Effective Discussions
Center for Teaching and Learning
Meg Flanigan, PhD, Associate Director, CTL
Mike Dombroski, OIT
Today

- Discussions: why we use them
- Student Concerns
- Faculty Concerns
- Setting the stage
- Defining your parameters
- The importance of the prompt
- Discussion management techniques

- Tools and technologies that support online discussions
Why Do We Use Discussions?

- Moves students away from the role of passive recipient to active co-creators of knowledge
- Encourages students to think in the manner and language of the discipline
- Helps students formulate ideas and communicate them clearly
- Teaches students to become respectful, attentive listeners
- Exposes students to multiple perspectives and an awareness of complexities
- Challenges them to recognize and address their own and others biases and assumptions
- Helps students integrate/synthesize new information into their existing knowledge base
Student Concerns

- I need time to think before I speak
- What if I’m wrong
- I’m the only one who disagrees with the consensus
- I'm not comfortable challenging my faculty and/or peers
- I haven’t finished/understood the reading
- I don’t know how to be heard
- Am I talking too much?
- What a waste of time and money!
Faculty Concerns

- We risk losing some control
  - What if my students are unprepared?
  - How do I keep them on track?
  - What if their responses are misleading or incorrect?
  - What if there is a comment that is offensive and the discussion gets out of hand?
  - How do I ensure that all students are included?

- How can I help students value discussion as both a learning tool and a skill?

- I’m not sure what discussion approach to take
Setting the Stage

- Why have you decided to use discussion in your classes?
- How can you help your students see the value of discussion?
  - **Have a discussion about discussions**
    - Ask them to consider why YOU think discussions are important
      - Collate their responses and then share your own rationale
    - Help them see discussions as a critical thinking skill
      - Emphasize value and relevancy of discussion as a skill
      - Have students consider where discussion lies within Bloom's Taxonomy
Setting the Stage

- Ask students about previous experiences: what worked, what didn’t? What type of participant are they? Why? Should they adapt? How?

- Have the students draft civility/rules of engagement guidelines
  - Have students also develop "consequences"

- Consider cultural backgrounds and be clear about your expectations

- Consider the class time required to plan and implement a discussion in your course

- Think about what you can do to prepare for the discussion
Make the Parameters Clear

• What type of discussion would work best to support your objectives/situation, for example....
   Socratic, open-ended, free-form
   Think-Pair-Share: students think about their responses, share it with another student and then share out to the larger class
   Jigsaw: each group focuses on particular topic/aspect. Groups re-shuffle and come together to teach each other and integrate/synthesize knowledge
   Fishbowl: members take turns being the active participant and the active listener; each is assigned particular roles

• Clarify the objectives and outline the procedures and timeline
Important: Expect a “product”

(For more ideas on types of discussions please see The Big List of Class Discussion Strategies and/or Active Learning while Physical Distancing 2.0)

Suggestion: In F2F or synchronous online sessions
For more considered responses, and to help those who like to think before speaking, give the students the prompt several days before class.

Have them post their responses and comment on others.
At beginning of your “together” session allow them a few minutes to refresh their memories – and then begin the discussion.
Importance of the Prompt

- Good prompts are open-ended
  - Moral/ethical dilemmas
  - Assess/ Diagnose/ Act
    - Compare and Contrast
  - Interpret and Evaluate
    - Conceptual Changes
      - Personal Exploration

Adapted from 6 Types of Questions to Improve Classroom Discussions
Discussion Management: 

Prepare: Clarify: Remind

Affirm
• “Yes, and”, not “Yes, but”
• Praise & amplify (“Great point. Why is this important? You’ve raised an interesting point; let’s explore this some more)

Probe
• Could you explain your rationale...
• Could you provide an example that illustrates your point

Invite
• Can anyone elaborate? (You can “call” on students)
• Would anyone like to add to this?
Clarify

- “I think I heard; I’m not sure I understand, could you rephrase”
- “Can you provide an example?”

Re-direct

- “Good point. We’re going to come back to that”
- “What we’re grappling with is xyz. What are your thoughts?”
- Let’s hear from….

Calm

- Acknowledge and prepare (Especially if it’s a “hot button” topic, consider own and others perspectives in advance)
- Take a moment for reflection (What just happened? Why?)
- Re-visit
### Discussion Management Techniques

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<th>IF</th>
<th>THEN</th>
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<tr>
<td>The statement is correct but superficial</td>
<td>Affirm but probe for rationale, Invite further input</td>
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<td>The statement is one of several possibly correct</td>
<td>Affirm (amplify statement and its rationale)</td>
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<td>Invite (Anyone else? What else is a factor?)</td>
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<td>The statement appears to be incorrect</td>
<td>Clarify (I think I heard)</td>
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<td>Probe (Could you explain your rationale? What assumptions are you making? Is that what the author stated?)</td>
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<td>Invite (Would anyone else like to help us out?)</td>
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<td>The student response is unclear</td>
<td>Clarify (I’m not sure I understood. I think I heard. Could you rephrase? Could you provide an example that illustrates your point?)</td>
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<td>The students go off-topic</td>
<td>Affirm (That’s a great point, hold that thought...)</td>
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<td>Re-direct (remember we are trying to understand...what are your thoughts?)</td>
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| One student dominates                   | Affirm positive intent  
Remind them of guidelines                                                  |
| One student does not participate        | Not always a problem  
Call on student directly  
Follow-up                                                                 |
| Student says something offensive        | Clarify (I’m not sure I heard you properly)  
Probe (Why would you say that? Have you thought about?)  
Use “I” statements (Can I share with you how I heard that statement?)  
Follow-Up  
Exercise control                        |
| Student gets angry/upset*              | Prepare (prior to discussion, student reflects on gut reaction, considers other perspectives and rationales)  
Acknowledge (This topic invokes strong feelings)  
Rationalize (why are we discussing it? What will students gain?)  
Reflect (give students time individually to reflect. What just happened? Why?)  
Re-visit (have students of varying opinions listen to each and take notes) |

* For more information see Making the Most of Hot Topics in the Classroom, and Interrupting Microaggressions
Could the Discussion be Approached Through a Different Lens?

When you think about the goal of the discussion, consider whether other approaches might be helpful

- role playing
- Infographics
- students evaluate/design case studies
- information portals, etc...

Conversely, use discussion as a follow up to these scenarios

For a myriad of ideas, also see the University Libraries’ Keep Learning, Teaching and Working Resources
Tools/Technology for Asynchronous Discussion Types

- **Socratic**
  - Blackboard
  - Teams
  - VoiceThread
  - Tophat - Homework

- **Think-Pair-Share**
  - Blackboard
  - Teams
  - VoiceThread
  - Tophat

- **Fishbowl**
  - Blackboard
  - Teams
  - VoiceThread
  - Tophat

- **Jigsaw**
  - Blackboard
  - Teams
  - VoiceThread
  - Tophat
Sources and Resources


Effective Online Discussions (n.d.) *Lumen Virtual Learning Design and Delivery* Retrieved from https://courses.lumenlearning.com/virtuallearningdesigndelivery/chapter/6-effective-online-discussions/

Collaborative Online Learning: Fostering Effective Discussions. Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo.


Making the Most of Hot Topics in the Classroom (2020). Retrieved from Center for Research on Teaching and Learning, University of Michigan.


- For more information, to request a follow-up discussion session, or to share your expertise, please contact oii@ohio.edu