
GETTING ALL STUDENTS ENGAGED

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Let's consider the first reason that discussion can fail—problematic student engagement. Drawing on the teaching and learning literature, we propose 12 principles to guide class discussion. These principles incorporate the ways that student behavior typically impacts discussion, specifically the appropriateness, consistency, breadth, or frequency of student participation, whether in a classroom or online. We describe each of these principles as well as several potential strategies for improving student engagement. Of course, problems always crop up along the way when designing and facilitating successful discussions, and we suggest solutions to several common challenges in chapter 3.

12 Principles to Guide Class Discussion

Following are 12 principles to guide class discussion.

1. Students must be prepared for discussion.
2. Students must feel safe to express themselves.
3. Students need good reasons to listen actively.
4. Students respond well to a variety of structured discussion formats.
5. Students contribute as equally as the discussion structure requires.
6. Students respond well to questions with multiple good answers.
7. Students benefit from having time to think before contributing.
8. Students can benefit from expressing themselves in motion and space.
9. Students can benefit from expressing themselves graphically.
10. Students respond well to novel stimuli, such as outside ideas or research.

11. Students participate according to how effectively a discussion is moderated.
12. Students must see their personal value as separate from the value of their contributions.

We address each principle in turn, considering its importance to student engagement and the strategies it suggests for ensuring broad and fruitful student participation in discussion.

Principle 1: Students Must Be Prepared for Discussion

At the beginning of chapter 1, we listed some definitions of *discussion*. They all tied the activity to some form of debatable or uncertain knowledge, presumably in a discipline: interpretations, explanations, approaches or possible solutions to a problem, evaluations, arguments, claims, opinions, positions, or perspectives, along with justifications. In other words, discussion involves higher level thinking about some content. Students can't participate, let alone advance their learning, if they come into the classroom or forum knowing little or nothing about the discussion topic. They *have to* prepare for the occasion. If they have little or nothing to contribute, their self-confidence suffers and their fear of peer disapproval rises, which in turn reduces their self-reported participation (Roehling, Vander Kooi, Dykema, Quisenberry, & Vandlen, 2011; Weaver & Qi, 2005).

Research tells us that relatively few students do the assigned reading, which is the most common form of preparation, unless faculty hold them accountable with some form of reward or sanction, such as required homework, a quiz, recitation, or other class activity that figures at least modestly into their course grade (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000; Hoeft, 2012; Huang, Blacklock, & Capps, 2013; Nathan, 2005; Nilson, 2016). Therefore, first, institute some kind of compliance measure to induce student preparation for discussion. Although students may find podcasts and videos less odious than readings, you still have to hold students accountable for carefully processing them. Accountability strategies to ensure that students prepare also can include nongraded activities that might figure into a broader participation grade—for instance, bringing to class a written summary of key points, an outline, or questions from an assigned reading.

Second, students are more likely to complete preparatory assignments when they understand their purpose and their importance within the course (Talbert, 2017). Therefore, consider telling students how each reading, video, problem set, or other assignment will help them achieve one or more course outcomes or perform well on another assignment or upcoming exam.

Students can't figure this out on their own because they are unfamiliar with course design, pedagogy, and the broad overview of your course.

Similarly, students rarely understand the value of discussion and the importance of their participation, especially given that they are used to playing a passive role (Howard, 2015; Karp & Yoels, 1976). But a solid explanation from you should convince them that it's worth their while to prepare. On the first day of class, you might describe the purpose of discussion as the sharing and assessment of varied, defensible perspectives, along with the evidence behind them. Then connect this purpose to the workplace realities they are facing, as Talbert (2017) recommends for preparing students for flipped learning. In the workplace, students will have to discuss and debate conflicting interpretations of situations in a civil manner. They will confront unknowns, uncertainties, and competing approaches to complex problems without clear strategies for solving them. Textbook facts won't carry the day for them; practice and comfort in participating actively in engaging discussions will.

Of course, the topics for classroom discussion must allow for legitimate discrepancies in perspective; they must contain elements of uncertainty or controversy. Agreement may feel good, but learning takes place around the *differences* in approaches and positions, the *disagreements* and the dissimilar directions that minds can take. Even discussions that might appear to have a less debate-oriented goal, such as the charge to collectively summarize an author's argument, require students to reflect on differences among each of their interpretations of the reading. Thus, regardless of the goal of any particular discussion, students must have the opportunity to hear points of view that they hadn't considered before, and then try them on and give them a fair evaluation. This is why students have to listen carefully and respectfully to their peers and consider their various interpretations and opinions, as well as their justifications. Because the value of discussion lies in these transactions, it is also crucial that every student have a voice and express it. No wallflowers permitted. Remind your class about the purpose of discussion every few weeks.

A related approach is to ask students to articulate the elements of a good discussion and the qualities of a good discussion participant. Hollander (2002) poses these questions as a short, ungraded writing assignment and, on the day the assignment is due, leads a discussion on the factors that contribute to a good discussion. Invariably her students bring up factors that emphasize participants' behavior—that they prepare, express a variety of viewpoints, back up opinions with evidence or analysis, contribute fairly evenly, listen to each other, and respond respectfully. She reports that this strategy increases and helps equalize participation for the rest of the term.

Holding a brief discussion about discussion helps both to clarify its value and to reinforce the importance of preparation in order to get the

most out of the learning experience. Helping students think metacognitively (McGuire, 2015) about the connection between discussion's purpose and process and its usefulness to their learning not only motivates students to prepare more effectively but also shows them how to participate in a discussion respectfully. Invite them to set some ground rules, suggesting as a guide how they want to be treated when they volunteer a possibly contentious contribution. The discussion that results will accustom them to hearing their own and their peers' voices and make it easier for them to speak up in subsequent classes. As the conventional wisdom goes, do on the first day of class whatever you want students to do throughout the term.

Third—and a clear way to reinforce your message about the key role that discussion will play in your course—is to include participation in the course grade. It does increase student preparation and participation (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2016) and even the participation of low-responding students (Williams et al., 2009). If you're an introvert, you may resist this idea. You may reflect back on the discomfort you felt speaking in any size class. But you did get over it, and you did so by being coaxed or perhaps pushed to speak. Participation grades need not penalize the less vocal student, though. You can deemphasize the *frequency* of contributions and include the completion of preparation assignments, the incorporation of outside sources into the dialogue, the ability to recognize and the willingness to challenge underlying assumptions, adherence to the discussion ground rules or format, and other factors related to the *quality* of the student's contributions. *How much* to count participation in the overall course grade inspires debate, and few faculty give it much weight—certainly not as much as they give exams and major assignments (Archer & Miller, 2011; Weimer, 2011). If discussion carries so much importance in a course, shouldn't we be counting it for more than 10% to 15% of the final grade?

If you decide to grade on participation, the next question is how, and it is not an easy task. You have to develop a new rubric or adapt an existing one. If you are teaching in a classroom, you have to keep track of something as ephemeral as speech. If you are teaching online, you have to assess a large amount of discussion forum text. However, you need not do all the assessing yourself. You can have students evaluate their own contributions, either all of them or their best ones, using a rubric or some criteria that you provide. You then respond to their self-evaluations or grades. For details about these methods, a long list of possible rubric criteria, and an example, go to the section "Assessing Individual Students' Contributions" in chapter 5.

Fourth, you can incentivize preparation and high-quality by rewarding them with recognition. After 15 to 20 minutes of discussion, ask students what they found to be the most insightful or useful contribution they heard

in the past several minutes, or the one that brought more students into the discussion, or the one that offered the most helpful follow-up to ideas that another student volunteered (Bowen & Watson, 2017). This technique should accomplish the same purpose as grading participation but with less student and instructor effort.

Fifth, encourage students to prepare for discussion by assigning some kind of homework on the reading, video, or podcast that will serve as the basis for the discussion. Then you can either collect (electronically or in class) and award the homework some nominal value (in total, worth at least 20% of the final grade) or use it to justify cold-calling, preferably randomly, on any student without causing undue stress (Kastens, 2010). You can grade the participation or assume that peer pressure will motivate student preparation.

You can choose from many possible forms of homework. You can have students bring in two questions to ask, two quotations that best capture the thesis, or the most difficult point to understand in the assigned material (Cashin & McKnight, 1986). You can have them mark passages in the readings that are puzzling, novel, interesting, provocative, central, or related to other readings or discussion themes. Then ask students to read the passages aloud in class and explain why they selected these particular excerpts. This activity can launch a discussion in which each student in turn responds to his or her peers' choices and insights (Barkley, 2010). Alternatively, distribute study questions in advance on the assigned reading, video, or podcast that reflect those on which you will be basing the discussion. Then allow students to refer to their notes or written answers to the study questions during the discussion. Although this is a very old idea, scholars still mention it occasionally (e.g., Brooks, 2011). As suggested by participants in a 2016 POD Conference roundtable session (Herman & Nilson, 2016), you can, for example, furnish study or reflection questions in advance and have students write their answers as homework and bring them to class. They can share their answers in small groups and decide the best answers to report out. Yet another idea is to have students write a double journal of their thoughts as they read, view, or listen to the homework, with one side of the page reserved for their public thoughts and the other side their private ones.

As stated at the beginning of this section, inducing students to complete whatever homework you assign to prepare them for a discussion is a necessary although not sufficient condition for a fruitful exchange. Happily, you have your choice of many ways to build in accountability, motivation, and incentives—instituting compliance mechanisms, explaining the value of preparatory assignments and discussion itself, recognizing responsible students, grading on participation, and assigning meaningful written homework on the preparatory content.

Principle 2: Students Must Feel Safe to Express Themselves

When faculty discuss safety in the classroom, they typically mean emotional or psychological safety. The idea of safety as a necessary foundation for authentic, productive discussion has generated dialogue and research on “safe,” “respectful,” “free,” and other types of spaces; the idea of safety versus comfort; microaggressions; trigger warnings; difficult conversations; and ground rules or course contracts for respectful interaction. Identities and the intersectionality of those identities, particularly in regard to historically marginalized groups, are often at the heart of this dialogue, as are concepts like implicit bias and privilege.

These concepts, issues, and debates all relate to the idea of *course climate*, or the “intellectual, social, emotional, and physical environments in which our students learn” (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010, p. 170). Research has shown that course climate impacts both motivation and learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). A number of factors contribute to course climate, including interactions between faculty and students and among students themselves, the tone set in the course, instances of stereotyping or tokenizing, classmate demographics, and course content (Ambrose et al., 2010). These factors influence whether the course climate may marginalize certain groups of students. In fact, DeSurra and Church (1994) found that most college classrooms have an “implicitly marginalizing” course climate (pp. 24–25)—that is, faculty unintentionally create a negative climate for at least some of the students. Ambrose and colleagues (2010) cite various studies that demonstrate the adverse impact of this negative climate on student learning (Hall, 1982; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Watson, Terrell, & Wright, 2002; Whitt, Nora, Edison, Terenzini, & Pascarella, 1999) and urge faculty to proactively and explicitly create structures to generate a positive climate for all students.

How, then, can faculty create structures that lead to an encouraging course climate so that students feel safe expressing themselves in discussion? In chapter 3, we present strategies for handling sensitive subjects, trigger warnings, and microaggressions.

Principle 3: Students Need Good Reasons to Listen Actively

If you regularly ask students to react to each other’s contributions, you’re already giving them one good reason to listen actively to the discussion, especially if their participation affects their course grade. But you have other tools at your disposal as well.