

Leading Class Discussions Tip Sheet

Leading discussions requires a teacher not only to have an idea of what should be covered and where the discussion should go, but also to have the skills to track and improvise on what occurs in real time in the classroom.

Discussion leading requires as well that we know our students and find ways to respond to them that are individually appropriate. Moreover, the best discussions are those that focus more on the students' learning than on your teaching; having a clear learning objective for the session will help to focus discussion.

Prepare.

- Decide what is the one big thing you want to accomplish that day, what the big take-home point should be – whether it is a something students will know or something they will be able to do.
- Develop a plan for accomplishing your objectives. Usually you can cover only three or four aspects of your topic (at most) in a 90-minute session.
- Think of provocative, compelling ways to engage students in each of your topics, drawing on any pre-class preparations you have required students to do.
- Vary what you do within the class and from class to class. Use debates, slides, student presentations, small-group discussions, etc. to vary the pace and help re-engage your learners
- Don't plan to cover too much or overly script your class sessions. Take in one sheet with an outline, focused questions for discussion, and a few notes on it to help you remember particular questions or facts.

Know your students.

- Learn their names and something about their interests.
- Find out what level of preparation they have had for this class.
- Do introductions on the first day of class if the class is small enough.
- Consider requiring brief office hour visits with each student (or in a large class, with groups of students) at the beginning of the semester to get to know them better.
- If you treat your students with respect for their ideas and confusions, they will learn more easily. Treat all students with equal respect.

Questioning, listening, and responding are the building blocks of a discussion.

- Prepare interesting and evocative questions that will pique their interest and curiosity.
- Listen carefully; you'll gather invaluable information about what and how students are thinking.
- Use silence; it is the surest way to discover students' thoughts, questions, and confusions.
- Respond based on what you have heard. You can respond with a statement, a question, a restatement of what they have said. When possible try to take students' thoughts further.
- Stay on topic and let students know clearly how the discussion at hand relates to the arc of the class.

Enjoy yourself and show your enthusiasm for the material. Talking about things that are important to you and helping others understand them is a noble enterprise. Letting your students know you are passionate about your material and that you like and respect them will make it work.