



Discussions: Increasing Student Engagement

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Discussions – Purpose

Jennifer Herman and Linda Nilson note that discussions might serve a variety of goals: “exchange of different interpretations, explanations, approaches to a problem, or possible solutions; collective analysis of arguments or claims; expression of varying opinions, positions, or perspectives, along with justifications;” and in the process students practice expressing their thoughts to gain new knowledge or perspectives. Discussions are not recitations in which students answer questions drawing upon their ability to recall facts, a retrieval practice that is also important to learning.¹ Discussions should require higher level thinking, e.g. application, analysis, evaluation; they can lead in many directions compared to a recitation.

Discussions are a valuable learning experience if they promote active listening, critical thinking, deepen understanding, sharpen verbal skills, encourage perspective-taking, require problem-solving or brainstorming, and encourage the integration of new ideas. These higher-level cognitive goals make content more memorable and enduring.

If your only teaching modality is online synchronous consult the [CTL's Teaching Tip Zoom and Increasing Student Engagement](#).

Good Discussions Start with Good Course Design

Prepare discussions in the same way you create a course through backward design. What are your goals for the discussion? How will you know your students achieved those goals? What learning and teaching activities must you develop to help students prepare for discussion? Potential goals for discussion might include to develop an ability to debate or defend claims; improve communication skills; appreciate diversity of perspectives; challenge assumptions; brainstorm; solve problems. In advance, share the learning goals with students. The learning goals will shape how you will assess discussion.

Some possible ways to assess discussion:

1. **Monitor frequency of participation.** If you have a manageable class size, perhaps thirty-five, tally participation as students offer substantive contributions. If students are clearly distracted or worse sleeping, they need to know the consequences of this behavior. Consider adopting a “stuff

¹ Herman and Nilson, 1.

happens” option in which you would drop a very small percentage of low grades to provide students with some flexibility. The percentage depends upon the number of discussions you schedule.

2. **Monitor quality of participation.** Make note if students support claims with evidence or build on a classmate’s contributions. What criteria might you look for? It will depend upon the goals for discussion. Herman and Nilson list several criteria: “quantity/frequency of contributions; listening skills; accuracy of content; demonstration of knowledge gained from assigned material; relevancy /responsiveness to the discussion issues; insight into discussion issues; demonstration of higher level thinking; evidence offered to support claims; sense of community fostered; professionalism; responsiveness to instructor feedback; responsiveness to student feedback; and quality of follow-up responses and feedback to other students.”²
3. **Have students provide “entry tickets.”** An “entry ticket” can demonstrate if students have thought about the material that will inform the discussion. Examples include, bring in three quotations from the discussion reading, a 3-2-1 Prompt (3 things that you learned, 2 questions that you have, 1 thing you liked), a written response to questions provided in advance, demonstrate how they worked through a problem, etc. These can be collected as hard copy or students might contribute in advance to a collaborative word or PPT document, submit to BRIGHTSPACE’s assignment folder, or contribute to a discussion board. If you have time to read in advance, incorporate the “Entry Ticket” questions into class discussions to emphasize their relevancy. See the [CTL’s Teaching Tip Prepare your Students to Participate](#) by A.D. Stuart, who uses this technique in English classes.
4. **Have students provide “exit tickets.”** An “exit ticket” is a writing prompt, short quiz, or survey that measures if goals were accomplished that are submitted when the class ends.
5. **Ask students to grade their participation.** Provide students with criteria or a discussion rubric (or have them help create them) and periodically require them to assess their participation. Ask them to comment on how they will improve for future discussions. Their self-grades could be collected through Office 365 or Google Form (just be sure to uncheck the setting to make it anonymous). In addition, explore how you could adapt BRIGHTSPACE’s [quiz feature to encourage self-assessment](#).³
6. **Survey students** on the quality of discussion and if it met goals.
7. **For discussion boards**, which can be used in F2F classes, monitor length and quality of the posts. Become involved with the discussions without becoming overbearing.
8. **Collect worksheets** completed during group work. These worksheets could be in paper form or made available through collaborative word or PPT documents.

“Twelve Principles to Guide Class Discussion”

We need to ponder what works best to promote meaningful discussions for students. In *Creating Engaging Discussions: Strategies for ‘Avoiding Crickets’ in any size Classroom and Online*, Jennifer Herman and Linda Nilson identify the challenges and offer approaches that can increase the likelihood that discussions achieve their purpose. Their book is worth exploring in depth. First, they outline and explain, the “12 Principles to Guide Class Discussion.”⁴ Those principles include:

1. “Students must be prepared for discussion.” This is perhaps most important and most difficult to achieve. In addition to creating incentives for doing the preparatory work, such as a quiz or informal writing assignment, helping students understand the purpose of discussions is equally valuable. Pre-discussion assignments, such as reading, watching a video, or listening to a podcast, should be clearly linked to the goals for discussion. Give students a road map, be transparent. For example, have students submit study or reflection questions that they upload to BRIGHTSPACE drawn from the readings or problem sets. Ask them to have these handy when discussion begins, or have

² Herman and Nilson, 67.

³ Thanks to Jon Hedrick for bringing this to my attention.

⁴ Herman and Nilson, 11-12 is where the list appears, and chapter 2 is dedicated to explaining. In this section, I am summarizing their work and offering examples for online specifically.

students submit several hours in advance, then the instructor can review and reference these during the in-person or synchronous session. If we refer to the pre-discussion assignments, then we emphasize the relevancy and purposefulness of the work. This process is an adaptation of Just-in-time-teaching (JITT).⁵

2. “Students must feel safe to express themselves.”

We should create a positive environment of respect in which all students feel safe to contribute; so that no one feels marginalized.

- Create rules of engagement and/or have students create those rules. If you have students create, it’s best to plant seeds by giving them some ideas or a checklist of possibilities (frequency, preparedness, misbehaviors and microaggressions, quality). One example: if you were the last one to speak, you must wait until two others have contributed before you participate again.⁶ Other examples: before you speak, summarize the last person’s comments; to substantiate claims, students should use assigned materials or be based on research.
- In addition, deepen your awareness and appreciation for the impact that the “hidden curriculum” has on students, especially if they are first generation or enter university under-prepared. In the context of discussion, students may be unfamiliar with the disciplinary language and reluctant to contribute out of fear of drawing attention to their inexperience or ignorance.
- Finally, make yourself aware of microaggressions that either you or your students might commit that have a deleterious impact on creating an equitable environment.

3. “Students need good reasons to listen actively.”

- Do your students know what it means to engage in a discussion? Herman and Nilson suggest that we outline the goal for discussion.
- As students contribute, make notes on a collaborative word document or whiteboard that can be shared with the class (you could assign a student to be the note-taker for a day).
- Guide them on how to take notes during discussion. Many students may believe that discussions are more of a social event than a learning opportunity and do not know what to note.
- We are likely to increase active listening if quizzes, exams, or assignments require students to make use of discussion content.
- After small breakouts, have groups summarize results or randomly call on students to share.
- Have students submit an “exit ticket” that responds, analyzes, evaluates, explores the goals of the discussion. Create an exit ticket using Office 365 Form or Quiz (results can be downloaded as excel files) and share the URL through a QR code a few minutes before the end of class. Or simply distribute a paper survey.

4. “Students respond well to a variety of structured discussion formats.”

In a F2F context, the structure might take the form of a gallery walk, poster session, debate format, jigsaw, fishbowl, etc. Here are some examples:

- Graffiti Boards face-to-face
- Fishbowl face-to-face
- Gallery Walk face-to-face also known as Big Paper face-to-face

5. “Students contribute equally as the discussion structure requires.”

In summarizing research on class discussions, Jay Howard notes that “a small number of students (five to eight) will account for 75 to 95 percent of all student verbal contributions to discussion regardless of class size.”⁷ This trend is called the “**norm of the consolidation of responsibility**,” in

⁵ <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/just-in-time-teaching-jitt/> accessed on 8 February 2021

⁷ Jay Howard, *Discussion in the College Classroom: Getting Your Students Engaged and Participating in Person and Online* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015), 48.

which the majority of students allow the minority to “carry the discussion for the rest of the class ... not perceiving themselves obligated to participate in the conversation.”⁸ If the minority who participate are the same group of students, they may come to resent the burden of responsibility or be resented for dominating. Faculty become frustrated when the same students always participate, which likely undermines the benefits of discussion. So how do we break the norm? From the beginning of the semester, have a toolbox of techniques ready to use. Here are some ideas:

- Share with students why you have adopted discussion as a teaching practice and the benefits.
 - Encourage students to develop the habit of having reading material and reading notes available with note-making supplies.
 - Explain “the norm of the consolidation of civil responsibility” and develop rules of engagement that specifically ask students how to manage this tendency.
 - After presenting a prompt, set a timer for 15 seconds or longer (depending upon your question prompt). Have students write their thoughts on paper, which gives introverts time to ponder and slows down the eager. When the timer tolls, call randomly on students.
 - Provide discussion questions in advance, have students submit their responses as homework or show their responses as an “entry ticket.”
 - Require breakout groups to have deliverables ready when the large class discussion resumes.
 - Distribute three “Talking Chips” (tickets, coins, poker chips, etc) and with each contribution students must surrender one chip, and they may no longer contribute when they run out of chips.
 - Leverage technology if students have devices. There are countless possibilities including collaborative documents in Office 365, Google Drive, and a multitude of apps: Polleverywhere, Flip, etc.
 - Develop clever ways to randomly call on students. Distribute a deck of cards as students enter, the call out a suit and ask someone to answer from that group. Have each student tell their neighbor what the last digit of their Social Security Number is, roll a ten-sided dice and call on one of those students. Put student names on separate index cards, shuffle, and draw from the pile. A google search will provide many ideas. See Number 12 below for a couple of more ideas.
6. “Students respond well to questions with multiple good answers.”
Questions with one correct answer are recitations. Develop questions that achieve your goals: open-ended, brainstorming, hypothetical, role-playing or perspective-taking, evaluation, synthesis, etc.
7. “Students benefit from having time to think before contributing.”
- Set a timer that gives students time to ponder their response to a question and do not solicit responses until the time is up.
 - Develop activities or assignments that get students to ponder the discussion prompts in advance. These can be collected through Discussion Boards, Office 365 collaborative Word documents or PowerPoint slide decks, Google slides, Padlet, etc. For example, to prompt discussion on the limits and possibilities of learning history through documentary films, I asked students to share their initial ideas using Office 365 PowerPoint. I created a slide deck in which each student was assigned a slide. Each slide was divided into four sectors and an open-ended question was posed in each sector. This preparatory work allowed students to articulate their interpretations in advance, so they were less intimidated when randomly called upon to elaborate on their interpretations.
8. “Students benefit from expressing themselves in motion and space.”

⁸ Howard, 50.

Physical movement can strengthen learning and memory. Examples in a F2F class include solving problems on a chalkboard, gallery walk, rotating stations, “take-a-stand,” reenactment, flipcharts.

9. “Students can benefit from expressing themselves graphically.”

Herman and Nilson note, students hone their conceptual thinking skills if they are asked to represent them graphically with concept maps.

10. “Students respond well to novel stimuli, such as outside ideas or research.”

Discussions could ask students to evaluate or analyze two or more competing interpretations or perspectives. An interactive lecture could pause every 10 minutes to check for understanding, especially useful in those moments when the content or concepts are particularly challenging.

11. “Students participate according to how effectively a discussion is moderated.”

In our role as facilitators, faculty should encourage students to engage with one another.

- Adopt ideas on how to create equitable discussions (number five above).
- Invite students to share their reactions or build upon what their classmate has said. Encourage students to support their claims with evidence or resources assigned for discussion.
- If the discussion becomes heated, offensive, or misinformed, the moderator must get the students back on track. If you or your students have developed rules of engagement, bring those up as a reminder.
- To determine if you are moderating effectively, periodically during the semester conduct a short survey. For example, simply ask students to respond anonymously:
 1. Did your instructor, the facilitator, create an equitable learning environment?
 2. Do you have any suggestions on how this instructor might improve the facilitation of discussion?
 3. Do you have any ideas on how you may contribute to a more equitable learning environment?
- If you have “rules of engagement,” create a Likert scale survey that asks students if they agree that the rules are being followed.

12. “Students must see their personal value as separate from the value of their contributions.”

- Consider framing discussions as an opportunity for developing skills where there are rarely right or wrong answers. This may create a space for students who believe their self-worth is tied to “the quality of their contribution.”
- Herman and Nilson offer a couple of F2F options that allow students to detach themselves from the contributions, e.g. card swap and snowball exercise. In both instances, students respond to a question, quotation, etc., then the responses are shuffled enough that it becomes difficult to know the individual contributor.

Preventing and Responding to Discussion Pitfalls

Herman and Nilson dedicate a chapter to “Preventing and Responding to Common Discussion Pitfalls.” They identify twelve challenges: “Students who dominate conversation; Crickets; Narcissists; Perpetually silent students; Students having a lack of opportunity to engage; Inattention and multitaskers; Personal attacks and related incivilities; Sensitive subjects and trigger warnings; Microaggressions; Students with autism spectrum disorder; Asynchronous online discussions; Synchronous online discussions.”⁹ Below I will summarize some of their suggestions.

If dominators are allowed to prevail, it can be a challenge to create a norm for broad participation.

- Be patient and willing to slow down the pace of discussion by avoiding the temptation to call on the first student who raises their hand. See the suggestions above in number five and twelve.
- Begin discussion with a reminder of its purpose, goals, and rules of engagement.

⁹ Herman and Nilson, 34.

Herman and Nilson separate narcissists from dominators. The narcissist tries to distract or talk about their personal experiences, not because they are trying to make sense of the content, but because they assume discussion is simply social.¹⁰ If personal experiences are not going to further the discussion, be sure to include this expectation at the beginning of class and in the rules of engagement. If a student tries to share personal experiences to support a claim rather than use assigned sources, remind them of expectations. If they persist, a private conversation or email addressing their behavior is appropriate.

Crickets are the sound of summer, though it has emerged as a synonym for silence at times when we expect dialogue. Herman and Nilson offer several suggestions:

- Provide learning goals for the day that define the relevancy of discussion and creates a road map for making notes and active listening.
- Create opening activities that are low-risk and encourage retrieval. Either ask students to recall or summarize the previous class meeting, reading, podcast, videos, or pose questions that encourage recall. When you are met with silence give them time to search their memory or review notes. In addition, a writing prompt allows for quiet contemplation, and it might even ask students to recall their emotional reaction, while a brainstorming question will equip students to ponder the outcome of an experiment or scenario. See the above ideas about Graffiti Board and Big Paper.¹¹
- If discussion sags, read aloud or have students read a key passage, play devil's advocate, break students into groups or deploy a think-pair-share activity. In general, to lift a sagging discussion always have back up plans that allow you to adapt.

If students have failed to prepare for discussion, making the technique impossible, do not resort to lecture. Depending upon the context, I might quickly survey students on why they did not prepare. Their reasons will shape my next step: if students are procrastinating or are overwhelmed, hold a brainstorming activity on ways to combat and promote a discussion on what learning is, how it occurs, and who is responsible; if a lack of structure or ineffective study habits are the cause, have some suggestions ready to share and discuss; if the assignments, course design, or my behaviors are a cause, solicit anonymous suggestions; if students do not understand the purpose of an assignment, topic, be more transparent; if it's an isolated incident, then shrug it off.

Many additional ideas on the promotion of discussion and facing challenges are offered by contributors to Herman and Nilson's book (chapters 6-13).

Sources:

Herman, Jennifer H., Linda B. Nilson. *Creating Engaging Discussions: Strategies for 'Avoiding Crickets' in any size Classroom and Online*. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus, 2018.

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Schwarz, Laura M., and Nancyruth Leibold. "Student Discussion Self-Grading through Use of the D2L Quizzing Tool." Brightspace Ignite Presentation, SlideShare (4/24/2015) <https://www.slideshare.net/D2LBarry/student-discussion-selfgrading-though-use-of-the-d2l-quizzing-tool> (accessed on 10 February 2021).

¹⁰ Herman and Nilson, 38.

¹¹ Herman and Nilson, 36.