

# ***Use Questions To Improve Class Discussion***

The discussion method is any teaching technique that uses two-way communication between students and the teacher and among the students themselves as a way to share ideas, opinions, conclusions or experiences.

Instructors use such techniques for a variety of reasons. They may wish to assess the level of students' understanding about lecture material. Through class discussion, instructors often can discover common misunderstandings about key concepts. Instructors also can use discussion to guide students in the application and analysis of their current knowledge in relationship to other contexts.

Research has shown that, compared with the lecture method, the discussion technique helps students achieve higher levels of reflective thinking and creative problem solving. Exploring values and changing attitudes may be accomplished through discussion.

Also, discussion forces students to become active participants in the learning process. Studies prove that information obtained through active discussion is better retained than information obtained through the traditional lecture.

## **Planning Your Questions**

Leading a class discussion, like any other teaching activity, requires good planning. The key components of a productive class discussion are the questioning strategy of the instructor as well as the questions themselves.

When planning your questions, consider your purpose for incorporating questions into your class discussion. Your purpose will help determine what level of questions you will ask.

Of course, the best questions are those that require students to think. Asking questions that require only the recall of factual informa-

tion supplied in yesterday's lecture discourages student participation, because the answers appear in the textbook or in the lecture notes. Recall questions may have some value as a review of the previous lecture material or introduction to new material, but their use should be limited.

When developing questions, focus on truly important content or issues. Questioning students about trivia may mislead them about what the key concepts and problems really are.

Be precise in phrasing your questions. Ask questions that require more than a simple "yes" or "no" response, unless you intend to follow them up with other questions that further explore the student's reasoning skills.

Be careful not ask questions that are too broad or general. These may take your discussion in a direction you had not intended to go. Also, make sure that your questions do not contain an "implied response." This type of question discourages participation because students may believe the answer is obvious.

Try to predict how students will respond to your questions. For example, consider some of the typical misconceptions held by students that might lead to an incorrect answer. Anticipating student responses may help you rephrase a question that is ambiguous, too broad or too restrictive in its scope. Your questions should give students enough latitude to express a response in their own words.

Also, as you plan your responses, consider that your students may not answer correctly or may not respond at all, and design an approach for handling either of these circumstances.

Writing your questions out in the order in which they will be asked will give you flexibility. If you think of better questions during the class discussion, you can quickly substitute them for your planned questions. Having a preplanned list, however, will assure that you address the important material in a logical order. The order of your questions may be related to the sequence of lecture material, from specific to general, or from lower level recall questions to higher level analysis or synthesis questions.

### Leading a Class Discussion

Planning your questions is only the first part of a successful class discussion. Leading the discussion, how you present your questions and how you respond to students, is the second. To encourage participation, always pause and wait for a response after asking a question. Students need an opportunity to think about their response. Initially, the silence may feel awkward to both you and your students, but allow 8 to 10 seconds for students to respond. The waiting period will show that you expect a response and that you are patient enough to wait for one.

Be careful to ask only one question at a time. A series of questions may be confusing to students and they may not respond if they do not have answers for all of the questions. Attempting to clarify your first question with a second or third may change the meaning of the initial question.

Use a variety of types of questions, especially open-ended and divergent questions for which there is no single, correct answer. These types of questions allow students to fully explain their responses. If students appear to be having difficulty elaborating their answers, you can assist them by asking for clarification, asking them to support their opinions with reasons or facts that support their position, or by asking several questions that may prompt an expanded response. Often, students need explicit direction in applying the knowledge they already possess to unique situations.

At the same time that you are attempting to develop yourself into an adept questioner, you also are seeking to develop your students into eager, participative responders. The way you field students' responses will affect the quantity and quality of future responses. Some suggestions for acknowledging student responses include:

- Use strong, positive reinforcement when students offer a correct or thoughtful response.
- Try to find part of the student's response to praise. If that is not possible, thank the student for responding and ask if anyone else wants to respond or comment on the first student's answer.

- If the student's response is inadequate or incorrect, pause to see if another student will respond with the correct response or a better response. Avoid reacting with "Yes, but...." Instead, ask how the student arrived at his or her answer. It is important to use this technique for both adequate and inadequate answers.

Making comments and building on the student's response demonstrate that you have listened to the student's remarks and value the points that he or she expressed. This technique reinforces the concept that teachers and students learn from each other, and also creates an atmosphere of support, acceptance and respect.

If you are uncertain about the quality of your classroom discussions or your skills as a questioner, tape record several classes to assess how you use questions and how your students reacted. Then apply the techniques outlined in this article and record your results to see how you have increased the effectiveness of your questioning skills and the participation of your students in the active learning process.

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## **Bibliography**

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