Engaging Student Interactions:  
In Class and Online  
Session Outline and Resources

Preparation for Discussion

Good discussions don’t just happen. They are partly the result of thoughtful planning, consistent modeling by the teacher, and respectful consideration of the experiences of students. Brookfield & Preskill. 2005. p.62.

•  Faculty preparation for discussion


Resources

-- A soup to nuts resource for all aspects of discussion teaching, but particularly useful in preparing and managing face-to-face and online discussion.

--An edited anthology, full of good chapters, especially those by Christensen who is recognized as a leading authority on discussion.

--A great piece on designing discussion activities. Compares face-to-face and online discussions, and structured and unstructured discussion. Lots of good references.

--If you need to be persuaded of the value of student interaction, this article makes a convincing case for it. It also lists the barriers that prevent many faculty from using interaction and offers an array of strategies for overcoming them. Never mind that it’s written about biology students, the contents are relevant in every discipline.

--A classic; full of great advice on preparing for and facilitating classroom interaction.

•  Student preparation for discussion

Authentic questions promote substantive engagement in the exercise, and provide stronger foundation for in-class discussion than a series of inauthentic “test” questions which often end up as dead ends in discussion. Yamane, 2006. p. 240.

Resources

Weaver, R. and Qi, J. “Classroom Organization and Participation.”


Auster, C. J. and MacRone, M. “The Classroom as a Negotiated Social Setting: An Empirical Student of the Effects of Faculty Members’ Behaviors on Students’ Participation.” Teaching Sociology, 1994, 22, 289-300.


--After a telling assessment revealed just how few students were actually doing the reading, he devised an assignment which got students reading and discussing the reading.

--Objects to quizzes and proposes an assignment that helps develop college level reading skills and improves the caliber of discussions.

--Great example of an assignment design that gets students doing the reading at the same time it develops college-level reading skills.

--Describes an assignment that gets students doing the reading before they come to class and participating in discussion during class.

Questions & Answers

• Faculty Questions


For indeed, the whole sum of what may be said about questioning is comprised in this: It ought to set the learners thinking, to promote activity and energy on their part, and to arouse the whole mental faculty into action, instead of blindly cultivating the memory at the expense of higher intellectual powers. That is the best questioning which best stimulates action on the part of the learner; which gives him a habit of thinking and inquiring for himself; which tends in a great measure to render him independent of his teacher; which makes him, in fact, a rather skillful finder than a patient receiver of the truth. Josiah Fitch, The Art of Questioning, 1879 (a small book written for British Sunday school teachers).

Resources

Auster, C. J. and MacRone, M. “The Classroom as a Negotiated Social Setting: An Empirical Student of the Effects of Faculty Members’ Behaviors on Students’ Participation.” Teaching Sociology, 1994, 22, 289-300.

--In a study that compared classes with the most and least participation, there was significantly more participation when faculty asked analytical rather than factual questions and when they called on students by name, provided positive reinforcement and asked for student’s opinions even when they didn’t volunteer.


--Offers a good overview of the intentions behind the use of participation and suggests new ways of thinking about its use.

Weimer, M. Discussion Details. Teaching Professor Blog Post, April 10, 2013. Find it at: www.facultyfocus.com
--Identifies the various decisions a teacher must make when deciding how to respond to a student comment and the details that need to be kept track of as the discussion unfolds.

• Student Questions & Student Answers

Participation connotes involvement, sharing and simply taking part, all desirable attributes especially for the social dimensions of a class. Contribution, on the other hand, connotes not only social, but intellectual involvement and sharing of knowledge and knowledge construction. Gioia, 1987. p. 16.

Resources
--She classified four types of postings made by students:
1. Direct response to question by instructor
2. Asking a completely different question of a more technical nature
3. Answering a question posed by a student
4. Responding to a comment made by a different student and building on that comment

--Makes an interesting distinction between participation and making a contribution.
“Concentrating on contributions causes people to think about what they are going to say instead of blurting out ill-considered opinions, superficial observations, and irrelevant personal examples.” (p. 16)

--Over half the students in this study did not participate in any of the 10 session of each class observed.

--Assigned students to write questions prior to labs. Analysis of the questions revealed students did not write many higher order questions and that this practice of writing questions did not dramatically improve the quality of the questions. Researchers conclude that in order to write better questions, students need direct instruction of the types and quality of questions.

--The results of this study answer the question yes. In a large biology course taught using a variety of active learning strategies that emphasized questioning, the quality of student questions improved significantly compared with a course taught using a lecture approach.

--Half the students surveyed in this study said they participated infrequently or never in their classes.
Policies

Faculty who choose to grade participation face two issues in this regard: 1) setting appropriate expectations for students by defining good from poor participation and 2) developing a means of measuring the quality of participation that is as free from bias as possible. Mello, 2010. The Good, The Bad, and the Controversial: The Practicalities and Pitfalls of the Grading of Class Participation. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal, 14*(1): p.85.

Resources


--Findings that support the use of cold calling.


--A participation policy that gives students a choice as whether they want to be called on or volunteer.

Assessment

...participation is probably one of the truest measures of actual performance that instructors have relative to other means of grading students due to its focus on behavior. Mello, 2010.p. 78

Resources


--Gave “tokens” to students who answered a teacher question correctly. Students submitted tokens at the end of the period for bonus points on the exam.


--An innovative system that rewards students with “cash” for good comments and questions and uses the “cash” as a vehicle for recording contributions.


--Contains a rubric that can be used to assess participation.


--Empirically investigated a method of having students record and describe their discussion contributions which showed that student did not over-report their participation.


--An interesting system that involves students in the assessment of participation.


--An excellent article that explores the pros and cons of grading participation, issues that make it challenging to grade and offers some alternative strategies.
-- Analyzed 50 rubrics which identified 153 performance criteria for online discussions. Organized these criteria into four major categories: cognitive, mechanical, procedural/managerial and interactive. Lots of items included in the article.

Rogers, S. L. “Calling the Question: Do College Instructors Actually Grade Participation?” *College Teaching*, 2013, 61 (1), 11-22.
-- In a survey of 352 instructors, 82% indicated on the course syllabus that participation was a student responsibility. 75% of them grade it.

-- I describe the process I use to let students set the participation policy in the class (pp. 101-104) and how I use self- and peer assessment in grading participation (pp. 189-191).

-- Reports on a method that allows students to establish the grading criteria for participation.

**Choosing NOT to assess**

“When discussion participation is graded it can easily undermine the quality of class exchanges, as the focus shifts away from developing shared understanding and toward making sure that individuals get full credit for what they say…. we believe the only way to grade participation is by assessing the group’s ability as a whole to advance the conversation.” Brookfield & Preskill. 2005 p. 242-243.