first team gets the wrong answer.

Variations: Have students (for homework or in groups) make a Jeopardy board for their classmates to play. Require that students provide a citation for their responses. Give bonus points to people/teams that ask questions that lead to deeper understanding.

Fishbowls (V) (D)

In a fishbowl discussion, students seated inside the “fishbowl” actively participate in a discussion by asking questions and sharing their opinions, while students sitting outside listen carefully to the ideas presented. Students take turns in these roles, so that they practice being both contributors and listeners in a group discussion. A fishbowl discussion makes for an excellent pre-writing activity, often unearthing questions or ideas that students can explore more deeply in an independent assignment.

1. Select a topic and write an open-ended prompt.
2. Set up the room with two circles. Typically, the inner circle (the fishbowl) is made up of 4-12 chairs, allowing for a range of perspectives while still giving each student an opportunity to speak.

3. Allow students to prepare for the discussion by writing ideas and questions in advance (5-10 min.).
4. Discuss norms and rules with the students. For instance, will you call “switch” after 10 min. or 15 min.? Are students allowed to speak a second time before everyone else has spoken once? Also provide instructions for the audience. What should they be listening for? Should they be taking notes?
5. Debrief the exercise by asking students what they learned from the discussion and how they think it went. Students can also evaluate their performances as listeners and as participants.

Adapted from <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/fishbowl>

Chat Stations (V) (D) (C)

Break students into small groups (max 4 students). Throughout the room, hang questions/problems/quotes on the wall (equivalent number of questions to the number of groups). Provide each group with paper to record their reactions to the question. Have students rotate throughout the room, spending time in their small groups at each question. Set a time limit for each station; have groups rotate simultaneously.

The instructor/TA should move throughout the room to listen in to conversations. When a particularly interesting idea comes up, flag it and ask students if they’d be willing (later) to share with the larger class.

Once every group has visited every question, regather as a whole class. Discuss each question (one at a time), inviting each group to share an insight or summary of their reactions.

As described at Cult of Pedagogy
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFUL4yP0vqo>

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Peer Provocations (V) (D) (C)

A different pair of students, each week, are asked to develop a provocation and the lead class discussion.

Before Class:

The pair should meet with the instructor/TA as they develop their concept for the provocation. A provocation is meant to generate deep thinking before class (the provocation is sent electronically to the class a few days in advance). A provocation would likely include excerpts from a text and questions. The provocation is meant to be brief and spark discussion.

During Class:

The leading pair is expected to guide discussion and help the class explore the week's content. The pair has autonomy to decide whether the class discussion will be a whole-group conversation, whether students will be in groups, or whether another facilitation technique (such as a debate) will be used.

Note: The use of a provocation followed by discussion is best modeled by the instructor/TA prior to having students lead class sessions.

As described in Designing, Scaffolding, and Assessing Student Discussion Leadership at https://instructionalmoves.gse.harvard.edu/designing-scaffolding-and-assessing-student-discussion-leadership?admin_panel=1.

Generating Truth Statements

(D)

Divide students into small groups. The instructions to each group are to decide upon three statements known to be true about some particular issue. "It is true about slavery that..." "We have agreed that it is true about the welfare system that..." "It is true about international politics in the 1950s that..." "We

know it to be true about the theory of relativity that...", and so on.

This strategy can be useful in introducing a new topic where students may think they already know a great deal but the veracity of their assumptions demands examination. The complexity and ambiguity of knowledge is clearly revealed as students present their truth statements and other students raise questions about or refute them.

The purpose of the exercise is to develop some true statements, perhaps, but mostly to generate a list of questions and of issues demanding further study. This provides an agenda for the unit. Sending students to the library is the usual next step, and they are quite charged up for research after the process of trying to generate truth statements.

Adapted from The Dreaded Discussion: Ten Ways to Start http://www.indiana.edu/~tchsotl/part%201/part1%20materials/The_Dreaded_Discussion.pdf

Stand Where You Stand (D) (C)

This highly structured activity encourages students to think critically, argue persuasively, and listen carefully to their opponents' points of view. It gives students practice in developing well-supported arguments, but it also challenges them to listen closely for the strengths of opposing views. A unique benefit is that it gets people to move around the room – literally to experience physically where they stand on a particular issue.

1. While studying a controversial issue, students read 2-4 essays as a homework assignment. 1-2 of these support a particular idea or viewpoint, and 1-2 oppose it.
2. When the students gather in class, the teacher shares with them a claim that reflects one side or the other in the essays – for example, "Formal

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education is a waste of time and resources in nonindustrialized societies.”

3. Students individually decide whether they agree or disagree with this claim and spend 10 min. writing down their position and their rationale for it, citing arguments, evidence, and quotes from the essays provided.
4. The teacher displays four large signs around the room, reading STRONGLY AGREE, AGREE, DISAGREE, and STRONGLY DISAGREE.
5. When they have finished writing down their views, students then stand in front of the sign that most closely reflects their position on the claim.
6. Students at each station take turns orally presenting arguments that support and justify the stance they have taken.
7. Students are then invited to move to another sign if the arguments they hear from their peers at that sign persuade them that a different view is more accurate or defensible.
8. Students end the exercise by spending 15 min. discussing as a whole group how the activity altered their perspectives on the issue.

This exercise adds spice and variety to classroom discussion. It reinforces the importance of developing and articulating well-substantiated arguments, it motivates discussants to be as persuasive as possible, it encourages everyone to listen carefully to different arguments, and it helps students view each other as potential teachers.

However, this exercise may bring about little or no change in the opinions of the participants, which makes it somewhat risky. While it sometimes helps students appreciate how complex most arguments are, it can also have the opposite effect of requiring students to take

an artificial stand from four oversimplified possibilities, none of which truly captures their views. Of course, during the debriefing, students often point out the problem of being asked to choose an oversimplified view. This can then lead into a discussion of the difficulties of stating unequivocal positions or making strong arguments when you know the complexities of an issue. Students start to say, for example, that politicians who declare simple positions on issues or propose simple solutions to complex problems must be ignoring information inconvenient for their position or distorting the evidence that does exist.

Adapted from *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* (2nd Edition) by Brookfield & Preskill, Chapter 6, Section 5 (Kindle Version).

Role Play

(V) (C)

“Role Play” is a creative, participatory activity that provides the structure for students to experience the emotional and intellectual responses of an assumed identity or imagined circumstance. The word *role* indicates that students actively apply knowledge, skills, and understanding to successfully speak and act from an assigned perspective. The term *play* indicates that students use their imaginations and have fun, acting out their parts in a nonthreatening environment.

1. It is critical to spend thoughtful time designing the scenario for your role play. Appropriate scenarios require interaction from stakeholders with multiple perspective. Therefore, identify the perspectives and define the type and number of characters and the framework for their actions.
2. In addition to the roles for the scenario, you may also want to assign group-process roles such as Moderator (who can, for example, intervene if a person falls out of character) and Observer (who interprets and comments on the action).

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3. As you craft the basic story line, it is best to initiate the action through a critical event that the players must respond to, such as a comment by one of the actors or an incident that has just occurred.
4. Identify resources (if any) for each of the play's roles, and decide how the activity will end. For example, will you set a time limit, or will you let the scenario end naturally?
5. Ask students to form groups with enough members in each group to assume each stakeholder role.
6. Present the scenario and allow time for discussion of the problem situation. It is important to allow sufficient time for students to ask questions on any aspects of the scenario that are unclear.
7. Assign or ask students to assume a stakeholder role. If you have decided to assign group-process roles such as Moderator and Observers, make sure students are clear on their tasks.
8. Inform students of the time limit or other parameters that will signify the end of the activity. If the role play should run only until the proposed behavior is clear, the targeted characteristic has been developed, or the skill has been practiced.
9. Follow the role play with a discussion within the small groups or with the whole class, or both. Discussion should focus on the students' interpretations of the roles and the motivations for and consequences of their actions.

Variations and Extensions:

- Allow students to help determine the scenario, identify the major stakeholders, and create the roles.
- Give students time to practice and then have student groups perform the role play in front of the class. Or instead of having multiple groups participating in multiple role plays, have one group role-play in front of the rest of the class. Assign Observers

specific tasks for interpreting the action and dialogue of the role play.

- After the initial performance is finished, re-enact the role play, changing characters or redefining the scenario.
- Combine this activity with a "Fish Bowl," by having one group perform the role play while another group watches, and then have the groups trade places.

As described in *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* by Barkley, Part 3, SET 19.

Classroom Debate (D) (C)

Teams work well for classroom debates but two students can be paired as well.

Adapt the following format to fit your specific goals and objectives. Adding a third, shorter round will allow teams to further defend their arguments.

Alternatively, have all students prepare both a pro and con position for a designated class session. During this class period two teams are randomly selected who will then state their arguments. The other students will contribute differing remarks and suggestions for a more active and well-prepared class discussion.

Round 1	Team 1	Presentation of "arguments for"	10 min.
	Team 2	Presentation of "arguments against"	10 min.
Team Discussion Period	This period is used for teams to prepare their responses.		5 min.
Round 2	Team 1	Response or rebuttal of "arguments for"	10 min.
	Team 2	Response of rebuttal of	10 min.

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		"arguments against"	
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Whole Class Discussion

To determine which team provided the most convincing arguments. A vote can be taken or a more detailed evaluation form can be used to assess each team. (10- 15 min.)

Note: Explain to the students that the success behind using debates in the classroom is not in winning and losing but rather how well teams prepared for and delivered their arguments and get potential buy-in from those who help the opposite point-of view.

1. Prepare guidelines and a set of rules to assist students as they prepare for the debate.
 - a. Include a time frame in which they have to prepare for the debate and how they are to present their material.
 - b. Allow non-debate students to be adjudicators to help them learn how to be objective in rating their peers' performance.
 - c. Determine if non-debating students will be allowed to vote.
2. Provide resources which will help students learn about debates and their structure. Consider holding a practice debate to help students understand the process.
3. Consider having students prepare brief "position papers" which also includes their reaction to the debate process and how they were able to reach consensus in their team's arguments.
4. Select the format you plan to use: teams, individual students, all students (see format above).
5. Research controversial, news-breaking, and stimulating topics to encourage dynamic and energized classroom discussion. Students are more likely to be authentic

when they debate a subject to which they can relate.

6. Review the debate process previously established and ask for questions and clarifications on the day of the debate.
7. Prepare rating rubrics and distribute to adjudicators before the debate begins.
8. Begin the debate, giving students as much autonomy as possible.
9. Facilitate classroom discussion and debrief the process at the end of the debate.
10. Distribute both student and instructor evaluations to the teams.
11. Have a plan in place if the debate gets "hot" and students argue instead of debate. Review guidelines before the debate begins to minimize inappropriate discussion and behavior. Also, getting to know your students through observation and actively listening to their classroom conversations can provide helpful information when selecting topics for debate.

Summary: Using debates in the classroom provides students the opportunity to explore real-world topics and issues. Debates also engage students through self-reflection and encourage them to learn from their peers. Finally, debates prepare students to be more comfortable engaging in dialogue related to their beliefs as well as their areas of study.

From description available at https://www.niu.edu/facdev/pdf/guide/strategies/classroom_debates.pdf