EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

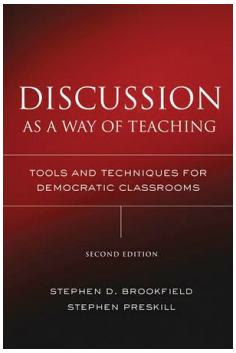
CTL TED University Center for Teaching and Learning

Effective Classroom Discussions

Lowman (1995) suggested that classroom discussion consists of student comments separated by frequent probes and clarifications by the teacher that facilitate involvement and development of thinking by the whole group. According to Svinicki and McKeachie (2011), the prototypic teaching method for active learning is discussion.

Discussion is an important aspect of developing students' thinking skills and higher-level learning such as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom et al., 1956), and also creativity (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Bligh, 2000). In addition to these benefits, Cashin and McKnight (1986) stated that discussion provides feedback to instructors about their students' acquisition of learning through questions, comments, elaborations, and justifications.

Class discussions can take on a variety of forms. Some of them described below can be easily adapted for and implemented in a classroom setting. Brookfield and Preskill (2005) provide several classroom discussion techniques. For information on remaining techniques, please consult the book by Brookfield and Preskill.



Where Do You Stand?

1. Assign readings before class that will allow students to familiarize themselves with a controversial topic, including facts that may be used as evidence for specific positions.
2. To begin the activity, write a debatable statement on the board, ask students to stand in a specific location in the room to indicate whether they strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree.
3. After students have "positioned" themselves, call on individual students to explain their respective positions vis-a-via the debatable statement.
4. Once you have heard from a few students, tell everyone that they can move to a different position, to reflect any changes in their thinking.
5. Repeat steps above once or twice more, then ask students to discuss the process.

What arguments were most compelling? Why?

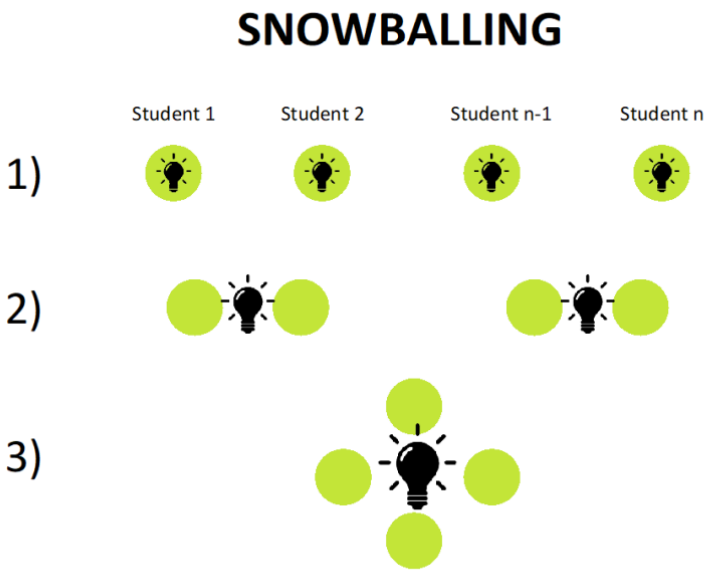
How did hearing different perspectives affect their thinking?

What new questions were generated?

Snowballing

This technique allows the students to work in groups and build their knowledge gradually. Students begin this activity individually. They then create progressively larger conversational groups by doubling their group size every few minutes until everybody in the large group has reconvened by the end of the activity.

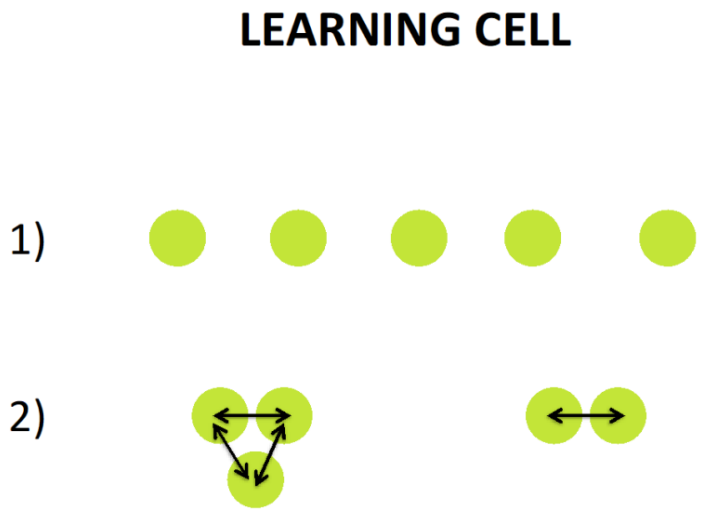
1. Pose a complex, or difficult problem, and tell the class that they are going to solve it.
2. Have students tackle the first sub-problem on their own.
3. Have students pair up, check their solutions and issue the next challenge, which requires the solution to the first problem to complete.
4. Have pairs join up into groups of four and repeat number 3.
5. Continue in this manner until two large groups are completing the final component of the problem
6. Discuss the solution as a class.



The Learning Cell

The learning cell can be very effective for ongoing assignments, such as assigned readings, where members of a learning cell take turns being responsible for writing up a summary of that week's reading and sharing it with their learning cell.

1. Students prepare for the learning cell by reading an assignment or an academic unit and generating a list of questions dealing with the major points, important concepts or methodological procedures.
2. During class time, students are randomly paired up, and partner A begins by asking the first question.
3. After the question is answered (and possibly corrected), the second student, B, poses a question to student A. If the nature of the questions asked is more comprehensive, it may work better to allow a minute for the answering students to write down their answers.
4. While the question asking and answering period is occurring, the instructor goes from team to team monitoring student progress and providing clarification as needed.



Group Dialogues

1. Write a question on each of 4-5 large flip-chart sheets of paper (or areas of the chalkboard).
2. Divide students into 4-5 groups (one group per question).
3. Each group talks with one another for five minutes to develop an answer to the question, then writes their answer on the paper or chalkboard.
4. When you say "move," each group moves to the next question in succession, reads the answer already recorded, talks with one another, then adds a written response to the first group's written answer.
5. Continue until all four groups have written a response to each question.
6. As a class, review the responses to each question, discussing how the answers evolved via dialogue.

Socratic Seminar

Griswold et al. (2017) found that interpreting graphs, tables, and diagrams using the Socratic Seminar instructional method improves learner outcomes. They also found that understanding of scientific topics improved even when none of the learners in the discussion groups knew the correct answer (Smith et al. 2009).

When using the Socratic Seminar individuals learn to regulate their thoughts to find true understanding, which makes this instructional method convenient to nurture metacognition and self-regulation (Darginavičienė, 2007; Oyler & Romanelli, 2014).

1. Students prepare by reading a text or group of texts and writing some higher-order discussion questions about the text.
2. Develop a classroom contract. These seminars have rules that may not apply to other forms of discussion, so before beginning the seminar, it is important that everyone is aware of the norms.
3. On seminar day, students sit in a circle and an introductory, open-ended question is posed by the teacher or student discussion leader.
4. Students continue the conversation, prompting one another to support their claims with textual evidence.

Saran & Neisser (2004), Stoddard & O'Dell (2016) and Griswold et al. (2017) provide Socratic Seminar questions below.

What do you mean when you say___?

Can you explain further?

How does this relate to what we have been discussing/learning?

What does the data mean?

What does the data/chart/table/graph show?

What are the implications of your idea/argument/position?

What effect would that idea/position have on ___ situation?

Can this data be used to support a specific claim?

Can you give me an example of what you said?

How does data apply to you? What experience do you have with this?

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Washington University in St. Louis. Center for Teaching and Learning

https://ctl.wustl.edu/resources/discussion-strategies/

Indiana University Bloomington. Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning

https://citl.indiana.edu/teaching-resources/teaching-strategies/discussions/index.html#:~:text=Discussion%20is%20important%20to%20learning,thinking%20about%20the%20course%20material.

The Big List of Class Discussion Strategies. Jennifer Gonzalez.

https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/speaking-listening-techniques/

McGill University. Active Strategies.

https://www.mcgill.ca/skillsets/files/skillsets/active_strategies_snowballing.pdf

Further Reading and Resources

- For help developing discussion questions, see A Typology of Questions from Harvard's Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning.
- Effective Class Discussions. Yale University. Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning.
- Discussions. Carnegie Mellon University. Carnegie Mellon Eberly Center.