

# Fostering Effective Classroom Discussions

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## Introduction

The theoretical and pedagogical developments in writing instruction over the last fifteen years have made fostering effective classroom discussions a crucial teaching skill. As we have come to focus on the teaching of academic discourse, the overriding metaphor in composition studies and writing textbooks has become that of helping students to "join the conversation." We have based any number of collaborative learning activities upon students' ability to talk to one another freely and effectively. Indeed, social construction theory has built an entire epistemology and theory of cognition on the premise of effective talk. As Kenneth Bruffee puts it in "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" [*College English* 46.7 (1984): 635—652],

We can think because we can talk, and we think in ways we have learned to talk . . . . If thought is internalized public and social talk, then writing of all kinds is internalized talk made public and social again. If thought is internalized conversation, then writing is internalized conversation re-externalized . . . . We converse; we internalize conversation as thought; and then by writing, we re-immense conversation in its external social medium. (640)

As we look ahead to where composition studies and writing pedagogy seem to be going, our students' ability to engage in effective discussion will apparently grow even more important. Our burgeoning disciplinary interest in civic discourse—in helping students gain the public rhetorical skills they will need to be fully active members of a participatory democracy—simply increases the importance of classroom discussion as a place to learn and practice essential discursive abilities. Facilitating more effective classroom discussions thus constitutes a fundamental first step toward improving the sad state of civic and public discourse in this country, toward helping our fellow citizens move beyond simply shouting at each other as a means of "communication" (as they do every night on such highly visible and influential political "discussions" as Bill Maher's "Politically Incorrect," for example).

Yet despite the tremendous current and future significance of effective classroom discussion, our professional literature in writing instruction is strangely quiet on the subject. We are, ironically, rather tight-lipped about how to facilitate effective talk in our writing classrooms. The published professional advice, what there is of it (see our annotated list of internet resources), comes from those professors who teach large lecture

classes and are helping others to move out of that singular mode of delivery. It seems we simply assume that since most writing instructors were *students in college literature courses* that presumably encouraged discussion, they therefore know how to foster and facilitate discussion as *teachers in college writing courses*. This assumption is not only spurious but also rather odd, given that the stereotype of an English undergraduate is that of an introverted bookworm. There is, however, a grain of truth to this assumption: given the paucity of available information, new writing instructors inevitably try, consciously or unconsciously, to mimic those professors from their pasts who somehow knew the knack of getting people to contribute in class.

But enough griping: it's time to rectify the situation. There is a long litany of things—concrete, pragmatic, proven things—that writing instructors can do to improve both the quantity and the quality of the discussion in their classrooms.

We begin, then, with a simple premise: classroom discussion functions best when *students are talking to students*. Indeed, our goal is to get as many students involved in talking to one another as possible and for the teacher to fade into the background. Students are well practiced in how to talk to and listen to teachers, in how to address and look to authority figures for answers. But they are not well versed in how to talk to and listen to each other, in how to navigate and negotiate and discuss issues of serious consequence and work toward answers among equals.

Moreover, we want to avoid class "discussions" that amount to nothing more than a perversion of the Socratic method, that amount to nothing more than a series of closed, two-person exchanges in which the teacher asks a question and an individual student answers the teacher, exchanges which lock the other students into the role of passive observers. We want as many students as possible to be as attentive and involved and engaged as possible; we want them to be agents in their own educations.

## **Strategies for Fostering Effective Classroom Discussions**

### **1) Set clear expectations for student participation in discussion sessions.**

Let students know the first day of class that a significant portion of their final grade for the course will be based on how effectively they participate in class discussion sessions, both in terms of the number of times they comment and in the quality of those comments. Keep your class roster handy during discussion sessions and mark who speaks and who doesn't. During conferences, ask those students who do not participate enough to "help you out" by speaking more in class.

You might even specify a class rule: "You are not allowed to say 'I don't know' in this class when asked a question. You are not required to *know*, but you are expected to *think*. So if I ask you a question and you don't know the answer, you are responsible to think of an answer, to guess, to speculate, to wonder aloud."

You can also foster effective discussions by helping students move out of the narrow, reductive agree/disagree formula that constitutes so much of the public and civic

discourse that they are exposed to and have internalized. You can begin the course by expanding their notions of how to productively respond to comments in class, by asking them what *they* do when they talk to their friends over lunch, for instance, and filling the board with options outside simply agreeing and disagreeing with what the previous speaker said, such as adding new ideas, wondering, compromising, telling jokes, questioning, complaining, telling stories, challenging, and analyzing.

Be sure to "prime the pump" for discussion days. Require students to demonstrate that they have already begun processing the material *before* you discuss it in class. For instance, you could make students hand you an "entrance ticket" as they enter class, a homework assignment which guarantees that they are prepared to engage in a productive discussion. This ticket could consist of their answers to a set of questions on a reading, for example, or a list of questions they have about the reading, or a paragraph that discusses the three most surprising things they found in the reading, etc.

### **2) Break the ice with informal talk outside of class.**

Enter the classroom five minutes early each day, and while the students file in, ask them about their other classes, their progress on writing projects, current events, or other lighthearted topics in an informal manner. For many students, composition is their only class with fewer than thirty students. The composition classroom may be the only course in which they are asked to speak; conditioned by other large lecture classes, they may feel intimidated or "out-of-place" when called on. Informal "small talk" may help break the ice before a discussion, and a relaxed and comfortable student will invariably feel more inclined to add her or his opinions to the conversation.

### **3) Control and use classroom space strategically.**

Karl Krahnke (English Department, Colorado State University) notes that situating students equidistant from each other breaks down their protective space, gives the teacher access to them, and sets the stage for communication. In other words, having the students put their desks in a circle or horseshoe shape prevents them from hiding in corners or behind other students' bodies. The circle improves communication by allowing them to see each other's faces and hear each other's responses without straining. And having them move their desks from rows and columns into a circle explicitly and concretely signals that a particular kind of class participation will soon be expected of them.

The circle or horseshoe shape also allows the teacher easier physical access to students than does the narrow passages of the row/column grid. This is important, because as Krahnke points out, moving toward a speaker, lessening the physical distance between yourself and the student, establishes and narrows a communication channel. Think, for example, about how talk show hosts move out into the audience. Moving toward the speaker is a physical and unmistakable indication that you are interested in what he or she is saying and that others should be listening too.

Conversely, Krahnke says, moving away from a speaker, increasing the distance between yourself and a student, widens a communication channel. As we back up, in other words,

the audience grows as more people move into the speaker's gaze.

Krahnke also suggests that working from among or even behind the students can lessen the threat from the teacher. That is, moving out from behind the "Big Desk" and sitting instead in a normal student desk as part of the circle is a concrete, physical signal that you want to be *a part of* the community rather than *apart from* it.

In like manner, he notes, lowering the communication channel decreases the teacher's authoritative role. Sitting down among your students lets you look at and talk to them across an even plane, rather than literally talking down to them. Remember that old nugget from your biology classes: there is a "fight or flight" mechanism that kicks in from the reptile part of our brain when we have to look up too far to see what is coming at us.

#### **4) Use eye contact purposefully and strategically.**

Krahnke suggests that establishing eye contact opens a communication channel and selects the student for a turn to speak.

Breaking eye contact during a student's turn and scanning the class, he notes, can distribute the student's communication throughout the class. That is, when the teacher breaks eye contact with the speaking student, he or she will follow the teacher's gaze and seek out someone else to talk to. The teacher's scanning eye also signals other students that they should be paying attention to the speaker.

Finally, Krahnke maintains, regular scanning can keep students engaged and can provide important feedback to the teacher. This is, in short, a surveillance function. If we are making eye contact with *all* the students in class, they are more likely to stay involved—and if they are not involved, we will know it immediately.

#### **5) Avoid open questions; call on individual students.**

Krahnke urges us to direct our questions to specific students and distribute turns around the room. This will increase the level of attentiveness on the part of the students, he says, and increase the number of students who participate. In other words, consistently asking questions that are open to anyone in the class to answer allows the hyper-verbal students to dominate and allows others to hide.

#### **6) Ask good questions.**

The kinds of questions we ask can make all the difference between an engaging and fruitful discussion and the verbal equivalent of pulling teeth. It is a good idea to write down a skeleton script of questions you want to ask during a class discussion, being open, of course, to follow a productive thread should it move away from your plan.

There are forms of questions to avoid. Listen to yourself in class, and if you find yourself working with these kinds of questions, consciously work to transform them into more productive forms.

A) the "Guess What I'm Thinking" Question—in which the teacher asks a question to which he or she already has a specific answer in mind. This makes "class discussion" into an attempt at mind reading for students. Questions like "What *should* Bob have done to improve his focus?" ask the students to guess at the answer hiding in your skull, whereas "What *could* Bob have done to improve his focus?" actually asks for *their* input.

B) the Yes/No Question and the Leading Question—in which the teacher's question can be answered with a simple yes or no, which stops a discussion dead. Questions like "Do you think Didion's conclusion is effective?" or "Wouldn't you agree that Didion's tone is whiny and annoying?" ask students to engage in nothing more than simple affirmation or negation, simple agreement or disagreement. Transform the question into something that asks for an analysis or interpretation, for example: "Why do you think she chooses to end the essay this way?" "How would you describe Didion's tone?"

C) the Rhetorical Question—in which a declarative statement masquerades as a question to soften its blow and make it more likely to be accepted. Rhetorical questions allow us to foist our interpretations and ideas on our students while deluding ourselves that we are actually asking for their opinions. Questions like "Don't we have an ethical and moral responsibility to inform parents that a convicted pedophile is moving into their neighborhood?" aren't really questions, of course. Transform such sneaky assertions into actual questions: "What arguments, pro and con, can we generate about informing parents that a convicted pedophile is moving into their neighborhood?"

D) the Information Retrieval Question—in which students are asked to simply look in the text at hand, find specific, concrete information, and bring it back to the teacher. "What metaphor does Milton use to describe Satan in lines 617-634?" amounts to a classic example of mindless, page-turning busy work. Transform the question into something that asks for analysis or evaluation: "How does Milton's description of Satan in lines 617-634 compare with depictions of the Devil you know from the movies or television?"

In explaining how to improve weak questions, we ha