



## EFFECTIVE DISCUSSIONS

### INTRODUCTION

Discussion is a valuable learning tool in many ways, including but not limited to the following: It

- Moves the student away from the role of passive recipient to active co-creator 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 complexity
- Challenges students to recognize and address their own and others' biases and assumptions
- Helps students integrate/synthesize new information into their existing knowledge base

#### A. Planning Your Discussions

Consider why you will use discussion in your class

- Is discussion a learning activity that supports your learning outcomes ,or
- is discussion a learning outcome in its own right?

Consider your audience

- Is this an introductory class or are students bringing advanced knowledge to the table?
- Is yours a discipline where students expect to have discussions?
- Are your students experienced with college-level discussions?

The answers to these questions will help inform how you introduce the concept and value of discussions to your class



## B. Help Students Understand the Value of Discussions

### Have a discussion about discussions

- i. Ask students to consider why you think discussions are important. Collate their responses and then share your own rationale
- ii. Emphasize the value and relevancy of discussion as a skill
- iii. Have students consider where discussion lies within Blooms Taxonomy;
- iv. Ask students about previous experiences. What did their instructors do that worked well, or not so well?
- v. Equally importantly what type of discussion participants are they? Do they tend to dominate conversations or are they reticent? Should they adapt their approach? How will they do this?
- vi. Ask students to draft civility/rules of engagement guidelines, as well as consequences
- vii. As you work on your course schedule, remember to consider the class time required to plan and implement a discussion
- viii. Think about what you can do to prepare for the discussion. What are the key questions you want your students to address? What will you do if you're met with silence? Think about ways to reframe the question or to break it into more accessible formats?

## C. What type of Discussion Will Best Support Your Objectives/Classroom Environment?

Here are a few examples of some basic discussion techniques: (For more details, or for more discussion techniques, please Resource List at the end.

- Socratic: open-ended, free-form
- Think-Pair-Share: students think about their responses, share them with another student and then share out to a larger group/class
- Jigsaw: each group focuses and explores a particular topic or aspect of a topic. Groups are then re-shuffled and come together to teach each other and integrate/synthesize knowledge
- Fishbowl: members take turns being active participants or active listeners, and then swap roles

\*Before putting your students into discussion groups, be sure to clarify the objectives, outline procedures and roles, and provide a timeline. Important- No matter what discussion technique is employed, we should always expect a “product” of some sort.



## *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

## D. The Importance of the Prompt

For in-depth discussions, it is important to avoid simple yes/no, or right/wrong questions. Useful prompts are open-ended. Some examples include asking our students to engage in:

- Moral/Ethical Dilemmas
- Assess/Diagnose/Act
- Compare/Contrast
- Interpretive and Evaluative
- Conceptual Changes
- Personal Exploration

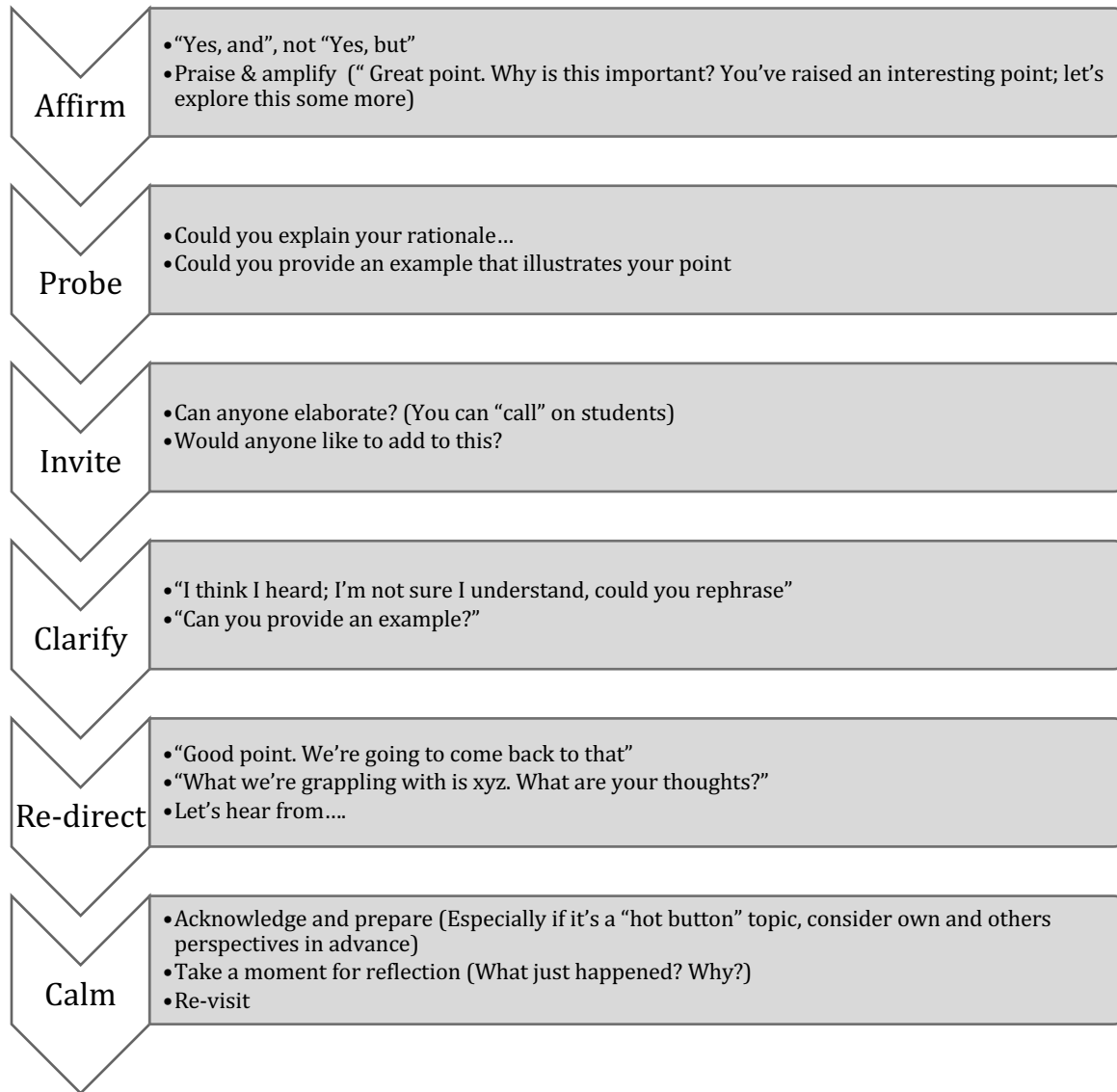
For more information on each of these approaches, please see “6 Types of Questions to Improve Classroom Discussions”

## E. Discussion Facilitation and Management

As discussion facilitators, we want our responses to students to be encouraging, inclusive, and framed in such a way that we help to continue, rather than inadvertently shut down, the discussion. We come to each discussion having asked ourselves and our students to prepare, we have clarified our expectations and, particularly when the topic under discussion is a “hot button” issue, we remind the class of our student-created guidelines for civil engagement. As such we want help our students deepen and expand their understandings and perspectives.



## i) Productive Instructor Responses





IF	THEN
<b>The statement is correct but superficial</b>	Affirm but probe for rationale, Invite further input
<b>The statement is one of several possibly correct</b>	Affirm (amplify statement and its rationale) Invite (Anyone else? What else is a factor?)
<b>The statement appears to be incorrect</b>	Clarify (I think I heard) Probe (Could you explain your rationale? What assumptions are you making? Is that what the author stated?) Invite (Would anyone else like to help us out?)
<b>The student response is unclear</b>	Clarify (I'm not sure I understood. I think I heard. Could you rephrase? Could you provide an example that illustrates your point?..)
<b>The students goes off-topic</b>	Affirm (That's a great point, hold that thought...) Re-direct (remember we are trying to understand...what are your thoughts?)
<b>One student dominates</b>	Affirm positive intent Remind them of guidelines
<b>One student does not participate</b>	Not always a problem Call on student directly Follow-up
<b>Student says something offensive</b>	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
<b>Student gets angry/upset*</b>	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*



## Sources and Resources

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