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## Large Classes: A Teaching Guide : Discussion

Traditionally, lectures do not feature much discussion and in comparison with small classes do less to develop in students' higher-order thinking skills. Discussion asks students to process information they have studied in new ways, for instance, by applying it, evaluating it, or comparing their understanding of it with that of others. Class discussions, either between the instructor and the students or the students themselves, greatly improve students' ability to retain information. Some ways in which discussion has been used successfully in a large class setting are outlined below. Lecture plans should include time for discussion once you have considered what kinds of questions you will ask and the purpose you want the discussion to serve. As mentioned previously, it takes time to figure out what activities work best for you. One suggestion for incorporating discussion into a lecture format is to gradually increase students' participation. The list here is presented in order of increased student involvement.

### Questions

One way to encourage students to engage in thinking about the information being presented is to ask questions. Some instructors use short-answer questions to keep students' attention, such as "And when did the war end? What were other reasons for the Civil War?". In asking this kind of question, the instructor waits until some students respond. Another kind of a question is open-ended, such as, "Why did the Civil War end?" When asking a question you do not expect students will be able to answer briefly, it is essential that you pause long enough for them to consider it before giving an answer yourself. A third type of question solicits students' opinions, e.g., "What do you think about Locke's assertion of" or "In your opinion, why...?" or "What do you think about...?".

### Show of Hands, Informal Votes, Short Surveys

Another way to involve students in the presentation of information is to ask for a show of hands or to take an informal vote on a subject or issue. For instance, you might ask, "How many are convinced by Smith's argument?" "How many feel that Golberg's interpretation is reasonable?" This vote may or may not lead to student commentary. A short survey that asks students for their opinions on or familiarity with a topic can be given at the beginning or end of a class. If given at the beginning, the results could be tabulated and analyzed during class. If given at the end, the instructor could tabulate the results and incorporate them into the next lecture.

### Student Discussions and Small Group Work

In these activities, the instructor poses a question or a problem and the students answer it by discussing it with one or two fellow students. For instance, after discussing a study, the instructor might ask students if they can think of alternative cases or factors. Students can also be asked to summarize the main points of the lecture. After the allotted time (five or ten minutes), the class reconvenes and volunteers from the groups offer their responses. The next section details more kinds of Collaborative Cooperative Learning Activities.

### Other Participatory Activities

Discussions can also be facilitated by having a group of students involved in the following activities:

#### Discussion Row

In a lecture hall, a couple of rows are designated as "discussion rows". The students in these rows are expected to respond to the instructors' questions throughout the lecture. Students might rotate sitting here throughout the semester.

#### Discussion Quadrant

The lecture hall might be divided into four quadrants. At different points in the lecture or semester, students from a particular quadrant are asked to respond to questions.

#### Expert Panel

on a panel counts as part of the student's grade. (For more information, see Bernstein [1994] in the References section.)

#### *Classroom "Talk Show"*

In this activity, several students volunteer to be a guest on the "show." The idea is to represent different points of view by having a varied panel of guests. For instance, in a discussion about slavery, students could take the roles of a slave, a slave owner, an abolitionist, an anti-abolitionist, a priest, etc. Students not role-playing act as the audience and ask questions. The instructor should act as moderator and prepare several questions that will provoke different points of view in case the discussion lulls. For more information on Critical Thinking and Classroom Discussion, see the Resource Packet on these topics.

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