

Teaching Orientation @ Ohio State: Session Agenda

College Teaching Topics: Facilitating Classroom Discussion

Coordinator: UCAT Staff, ucat@osu.edu

Date: Autumn

Duration:..... 1 hour, 15 minutes

Goals

In this session, TAs or instructors will learn how to encourage and maintain student involvement, respond to individual contributions, and employ questioning strategies.

Objectives

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Identify the benefits and challenges of class discussion have an actual plan of something to do when they enter the classroom
- Identify some strategies for planning an effective discussion and consider boundaries and expectations they want to set for their classrooms
- Employ techniques for facilitating discussion and encouraging balanced student participation

Timeline

The structure of this agenda must be followed in the order given. Options for activities within each section are provided on the following pages.

_____ – _____	(20 minutes)	Activity 1. Introduction and Icebreaker
_____ – _____	(15 minutes)	Activity 2. Planning a Classroom Discussion
_____ – _____	(15 minutes)	Activity 3. Choosing Good Discussion Questions
_____ – _____	(18 minutes)	Activity 4. Managing Classroom Discussions
_____ – _____	(2 minutes)	Activity 5. Wrap-up

Facilitator Resources:

“Effective Discussions” (http://ucat.osu.edu/read/teaching/strategies/strategies_discussion.html)

Materials:

Attendance Sheet (will be in materials bin in your classroom)

Additional Resources on Facilitating Classroom Discussion (flash drive)

Ground Rules for Discussion (flash drive)

Levels and Types of Questions (handout and flash drive)

Planning a Discussion (handout & flash drive)

DVDs: Critical Incidents I-VI (2005) by the University of Victoria (will be in your classroom):

It’s Our Turn! (2:59), on Disc 2, Section V, “Diversity and Inclusion”

Student Passivity (1:51), on Disc 1, Section III, “Legends of the Fall Term”

Losing Control (2:34), on Disc 1, Section II, “Close Encounters of the Academic Kind”

Other Details:

Time and room number for first session: _____

Time and room number for second session: _____

This session was designed with face-to-face discussions in mind. If your participants are facilitating discussions at all, most of them will likely be face-to-face. However, during the introduction you might ask if anyone in the room will be teaching online. Everything in this session applies to online discussions as well, even if logistically it is accomplished on the web. If you have participants who plan to teach online, consider including that teaching context within the activities of this session.

Activities

Activity #1 - Icebreaker (20 minutes)

Circulate attendance sheet during this first activity.

Do an icebreaker that gets participants to (1) have a discussion and (2) engage in a method of generating ground rules for discussion. The following is modeled after Brookfield and Preskill's method for developing ground rules for classroom discussions¹:

- Ask participants to individually write down notes about the best group discussions in which they have been involved. What made these discussions satisfying? (2 minutes)
- Next, ask them to write down notes about the worst group discussion in which they have been involved and what happened that made it dissatisfying. (2 minutes)
- Ask participants to get into groups of 3-4, and share their lists of good group discussion features and of bad group discussion features with each other. Have participants generate a set of ground rules for effective class discussions in their groups. (5-6 minutes)
- Bring the session back together as a whole and have each group offer one ground rule from their list. You can write each rule on the board or ask one or two participants to do so. Each subsequent group should try to offer a rule that has not already been stated. After every group has offered a rule, depending on how much time you have, you can either ask each group to offer a second rule or ask if there are any rules that groups thought of that were not yet mentioned. (7 minutes)
- If an important rule does not get mentioned, you can add it at this time.
- Briefly discuss why classroom discussions need ground rules and point participants to the **Ground Rules for Discussion** handout on their flash drives. If nobody's noticed you can point out that participants can use this method to create ground rules in their own classes or that they as teachers can dictate the ground rules. (3 minutes)

Activity #2 - Planning a Classroom Discussion (15 minutes)

This activity begins the process of planning a discussion, and is meant to highlight the importance of learning objectives, structure, and preparation.

Learning Objectives

Each classroom meeting should have clear learning objectives, not just vague goals like “Understand the first several chapters of *Moby Dick*. Rather, for a particular classroom discussion, successful students should leave the class being able to identify X or be able to discuss Y or be able to weigh pros and cons about issue Z. Here are a few examples:

- ❖ Be able to identify functions of the endomembrane system;
- ❖ Be able to discuss various strengths and weaknesses of different models of psychoanalysis;
- ❖ Be able to argue for a particular theory of evolution.

Structure

Will the discussion involve the entire class? Will the class be divided into groups? Will you initiate and facilitate the discussion with questions? Or will the class be doing something to initiate the discussion (e.g., writing something; drawing a picture; filling out a questionnaire)? Will the discussion be an open dialogue or a controlled debate? If an open dialogue, how will you call on students? Will the discussion be face-to-face or online? Note that there are practical issues to take into consideration when choosing a structure, such as class size.

Preparation

Both instructor and students should prepare for the discussion. In this activity we focus on student preparation.

Choose ONE of the following activities:

A. Single, common topic

- Hand out the **Planning a Discussion** worksheet. Choose a single topic that virtually all of the participants will know enough about to actually plan a discussion and that is “academic” enough to warrant an academic discussion. Keep in mind that some of your session’s participants may be international students. Example topics: (a) what makes good literature; (b) what makes good art; (c) what makes good music; (d) global warming; (e) the uses of social networking; or (f) some other common topic.
- Have participants work individually or in small groups (3-4 people) to fill in the **learning objectives, structure, and student content preparation**, for the proposed discussion. The other parts are optional. Tell them that you will be discussing **questions** (on the second page of the handout) in a little while.
- Then, bring participants together as a whole group and ask them to share what they planned. If you have time, ask them to brainstorm the **rationale** for using discussion to teach about this particular topic.

B. Discipline-based topic

- Hand out the **Planning a Discussion** worksheet and have participants choose a topic (e.g., an important concept, event[s], text[s], phenomenon, or process) from their own discipline to plan a discussion around.

- Have them work individually or in groups. If you choose groups for this, it can be effective to group them according to discipline if you are able. If you choose this option, you might have them get into groups according to discipline at the very beginning of the session, so that they can stay in those groups for this activity.
- Participants should fill in the **learning objectives, structure, and student content preparation** for the proposed discussion. The other parts are optional. Tell them that you will be discussing **questions** (on the second page of the handout) in a little while.
- Then, bring them together as a whole group and share what they planned.

C. Topic: What makes for an effective classroom discussion?

- Hand out the **Planning a Discussion** worksheet. Assign students the topic “What makes for a good classroom discussion?” since most students (with the possible exception of international students) will have had experience with discussion classes.
- Have participants work individually or in small groups (3-4 people) to fill in the **learning objectives, structure, and student content preparation**, for the proposed discussion. The other parts are optional. Tell them that you will be discussing **questions** (on the second page of the handout) in a little while.
- Bring participants together as a whole group and ask them share what they planned. If you have time, ask them to brainstorm the **rationale** for using discussion to teach about this particular topic. Possible answers: (1) Discussion allows the instructor to model good classroom discussion; and (2) There is no one correct set of features for good classroom discussion, so discussion allows students to see how good classroom discussion can vary with its context.

*NB: Some facilitators use the **Planning a Discussion** worksheet to plan this session or to plan one of the discussions in this session. At the end of this activity, (regardless of whether A, B, or C was chosen) they might show participants how they did the planning. There is also an opportunity for facilitators to show their planning later.*

**Activity # 3 - Choosing Good Discussion Questions
(15 minutes)**

Part of instructor preparation for discussions includes preparing questions to begin and further a discussion. Facilitate a large group discussion as follows, and including the points below.

- Ask participants to brainstorm characteristics of good discussion questions. Write their ideas on the board. As participants offer ideas, a good follow-up question from you can be to ask, “Why would that make for a good discussion question?”

- After collecting some ideas, you can distribute the handout **Levels and Types of Questions**. If participants are having trouble coming up with ideas of their own, you can distribute the handout earlier in order to stimulate the discussion.
- Good questions are consistent with the learning objectives for the discussion. Discuss the need for questions to be open-ended but focused at the same time. Good questions often require some type of evidence from what students are learning, or ask for a student's opinion within a restricted context. For example: the question "What do you think about the chapter you read for today?" might provoke some students to talk, but it provides no direction and offers no genuine effort at engaging students. On the other hand, a much richer discussion directed toward the desired learning objectives would come from a pair of questions like "First, can we summarize Brown and Halliday's findings on the possibility of cryptomnesia?" Then, let's think about this: "What might the implications of that phenomenon be for our understanding of plagiarism?" Note how the first question focuses the context for discussion and the second question provides direction but also opens up the discussion to lots of acceptable answers. (*Facilitators should feel free to use their own examples here*).
- Answering questions provides an opportunity for students to process "out loud" in ways that they might not think to do on their own. Varying question complexity allows for students to use different types of thinking skills. In the previous example, in response to the first question, students are remembering what they read about Brown and Halliday's findings and summarizing them. The second question asks them to apply those findings to a specific situation and imagine various outcomes.
- If participants offer a kind of question that should be avoided or used sparingly (guess-what-I'm-thinking; yes/no; leading; rhetorical), ask the rest of the participants if they agree, or ask another question to further discussion.
- If it has not already come up, discuss the importance of "wait time" in discussions, especially in face-to-face discussions. As an instructor it is useful to stay silent for at least 15-30 seconds after you ask a question. You can demonstrate this to give participants an idea of how long 30 seconds is. It can seem like a very long time to the instructor, but students need time to process a question and formulate an answer.

*If you wish, at the end of this activity is also a good time to show participants how you used the **Planning a Discussion** worksheet to plan your session and in particular what questions you planned ahead of time.*

Activity #4 - Managing Classroom Discussions (20 minutes)

Ground rules provide a good basis for acceptable behavior during discussions, but there are other strategies that a teacher can use to manage discussions. What can a teacher do to create a climate conducive to discussion and to ensure balanced participation? Students need to feel safe enough to contribute to discussion. Even then, some students may still be quieter than others. How can a teacher

encourage participation from shy students? How can a teacher keep the discussion on track without discouraging participation?

Choose ONE of the following activities:

A. Choose one or two of the three videos, listed below, to show and discuss with participants. You might use the interpretive questions at the end of each video (and copied below) or come up with your own to evoke discussion.

- Losing Control* (2:34), on Disc 1, Section II, “Close Encounters of the Academic Kind.” This video reveals one, albeit exaggerated, possible consequence of not having ground rules for classroom discussion.
 - 1) What issues do you see in this situation?
 - 2) How should the faculty member respond to these issues?
 - 3) What steps might have been taken to prevent this kind of situation from developing?

- Student Passivity* (1:51), on Disc 1, Section III, “Legends of the Fall Term.” This video focuses on the problem of the unresponsive class.
 - 1) What teaching techniques might this instructor use to stimulate response and discussion?
 - 2) In what ways can we increase motivation in “required” courses for non-majors?

- It’s Our Turn!* (2:59), on Disc 2, Section V, “Diversity and Inclusion.” This video reveals, again in a somewhat exaggerated way, the problem of gender bias. It also can help identify other features of bad facilitation.
 - 1) What are the issues and assumptions?
 - 2) What sort of climate is being set?
 - 3) How can instructors ensure that all voices are heard?

B. Ask participants what their biggest concerns are in managing a discussion. Write them on the board. Ask participants if they have ever witnessed these situations as students and what their teachers did to deal with those situations. Discuss whether teachers did a good job or how they might have done a better job.

C. Combine the two activities above. For example, you can show one of the videos, discuss the questions following the video, and then extend the discussion to participants’ experiences.

**Activity #5 - Wrapping up
(3-5 minutes)**

- Address any remaining concerns; check whether there are any final questions from the participants.
- Mention that the flash drive has good resources on facilitating classroom discussions and that they should hold onto their thumb drives for later reference.

- If it has not come up, briefly mention how to grade student participation: giving points; having students write short summary/response papers on the discussions; assigning a percentage of the final course grade to class participation.
- Distribute evaluation forms to the participants and explain how they will be collected.
- Double check that everyone has signed the attendance sheet.

For facilitators to do after the session:

Bring your attendance sheet and evaluation forms to UCAT headquarters. Make sure that you turn your materials in and check out with a UCAT staff member.

¹ Brookfield, S. and Preskill, S. (1999). *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.