



Teaching Tips

Discussions: Facilitation Techniques

Discussion groups are an excellent method for engaging students in learning and reinforcing course material. There are a number of creative techniques for facilitating effective discussion groups. The following are suggestions to get you started. EDC staff is always available to help you find or refine more discipline-specific techniques!

Introductory activities

These are intended to help get the conversation started. Use other techniques for more in-depth discussion.

- Topic-icebreakers** At the beginning of the discussion, ask a relevant and provocative question that can be readily answered. Ask each student for a brief response to the question.
- Polling** Facilitator asks a series of questions at the beginning of class to the students who respond with a show of hands or at the end of class that students respond to on paper. Comments are summarized and shared back to the group at the next class. When used at the end of class, this technique can ask students a variety of questions such as what they did not understand, what they would like to cover, where confusion exists or to gauge their level of knowledge on the subject material.
- Continuum or Value Line** Ask students to line up according to their understanding/ experience/ intensity/ feeling/ experience/confidence of the question or topic posed. Follow-up by hearing back from each student.
- Voting** Variation on polling. Students vote (or rank preferences) by sticking coloured stickers on their choice of answer(s) to a question (s).

In-depth Discussion Techniques

These follow well after introductory activities and are designed to help structure a discussion and involve

- Buzz Groups** Students in groups of 2 or 3, discuss topic question. Then a spokesperson from each group or each student reports back to the larger group.
- Brainstorming** Create a focus question or topic for brainstorming. The question or topic needs to be broad enough to give opportunities for answers but not too broad. Make it relevant. Students provide input but no analysis or critique is allowed. Write suggestions on board. Stop the exercise when input flags. Sorting and analysis takes place only after brainstorming is finished.
- Round Table** A question is asked and every student is asked to respond. Give students a few minutes to think, have them write down their responses, and then begin roundtable. Start at one end or side of room and work your way around so that no one is missed. Give students the option of a pass, so that no one is embarrassed by not having an answer.

Continued on reverse.

- Debates** Divide class into two teams. Assign a role or perspective to each team. Each student on the team presents for a few minutes from that perspective only. Then switch.
- Posters** In small groups, students prepare posters that show their ideas, response or suggestions. Could be used to find out where students misunderstand the course material.
- Think-Pair-Share** Each student jots down their ideas in response to a posed question. In pairs, students exchange ideas. Lastly, these thoughts are shared with the larger group. Variation—students could present each other’s ideas to the group of students or could combine their ideas into a unified answer.
- Mind Mapping** For this exercise paper or black/white board is needed as well as markers. A question or topic is written in the middle of paper or board. Students working individually or on teams, write comments, ideas, or responses that are linked to the main topic. Additional comments build on these or start new threads. responses can be linked with other related ones and new ideas added on from others or from original. Mind mapping creates a visual record of a discussion that includes the links made between ideas.
- Fish Bowl** One group of students sits in a small circle discussing a topic. An outer ring of students observes [without any discussion] the interactions of the group in the centre. This is a useful technique for observing group behaviour.
- Circle of Voices** Students (in groups of 4 to 5) take turns speaking for 1-3 minutes on an assigned topic. While each student speaks, no interruptions, questions or comments are allowed. After each group member has spoken, open the floor for general discussion but do not allow any new ideas to be introduced. The purpose of this technique is to encourage active listening and to focus the discussion.
- Jigsaw** Groups are assigned a multi-faceted problem. Each member of the group then selects or is assigned a particular aspect of the problem on which to focus. Next, students move into expert groups that consist of students who are responsible for mastering the same material. In these expert groups, the students ensure that they understand their portion of the material and also know how they will teach it to their original group members. Students then regroup into their original groups, and each student teaches his or her material to the others. Individual mastery of the entire topic can be evaluated through quizzes.
- Quescussion** Students present ideas in the form of a question [but avoid “Don’t you think, xyz is true?” questions]. Nobody makes any statement or comment of fact. This is a tricky one to get used to but can be extremely effective in drawing out shy students or making the routine discussion group more fun.
- Summary** Rather than you summing up the discussion, get the class involved! Have students take turns providing the summary and connections for the discussion. You can also get student summaries from the whole class by asking questions that encourage a summary of the material, probing students to make connections, or simply by having each student state the most important point they made to the discussion in 5 seconds or less.