



Facilitating Class Discussion

Facilitating Discussion & Engagement

Breaking it Down: Facilitating discussion well is not just about being “on” during class. It’s helpful to think of leading a discussion as a process with three stages—prepare, do, reflect.

PREPARE

Have goals.	Having clearly articulated goals is essential, beyond just “discuss.” Learners are more engaged when they know what they’re learning and why it matters. Goals need not conflict with the open-endedness of discussion. A discussion might aim to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Get a range of opinions or responses on the table• Close read and clarify a difficult part of the readings• Review course material and check for comprehension• Solve a problem• Get clear on a question or a concept• Compare and contrast one or more answers to a question
Have a plan, but don’t be afraid to deviate.	How will <i>you</i> know when the class has reached the articulated goal(s)? How will <i>students</i> know? How hands on or off will you be as you facilitate? It can be helpful to have some sense of the sorts of alternative directions you’ll let play out and which tangents you’ll likely cut off if the discussion moves away from your explicit goals. If you’re teaching a class where you’re given a plan, how will you integrate your own teaching style, so it doesn’t seem scripted?
Help students prepare.	Offer them discussion questions in advance, or tell students to come to the next class with one or more prepared. Use “back channels” -- offer alternative spaces to participate, e.g. online discussion platforms, social media accounts set up for class activity.

DO

Stick to your rituals.	Arrival and/or closing rituals create a container for discussion—their regularity helps students transition into the class mindset: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask students to write a word or question on the board as they enter in response to that day’s reading or assignment.• Read a short quote or poem together.• Write exit notes at the end of class.• Ask a student to summarize key takeaways from discussion.
Communicate your goals and plan.	Be transparent and explicit about the goals you’ve laid out for today’s discussion. Explain the path the class might take to accomplish these goals.



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	Encourage students to use a variety of discussion moves. In what ways can students contribute beyond simply voicing their opinions?
Abide by group agreements.	Continually acknowledge group agreements established early on. Note that these agreements can be returned to and evolve over time. It's helpful to post the agreements on Canvas or the class webpage for student reference.
Have some ready tactics for when discussion isn't flowing.	<p><i>Writing.</i> Ask students to write at the start or during lulls to give them time to process and generate more discussion material.</p> <p><i>Pair Share or Small Group Discussion.</i> Ask students to discuss in smaller groups to provide a low stakes way of generating conversation.</p> <p><i>Warm Call.</i> Give a particular student a heads up that you'll be asking them to contribute or respond to a question in a little bit.</p> <p><i>Area Call.</i> Call on an area of the room rather than a single person. You can also warm call an area.</p> <p><i>Hot Seat.</i> Have one or a few students field questions from their classmates.</p> <p><i>Reverse Hand Raising.</i> Ask students to raise a hand if they <i>don't</i> have an answer or response. Commit to calling only on students who don't raise a hand.</p> <p><i>Patience Game.</i> Wait for a certain number of hands to be raised before you call on someone.</p> <p><i>Don't forget the physical.</i> Take a stand/stretch/move break. Have students switch seats.</p> <p><i>Freeze Frame.</i> Pause the discussion; have students reflect on what was just said or how the discussion has progressed thus far.</p>

REFLECT

Return to your goals.	Try not to leave class without some kind of wrap up. Prompt students to synthesize takeaways from the discussion, whether aloud or in writing. Communicate what you understand the class to have accomplished.
Take 5.	<p>Save yourself time later with a few minutes of reflection and note-taking while things are fresh: What worked and what didn't? On what topics or with which students will you follow up?</p> <p>Make sure you have any necessary notes on Participation and Attendance.</p>