

## Classroom Discussion

### **Why Do Discussions Sometimes Fail?**

- Expectations are unrealistic (E.g. expecting students to master sophisticated content during a single large group discussion session)
- Students are not prepared (Assign activities that will prepare them for the discussion and recognize their preparation)
- Ground rules are not established (Who determines who speaks? What etiquette is expected? How long will the discussion last?)
- There's no "reward" (I.e. participation is not required or recognized with points, etc. Some students may not see value in the discussion so share what you hope the discussion will accomplish)

### **Classroom Discussions Best Practices:**

#### **1. Prepare for the discussion**

- Clarify your goals
- If you are leading the discussion
  - Compose provocative questions with no "right" answers
  - Develop guiding questions that will refocus the discussion if it goes too far off track
- Create a back-up plan in case the discussion stalls
- Design activities that will prepare students for discussion

#### **2. Develop strategies for facilitating the discussion**

- Set ground rules for participation, courtesy, and inclusiveness
- Ask questions to determine what students understand before asking them to do complex or original thinking
- Ask follow-up questions that allow students to develop or clarify a response
- Provide a record or summary of key points as they have emerged
- Draw connections between the discussion and other course or discipline topics

#### **3. Determine how you will assess the discussion**

- Leave time at the end of the session for debriefing
- Leave time at the end of the session for students to record key points or list unanswered questions
- Develop continuing assignments based on discussions (5-minute papers, journaling, quizzes, etc.)

### **Classroom Discussion Types:**

#### **1. Guided or directed (Whole class or group discussion)**

- Instructor pose a discussion question (Sometimes in advance)
- Each student contributes an original response to the discussion question (Sometimes written)

- Students offer responses or questions to each other's contributions to broaden the scope of the discussion
- Students present their views or the views of their groups, either orally or in writing

## 2. Inquiry-based (Typically small group discussion)

- Instructor pose a discussion issue that requires argumentative reasoning and elaboration
- Students identify and highlight main issues relevant to the discussion by appraising new information, testing its validity and relevance, and considering their ideas against insights and perspectives provided by peers
- Students summarize the discussion in light of other discussants' reactions and interpretations in order to synthesize supporting and opposing ideas

## 3. Exploratory (Typically small group discussion)

- Instructor pose a real-world problem that requires students to consider the premises or ideas they have been discussing
- Students consider their beliefs and opinions and evaluate how alternatives to these beliefs and opinions apply in the real world and in their discipline

## 4. Task directed (Could transition from a whole class discussion to a small group discussion) Instructor ask students to:

- Scan: Extract a set of main ideas following a presentation, reading, lecture, or seminars. Students and
- Select a core set of concepts, which will form the basis of other discussions
- Rank the selected concepts according to a criterion (most important, hardest, most confusing, and general to specific) and justify their choices
- Define: Students record the concepts and then a student or a group must clearly define the concept

### Assign Roles:

- Active Listener: Tries to paraphrase others' contributions to the conversation –“So what I hear you saying is ...”
- Connector: Attempts to show how participants' contributions are connected to each other
- Devil's Advocate: Listens carefully for any emerging consensus, then formulates and expresses a contrary view
- Evidential Assessor: Listens for comments that generalize or make unsupported assertions, then asks for the evidence that supports the assertions being made
- Speculator: Introduces new ideas, new interpretations and possible lines of inquiry into the group e.g. “I wonder what would happen if ...?”, Summarizer: Makes and records summary observations that take into account each person's contributions
- Umpire: Listens for judgmental comments that sound offensive, insulting and demeaning
- Underscorer: Emphasizes the relevance, accuracy, or resonance of another person's comments and underscores why the comments are so pertinent

Source: Center for Teaching and Learning [[Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health](#)]