PART III

Discussion Strategies

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Leading a Discussion

Class discussion provides students with opportunities to develop their communication skills and to acquire knowledge and insight through the face-to-face exchange of information, ideas, and opinions. A lively, productive give-and-take discussion allows students to articulate their ideas, respond to their classmates’ points, and develop skills in thinking through problems and organizing evidence using the language and methodologies of an academic discipline (McConigal, 2005).

In large-enrollment courses, instructors can divide the class into smaller groups for discussion; see Chapter 18, “Encouraging Student Participation in the Large-Enrollment Course.”

General Strategies

Clarify your expectations at the beginning of the term. During the first week of class and in the syllabus, define the role discussion will play in the course and describe students’ responsibilities. Let students know that you expect everyone to participate, that discussion is a time to test ideas and new perspectives, and that the discussion will be more worthwhile if they come prepared.

Plan how you will conduct each discussion session. You will want to devise assignments that prepare students for the discussion, compose a list of questions to guide and focus the discussion, and identify appropriate in-class activities such as pair work and brainstorming. Have in mind two or three ways that you might begin the discussion, and leave time for an end-of-session wrap-up and synthesis. Because discussion patterns tend to gel early in the term, devote extra effort to the early sessions. (Source: Faust and Courtenay, 2002)

Sharpen students’ discussion skills. Help students develop the attitudes and skills they need to participate. For example, identify the roles that make for lively, purposeful discussion, including “detective” (listening for unchallenged biases) and “umpire” (listening for judgmental comments). Explain that conflicts are a natural part of the discussion process, and describe ways to handle conflicts. Talk about
the value of staying on point and not succumbing to digressions. (Sources: Brookfield and Preskill, 2005; Kramer and Korn, 1999)

**Sharpen your discussion skills.** An effective discussion leader must be involved in the discussion but also mindful of the group process. You will need to serve as a gatekeeper (“Makayla, you’ve been quiet. Do you have something to add?”), a mirror (“The group seems to be focusing on . . .”), an observer (“Why do we drift into tangents whenever . . . comes up?”), a validator (“Great point!”), a negotiator (“Can we come to consensus on this?”), and a reality tester (“Do you realize how our comments can be interpreted?”). (Source: Forsyth, 2003)

**Take cultural norms into account.** Some of your students may have been taught to be silent and respectful in class; others may have been taught that interrupting and speaking loudly are natural when one feels passionately about a topic. Help your students by identifying ground rules for discussion and asking students who want additional guidance to see you after class. (Source: Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence and Intercultural Communication Center, n.d.)

**Setting the Context for Discussion**

**Explain the ground rules for participation.** For example, do students have to raise their hand to speak? If you will call on students at random, do they have a right to “pass” without penalty? If the class is small, you might involve the students in setting the ground rules. (Source: Brookfield and Preskill, 2000)

**Ask students what makes for an excellent class discussion.** Either in writing or small groups have students develop guidelines that they can refer to during the term. Faculty who have posed this question report that students paint a vivid picture of an engaged, energetic class: well-prepared students; wide participation; respect for different opinions; thought-provoking questions; and thoughtful listeners. (Source: teachers listserv of the University of California, Berkeley)

**Give pointers about how to participate in a discussion.** Explain that the purpose of discussion is exploration—the search for more information and new viewpoints to compare and test—not advocacy or battle. Stress the value of listening carefully, tolerating opposing viewpoints, suspending judgment until all sides have spoken, realizing that there may not be one right answer or conclusion, and recognizing when one has not understood a concept or idea. Tiberius (1999,
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adapted from p. 64) recommends distributing a list of suggestions for discussion participants:

- Seek the best answers rather than try to convince other people.
- Try to keep an open mind and not let your previous opinions or ideas get in the way of your willingness to listen to others’ ideas.
- Practice listening by putting into your own words the point that the previous speaker made before adding your own contribution.
- Avoid disrupting the discussion by introducing new issues; instead, wait until the current topic reaches its natural end; if you wish to introduce something new, let the group know that what you are about to say will raise a new topic and that you are willing to hold your comment until people are finished discussing the current topic.
- Stick to the subject and talk briefly.
- Avoid long stories, anecdotes, or examples.
- Give encouragement and approval to others.
- Seek out differences of opinion; they enrich the discussion.
- Be sympathetic and understanding of other people’s views.

Assign preparation activities. Accompany a reading assignment with questions likely to arise during the discussion. Or ask students to conduct a “fact-finding mission” to search the texts for factual evidence that clarifies a particular concept or problem. Or ask students to come to class with a one- or two-paragraph position piece or several questions they would like to be discussed. (Sources: Clarke, 1988; Cross, 2002)

Refer to the study questions. Begin the discussion by raising one of the study questions or by asking the class which of the study questions they found most provocative or most difficult to answer.

Phrase questions so that students feel comfortable responding. Open with a question that does not have a single correct answer. For example, instead of asking for a definition (“What is entropy?”), ask the students to mention something new that they learned (“What about entropy stands out in your mind?”) or to give an example of the concept. Or give students a few minutes to write a response to the question “What is the most important word in the first (or last) paragraph of the reading? Why?” and begin the discussion with that question. (Sources: Kloss, 1996; Lowman, 1995; McKeachie and Svinicki, 2006)
Ask for students’ questions. Tell students to come to class with one or two questions about the reading: “Bring a provocative, intriguing question and a sentence or two about why you would like the question to be discussed.” From these questions, pick one at random to start the discussion. Or have students divide into small groups to discuss their questions. (Source: Frederick, 1981)

Pose an opening question and have students divide into pairs to discuss. Give pairs, trios, or small groups of students an explicit task: “Identify the two most obvious differences between today’s and last week’s readings” or “Identify three themes common to the reading assignments.” Give the groups a time limit and ask them to select a spokesperson who will report back to the entire class. (Source: Frederick, 1981)

Pose an opening question and have students spend five minutes writing a response. Beginning a discussion with a short writing task gives students time to think and enriches subsequent discussion. (Source: Lang, 2008)

Ask students to recall specific images from the reading assignment. Ask students to volunteer one memorable image, scene, event, or moment from the reading: “What images remain with you after reading the account of Wounded Knee?” List these on the board and explore the themes that emerge. (Source: Frederick, 1981)

Pose a controversial question and have students take a position. Ask students for pro and con arguments or strong examples that support each position. You can also ask students to argue the counterposition to a point they agree with. This approach can lead students to understand the complexities of a controversy, rather than simply reinforce their initial views. (Source: Budesheim and Lundquist, 1999)

Brainstorm. In a brainstorming exercise, anyone can contribute an idea (no matter how bizarre or far-fetched), and each idea is written on the board or screen. Free association, creativity, and ingenuity are the goal; no idea is questioned, praised, or criticized during the exercise. Use brainstorming to encourage students to produce a range of possible causes, consequences, solutions, reasons, or contributing factors. After a set time (five minutes, for example) or when students have run out of ideas, the group begins to evaluate all the ideas.

Ask students to respond to a brief questionnaire. Post or distribute a brief set of questions and use the signed responses to open the discussion. “Amir, I see you answered the first question in the negative. Ebba, I note that you disagree...
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with Amir” or “Minh, your answer to question four is intriguing. Can you tell us more?” (Source: Davis, 1976)

**Have students write a few facts on index cards.** Hand out blank index cards and ask your students to write down two or three facts about a given topic; these cards are not signed. Collect the cards, shuffle the deck, and draw a card at random. Read one fact from the card and ask students to comment or add related information. (Source: Devet, 1995)

**Use sentence completion exercises.** Brookfield and Preskill (2005) suggest the following prompts: “The question I’d most like to ask the author is ____”; “The idea I most take issue with is ____”; “The part of the readings that is most confusing is ____.”

**Guiding the Discussion**

**Take rough notes.** Use these for summarizing the session. You might also note areas that need clarification as well as students’ comments that can be used to segue to other points.

**Keep the discussion focused.** List the day’s questions or issues on the screen or board so that the class can see where the discussion is heading. Brief interim summaries of the discussion are helpful, as long as the summaries do not cut off the discussion prematurely.

**Use nonverbal cues to encourage participation and maintain the flow.** Eye contact, nods of approval, and other signals will help keep students engaged. To shift the mood and pace, you can move around, sit down, stand up, or write on the board. (Sources: Faust and Courtenay, 2002; Rosmarin, 1987)

**Return the discussion to the key issues.** Redirect a discussion that gets off track: “We seem to have lost sight of the original point. Let’s pick up the notion that . . .” or “This is all very provocative, but we also need to talk about the government’s response before we end today.”

**Listen carefully to what students say.** Be attentive to (adapted from Christensen, 1991):

- **Content, logic, and substance.** Does the student see the strengths and weaknesses of his or her point? Has something important been left unsaid?
- **Nuance and tone.** Does the student sound confident or doubtful, engaged or indifferent?
• **Context.** Does the student’s comment build on previous points and strengthen the flow of the discussion?
• **Consensus.** Do students agree or disagree with the student’s comment?

**Clarify students’ misunderstandings.** Don’t let the discussion become bogged down in confused statements: “Let’s clear up this misunderstanding before we continue”; “We’ve covered some important points so far. Are you persuaded or troubled by this line of thinking?” (Source: Lowman, 1995)

**Vary the pace and tone.** To spark participation, ask specific rather than general questions, or call on students who tend to express strong opinions. To calm a discussion, pose abstract or theoretical questions, slow the tempo of your voice, and avoid calling on opinionated students. (Sources: Christensen, 1991; Rosmarin, 1987)

**Be alert for signs that a discussion is faltering.** Expect one or two lulls in the discussion, but be prepared to move on when students’ attention is wandering. Signs that a discussion is foundering include excessive hair-splitting or nitpicking, repetition of points, private conversations, refusals to compromise, disruptive attacks, and apathetic participation. Introducing a new question or activity can jump-start the discussion. (Source: Tiberius, 1999)

**Avert heated arguments.** Remind students that intellectual conflict is essential to academic discovery, but also point out the importance of cooperating, avoiding personal attacks, and being tolerant of divergent points of view. If a discussion risks becoming too heated, offer a calm remark (“Let’s slow down a moment” or “Wait. It’s not helpful when five people speak at once”) and move on. (Source: Johnson and Johnson, 1997)

**Bring closure to the discussion.** Announce that the discussion is ending: “Are there any final comments before we pull these ideas together?” Use your closing summary to emphasize two or three key points and to provide a framework for the next session. (Source: Clarke, 1988)

**Assign students to conduct the summary.** At the beginning of the discussion, select one or two students to be the summarizers of the major issues, concerns, and conclusions generated during discussion. Or tell the class that you will call on someone at the end of class to summarize. This strategy encourages students to listen more carefully because they may be called upon to give the summary.
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*Ask students to write down and submit the question uppermost in their minds.* During the closing minutes of class, ask students to list one or two questions and to turn these in anonymously. Use these questions to start the next class meeting.

**Evaluating the Discussion**

*Ask yourself a few evaluative questions.* After class, spend a few minutes thinking about these questions:

- What portion of the class contributed to the discussion?
- How much did you dominate the session?
- What was quality of students’ comments?
- What questions worked especially well?
- How satisfied did the group seem?
- Did students learn something new about the topic?

*Occasionally save a few minutes for the students to assess the discussion.* Ask students to discuss or write their responses to the following questions: What is going well with class discussion? What could be improved? Are you satisfied with your participation in class discussion? (Source: Hollander, 2002)

*Video-record the discussion.* If you want to make a detailed analysis of how you conduct discussions, video-record a session. One way to analyze the recording is to note who undertakes which of the following activities (adapted from Davis, 1976, pp. 85–86):

- *Initiating:* proposing tasks or procedures, defining problems, identifying action steps
- *Eliciting:* requesting information, inviting reactions, soliciting ideas
- *Informing:* offering information, expressing reactions, stating facts
- *Blocking:* introducing irrelevancies, changing the subject, questioning others’ competence
- *Entrenching:* expressing cynicism, posing distractions, digging in
- *Clarifying:* clearing up confusions, restating others’ contributions, suggesting alternative ways of seeing problems or issues
- *Clouding:* creating confusion, claiming that words can’t “really” be defined, remaining willfully puzzled, quibbling over semantic distinctions, obscuring issues
• **Summarizing**: pulling together related ideas, offering conclusions, stating implications of others’ contributions
• **Interpreting**: calling attention to individual actions and what they mean
• **Consensus proposing**: asking whether the group is nearing a decision, suggesting a conclusion for group agreement
• **Consensus resisting**: persisting in a topic or argument after others have decided or lost interest, going back over old ground, finding endless details that need attention
• **Harmonizing**: trying to reconcile disagreements, joking at the right time to reduce tensions, encouraging inactive members
• **Disrupting**: interfering with the work of the group, trying to increase tensions, making jokes as veiled insults or threats
• **Evaluating**: asking whether the group is satisfied with the proceedings or topic, pointing out implicit or explicit standards the group is using, suggesting alternative tasks and practices

As you observe your students’ behavior and your own, think about ways to increase productive activities and decrease counterproductive ones. Ask a trusted colleague or a faculty development expert on your campus to analyze and review your recording with you.

**References**


Budesheim, T. L., and Lundquist, A. R. “Consider the Opposite: Opening Minds through In-Class Debates on Course-Related Controversies.” *Teaching of Psychology*, 1999, 26(2).


Leading a Discussion

http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/resources/PublicationsArchives/InternalReports/culturalvariations.pdf


Encouraging Student Participation in Discussion

Students’ enthusiasm and willingness to participate affect the quality of class discussion. Your challenge is to engage your students, keep them talking to each other, and help them develop insights into the material. Roby (1988) warns against falling into quasi-discussions—encounters in which students talk but do not develop or criticize their own positions. Two common forms of quasi-discussion are “quiz shows” (where the teacher has the right answers) and “bull sessions” (which are characterized by clichés, stereotypes, empty generalizations, and aimless talking).

Class participation tends to increase when students feel confident, are interested in the topic, and have good rapport with one another (Passinger, 1997). The following suggestions are intended to help you create a classroom in which students feel comfortable testing and sharing ideas.

**General Strategies**

*Get to know your students.* In classes of thirty or fewer, learn all your students’ names; see Chapter 3, “The First Days of Class” for suggestions. If you require students to come to your office once during the first few weeks of class, you can also learn about their interests. Class participation may improve after students have had an opportunity to talk informally with their instructor.

*Arrange seating to promote discussion.* At a long seminar table, seat yourself along the side rather than at the head. If it’s feasible, ask students to sit in a semicircle so that they can see one another. If the discussion tends to be dominated by students sitting closest to you, suggest that students change seats. (Sources: Brookfield and Preskill, 2005; Faust and Courtenay, 2002; Jensen et al., 2005)

*Encourage students to meet one another.* Students are more likely to participate in class if they feel they are among friends. During the first week or two of class,
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plan some activities that will help students get to know one another. For example, ask students to introduce themselves and describe their background in the subject. These introductions may also give you some clues about framing discussion questions that address students’ interests. See Chapter 3, “The First Days of Class” for suggestions. (Source: Faust and Courtenay, 2002)

Help students dispel faulty assumptions about class participation. Trosset (2000) has identified the following false assumptions that hinder students from participating:

- Participation requires advocating a particular position.
- Matters should not be discussed if the result is unlikely to be agreement.
- Personal experience is the only source of legitimate knowledge.
- All knowledge is merely opinion.
- People have the right not to be challenged.
- No one in the group should experience discomfort.

Increasing Student Participation

Create opportunities for all students to talk in class during the first two weeks. The longer a student goes without speaking in class, the more difficult it will be to speak up. Use small-group or pair work early in the term so that all students can participate in nontaxing circumstances.

Allow the class time to warm up. Arrive a few minutes early and talk informally with students. Or open the class with a few minutes of conversation about relevant current events, campus activities, or administrative matters.

Limit your own comments. Avoid the temptation to respond to every student’s contribution. Instead, allow students to develop their ideas and respond to one another.

Periodically divide students into small groups. Students may find it easier to speak to groups of three or four. Divide students into small groups, have them discuss a question for five or ten minutes, and then reconvene the class. Choose topics that are focused and straightforward: “What are the two most important characteristics of goal-free evaluation?” or “Why did the experiment fail?” Once students have spoken in small groups, they may be less hesitant to speak to the class as a whole.
Assign leadership roles to students. Ask two or three students to lead a discussion session during the term. Meet with the discussion leaders beforehand to go over their questions and proposed format. Have the leaders distribute three to six discussion questions to the class a week before the discussion.

Use tokens to encourage discussion. Try a “token economy” in which you award tokens for participation that students can accumulate for extra credit or parlay into an option such as not having to take a quiz. Or use poker chips when over- or under-participation is a problem. One faculty member distributes three poker chips to each student in her class. Each time a student speaks, a chip is turned over to the instructor. Students must spend most of their chips by the end of the period. Another faculty member uses sticky notes which students place on their desk each time they speak. This gives an immediate visual sense of the contributions of each student. (Sources: Bonicelli and Moore, 2003; Cross, 2002; Lang, 2008)

Keeping the Discussion Going

Build rapport with students. Comment positively about a student’s contribution and reinforce good points by paraphrasing or summarizing them. If a student makes a good observation that is ignored by the class, point this out: “Thank you, Steve. Karen also raised that issue earlier, but we didn’t pick up on it. Perhaps now is the time to address it. Thank you for your patience, Karen.” (Source: Tiberius, 1999)

Bring students’ outside comments into class. When students make a good comment after class, through e-mail, or during office hours, ask if they are willing to raise the idea in class. If they agree, introduce the comment in class by saying something like “Jin, you were saying something about that in the hall yesterday. Would you repeat it for the rest of the class?” If the student is reluctant, bring up the issue yourself and give credit to the student.

Use nonverbal cues to encourage participation. Smile expectantly and nod as students talk. Maintain eye contact with students. Look relaxed and interested.

Draw all students into the discussion. You can involve more students by asking whether they agree with what has just been said or whether someone can provide another example to support or contradict a point: “How do the rest of you feel about that?” or “Does anyone who hasn’t spoken care to comment on the plans for greening the campus?”
Give quiet students special encouragement. Some quiet students are just waiting for a nonthreatening opportunity to speak. To help these students, you can try these strategies:

- Arrange small-group (two to four students) discussions.
- Pose casual questions that don’t have a single correct answer: “What do you remember most from the reading?” or “Which of the articles did you find to be the easiest to understand?” (McKeachie and Svinicki, 2006).
- Assign a small specific task to a quiet student: “Carrie, would you find out for next class session what Chile’s GNP was last year?”
- Bolster students’ self-confidence by writing their comments on the board.
- Stand or sit next to someone who has not contributed; your proximity may draw a hesitant student into the discussion.

Discourage students who monopolize the discussion. Here are some ways to handle dominating students:

- Ask everyone to jot down a response to your question; then choose someone to speak.
- Enforce a minute or so of silent wait time after posing a question, allowing students to structure a response (Bean and Peterson, 1998).
- Restate your desire for greater student participation: “I’d like to hear from others in the class.”
- Avoid making eye contact with the talkative.
- Explain that the discussion has become too one-sided and ask the monopolizer to help by remaining silent: “Larry, since we must move on, would you summarize your remarks, and then we’ll hear the reactions of other group members.”
- Acknowledge the time constraints: “Our time is running out. Let’s set a thirty-second limit on everybody’s comments from now on.”
- Speak to the monopolizer after class or during office hours. Tell the student that you value his or her participation and wish more students contributed. If this student’s comments are good, say so, but point out that learning results from give-and-take and that everyone benefits from hearing a range of opinions and views.

Tactfully correct wrong answers. Any type of put-down or disapproval will inhibit students from speaking up. Say something positive about those aspects of the response that are insightful or creative and point out those aspects that are off base. Provide hints, suggestions, or follow-up questions that will enable students to understand and correct their own errors.
Grading Class Participation

Decide whether you want to grade student participation. Some faculty grade students on their classroom participation, and on some campuses the practice is common. This may benefit students who test poorly but who demonstrate a depth of understanding by their comments during class. However, grading class participation may discourage free and open discussion, making students hesitant to talk for fear of revealing their ignorance or being perceived as trying to gain grade points. Faculty also argue that thoughtful silence is not unproductive, and that shy students should not be placed at a disadvantage simply because they are shy. Some faculty regard the grading of participation as too subjective to be defended if challenged. (Sources: Bean and Peterson, 1998; Hollander, 2002)

If you grade participation, select appropriate standards. Brookfield’s many examples of kinds of participation (2006) include bringing in an article or a Web URL that adds new information or perspectives; asking the group for a moment of silence that gives others time to think; and paraphrasing or summarizing previous comments. Bean and Peterson (1998) recommend using holistic rubrics for scoring participation; for example, from “1” (is disruptive and rude) to “6” (is well prepared, advances the conversation, shows interest and respect for others). If you use rubrics, share them with students at the beginning of the term so they know how they will be graded.

Dancer and Kamvounias (2005) ameliorate the problem of the instructor’s subjectivity by incorporating peer-to-peer evaluations. You can ask students to rate each other: “How much did student X contribute to your learning in this course?” You can involve the class in defining the criteria for assessment. For example, classes have generated criteria such as “willing to take risks,” “limiting participation to a reasonable amount,” and “providing new ways of thinking about the material.”

Zaremba and Dunn (2004) and Lang (2008) describe examples of self-evaluation measures in which students rate their preparation and verbal and nonverbal participation after each class session. When the student’s self-evaluation is consistent with the instructor’s assessment, the student’s rating is recorded. When they differ, the instructor’s takes precedence, and students receive an explanation for the instructor’s rating.

Melvin (1988) describes a grading scheme based on peer and professor evaluation: students are asked to rate the class participation of each of their classmates as high, medium, or low. If the median peer rating is higher than the instructor’s rating of that student, the two ratings are averaged. If the peer rating is lower, the student receives the instructor’s rating.
Faculty who grade participation tend to make it 10–20 percent of the final grade in the course.

References


Online Discussions

Successful online discussion requires careful planning of purpose and structure, as well as active instructor supervision. In the absence of these factors, online discussions are often of little value, and students show little enthusiasm for them (Pena-Shaff et al., 2005; Williams and Purdy, 2002). Be clear on what you want your online discussion to accomplish. Online discussion should be an integral part of the course, not an add-on and not busywork. If online discussion appeals to you as a way to have more class time to lecture, consider moving some lecture material online in order to free some class time for discussion (Keefe, 2003; Silverstein, 2006). If regular participation in an online discussion group is a course requirement, reduce the other homework accordingly.

General Strategies

**Use your campus learning management system.** Your learning management system or collaborative and learning environment may include software for conducting online discussions. Current technology offers three ways to structure online discussion:

- **Mail-lists and listservs** allow instructors and individual students to exchange e-mail messages with everyone in the class.
- **Discussion boards** (bulletin boards, forums) are Web sites where students can post messages and read all their classmates’ messages. The messages are usually threaded (grouped by subject line and displayed in chronological sequence).
- **Chat sessions** allow for real-time typed conversations at a Web site.

Real-time online chat is useful for distance learning, but it seems to be less effective than discussion boards for classes that have face-to-face meetings. Online chat also poses difficulties in maintaining focus; sometimes, too, it is hard to tell whether a participant has completed a response or is pausing to compose a thoughtful comment. For these reasons and others, most instructors prefer discussion boards to online chat. (Sources: Bauer 2002; Kirkpatrick, 2005)
Create a course blog. Some instructors use blogging software to organize online course materials and to facilitate online exchanges among students. Other instructors have found that blogging is not particularly effective for promoting student interaction. (Source: Krause, 2005)

Planning a Discussion Board

Coordinate online, offline, and in-class work. For example, will students identify questions in class that they will then explore in online discussion? Will students be assigned projects to complete in online groups? How will ideas or consensus opinions generated online be introduced into classroom discussion, papers, or tests? Instructors who use online discussion agree that it does not supplant the need for face-to-face discussion in the classroom. (Source: de Bruyn, 2004)

Control the size of online discussion groups. Experienced faculty recommend that groups contain four to twelve students, and no more than twenty students. In large courses, you can list a set of discussion topics and let students choose which discussion to join. Or you can divide your class into three groups—one to pose questions, one to respond to questions, and one to summarize and comment—and have students rotate groups throughout the term. One instructor suggests dividing a class of twenty-five students into two groups, which post online during alternate weeks. (Source: Bryant, 2005)

Set expectations for participation. Tell students how many times (or how often) you expect them to log on and to post; experienced faculty recommend twice a week. State how their online participation (both attendance and quality of participation) will affect their course grades. Some faculty assign bonus points for high-quality contributions; others weigh online participation as 10 percent or less of the course grade. Bauer (2002) provides examples of rubrics for grading student participation in online discussions, including type of comments. (Sources: Bauer, 2002; Bender, 2003)

Devise focused questions or specific tasks. It is usually better to dedicate online discussion to problem-solving rather than to broad questions, although it can be effective to ask students to explore and reach consensus on an open-ended question within a set time period. Other tasks for discussion boards include creating exam questions for the midterm or final; making a substantive reply to four classmates, with each student then posting how the feedback has affected his or her thinking; engaging a guest discussant who is an author of one of the readings; and
conducting a debate in which students argue for or against a particular position.
(Source: Greenlaw and DeLoach, 2003)

**Explain the ground rules.** The following guidelines are adapted from Gajadhar and Green (2005); Palloff and Pratt (2007); Pena-Shaff, Altman, and Stephenson (2005); Sevilla and Wells (2002); and Wakley (2002):

- Write informative subject lines.
- When responding to a previous comment, mention the specific point to which you are responding.
- Keep comments short but include supporting logic and details. Avoid postings like “Me too,” “Good point,” or “Don’t think so.”
- When you present an opinion, support it with evidence or data.
- Ask for clarification if you don’t understand a point someone has made.
- Communicate agreement as well as disagreement, and state your reasons.
- Carefully proofread your post.
- Assume that all participants have good intentions.
- Wait 24 hours before responding to a post that you perceive as negative to let your emotions settle down.
- Expect conflict as part of the group process.
- Be willing to change your mind.
- Adhere to general rules of civility, courtesy, and mutual respect.

**Establish the style of response.** How formal or informal do you expect students’ posts to be? Describe and give examples of the style you expect them to follow. You may also wish to set standards for permissible language and to require all participants to identify themselves by name. Students who are new to discussion boards may appreciate seeing examples of thoughtful and courteous posts. (Sources: Bender, 2003; Lawrence et al., 2005)

**Help students manage the message volume.** Students may need tips on sorting and keeping track of the threads or e-mail messages that most interest them. Suggest that students scan the posts every day or two, rather than face an overwhelming stack of messages twice a week. (Source: Aitken and Shedletsky, 2002)

**Conducting Online Discussions**

**Launch the discussion.** Establish a welcoming, encouraging tone, and let students see that you are paying attention. Compliment participants online and in or after
class, and incorporate, as appropriate, students’ comments into your postings. Make an occasional short substantive comment, but focus on prompting students to expand their comments: “Miguel, is what you’re saying consistent with what Sumi said?” or “Sumi, what alternative explanations could you add to the one you’ve stated?” When discussion is flowing well, praise the quality of discussion. (Sources: Bender, 2003; Muilenburg and Berge, 2000)

**Pose questions at different levels.** Effective questions are the key to starting and maintaining discussion (see Chapter 12, “Asking Questions”). Students tend to ignore vague or overly broad questions. You can also prompt discussion with sentence-completion exercises, a problem or scenario, or by playing devil’s advocate. (Sources: Bender, 2003; Muilenburg and Berge, 2000)

**Facilitate the discussion.** Encourage active student-to-student participation. Ask for clarification, point out contradictory statements, or energize the discussion if needed, but try to stay in the background. Research shows that frequent postings by instructors do not result in greater student participation. (Sources: Mazzolini and Maddison, 2003; Oren et al., 2002)

**Launch and manage discussion threads.** Start a thread for procedural questions, so that these exchanges will be separate from the substantive discussion. Announce general topics for discussion, and seed the discussion by posing an opening question. Archive any threads that have served their purpose and are cluttering the site. Especially at the beginning of the course, monitor how well students are respecting the boundaries of existing threads and starting new ones when appropriate. In a threaded discussion, require students to comment on previously posted questions before adding comments of their own. Remind students to respond to pertinent comments on their own earlier questions or comments. (Source: de Bruyn, 2004)

**Watch out for orphaned comments and silent students.** Sometimes students’ comments or questions get little or no response from other students. The authors of these orphaned comments may become discouraged and drop out of the discussion. If you see this dynamic, gently remind students to respond to the orphaned comment. When quieter students participate, give them a supportive response. (Source: Pena-Shaff et al., 2005)

**Monitor and instruct students in the use of subject lines.** Remind students that each message should have an accurate subject line that indicates both the point the message is addressing (“Re: Kim’s pro-incentive argument”) and what
the message will add (“—but what about New Zealand?”). Do not let students develop the lazy habit of simply adding “Re” before the subject line of an earlier comment. (Source: Sevilla and Wells, 2002)

**Provide for summary and synthesis.** To avoid letting a threaded discussion lose its way or simply fade out, periodically pose questions that require synthesis and summary of the thread. You could also assign this task and other moderating roles to individual students. (Source: de Bruyn, 2004)

**Assess online participation.** Whether or not online participation counts toward course grades, give students some comments about the quality of their participation. Most online discussion software allows you to preserve and archive contributions and then review these when evaluating the quantity and quality of participation. (Sources: Knowlton, 2003; Murphy and Loveless, 2005; Wang and Tucker, 2001)

### References


Online Discussions


Asking Questions

The give-and-take of asking and answering questions is central to learning and to effective teaching. The types of questions instructors pose and the sequencing of questions should capture students’ attention, arouse their curiosity, reinforce important points, encourage reflection, and promote active learning.

General Strategies

**Formulate questions in advance.** As you prepare for class, identify questions and anticipate the range of student responses. Select and discard questions from your list as the discussion proceeds, depending on what topics your students want to pursue. To improve students’ inquiry skills, use your opening questions to stimulate students to form their own questions. Ask a few questions that you are not quite sure how to answer. You may be impressed by your students’ ideas. (Source: Haroutunian-Gordon, 1998; Windschitl and Buttemer, 2000)

**Place your questions in order.** You might want to move from the general to the specific, from the simple to the complex, or from the convergent (one answer possible) to the divergent (many answers possible). Select an order that will allow students to answer successfully the first time, especially to your opening questions. (Source: Pennell, 2000)

**Prepare strategies for asking questions.** Think about different ways to pose your questions: to the class as a whole, to pairs of students, to small groups. Create questions designed to prompt brainstorming, consensus building, or debate. (Source: Kasulis, 1984)

**Decide how you will call on students.** Some faculty call only on students who raise their hands; other faculty prefer to draw all students into the discussion by pointing to someone and requesting a response. If you go around the room calling on students in order, some students’ attention may wander until it is their turn. If you choose to “cold-call” randomly on students with questions, warm up the situation first. For example, consider asking students to turn to a neighbor to
answer the question; pausing before calling on someone to give students time to think; writing the question on the board to help students gather their thoughts; or allowing students a moment to write a response, jotting down a few key points. (Source: Dallimore et al., 2004)

**Convey a sense of spirited inquiry.** Let your tone of voice, facial expression, and gestures suggest that you are seeking knowledge, not interrogating the troops. Be demographically inclusive in directing your questions and calling on students. (Source: Payne and Gainey, 2003)

**Keep notes on class participation.** Take a few minutes after each class session to note which questions generated the most lively exchanges. (Source: Kasulis, 1984)

**Evaluate your questioning skills.** The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign has developed guidelines for evaluating instructors’ questioning skills (“Methods for Assessing Questioning Skills,” n.d.) including sample surveys to administer to students to get their feedback. Acheson and Gall (2003) suggest dimensions on which students or instructors can evaluate an instructor’s questioning behavior, including use of a variety of questioning strategies and behaviors that elicit student participation. See also Chapter 53, “Video Recordings and Classroom Observations” for advice.

### Levels and Types of Questions

**Vary the kinds of questions you ask.** Move from simple questions to those that require more thought (adapted from Christensen, 1991; Elder and Paul, 2005; McKeachie and Svinicki, 2006; Rosmarin, 1987; Yip, 2001):

- **Exploratory questions** probe facts and basic knowledge: “What research evidence supports the theory of a cancer-prone personality?”
- **Challenge questions** examine assumptions, conclusions, and interpretations: “How else might we account for the findings of this experiment?” “What assumptions underlie this point of view?”
- **Relational questions** ask for comparisons of themes, ideas, or issues: “What premises of *Plessy v. Ferguson* did the Supreme Court throw out in deciding *Brown v. Board of Education*?”
- **Diagnostic questions** probe motives or causes: “Why did Simone assume a new identity?”
• *Action questions* call for a conclusion or action: “In response to a sit-in at California Hall, what should the chancellor do?”

• *Connective and cause-and-effect questions* ask for causal relationships between ideas, actions, or events: “If the government stopped farm subsidies for wheat, what would happen to the price of bread?”

• *Extension questions* expand the discussion: “How does this comment relate to what we have previously said?”

• *Hypothetical questions* pose a change in the facts or issues: “Suppose Sergei had been rich instead of poor. Would the outcome have been the same?”

• *Priority questions* seek to identify the most important issue: “From all that we have talked about, what is the most important cause of the decline of American competitiveness?”

• *Summary questions* elicit syntheses: “What themes or lessons have emerged from today’s class?”

**Tap different cognitive skills.** Another way of categorizing questions follows from Bloom’s classic hierarchy of cognitive skills (1956):

• *Knowledge* (remembering previously learned material such as definitions, principles, formulas): “Define shared governance.” “What are Piaget’s stages of development?”

• *Comprehension* (understanding the meaning of remembered material, usually demonstrated by restating or citing examples): “Explain the process of mitosis.” “Give some examples of alliteration.”

• *Application* (using information in a new context to solve a problem, answer a question, perform a task): “How does the concept of price elasticity explain the cost of oat bran?” “How would you graph the data in a sample like this one?”

• *Analysis* (breaking a concept into its parts and explaining their interrelationships; distinguishing relevant from extraneous material): “What factors affect the price of gasoline?” “Point out the arguments the author uses to support his thesis about polar ice melts.”

• *Synthesis* (putting parts together to form a new whole; solving a problem requiring creativity or originality): “How would you design an experiment to show the effect of education on income, holding other factors constant?” “How would you reorganize Bloom’s taxonomy in light of new research in cognitive science?”

• *Evaluation* (using criteria to arrive at a reasoned judgment of the value of something): “To what extent does the proposed package of tax increases resolve the budget deficit?” “If cocaine were legalized, what would be the implications for public health services?”
Higher-level questions may also be sorted into three main types (adapted from Edwards and Bowman, 1996):

- **Convergent** questions invite the analysis and integration of existing data with the aim of arriving at a single conclusion.
- **Divergent** questions invite the respondent to elaborate on a conclusion to reach further implications or synthesis with other ideas.
- **Evaluative** questions involve making considered judgments based on data or evidence.

“What’s the next important question we should ask?” is an excellent high-level question that shares with students the responsibility for directing the discussion (O’Harc, 1993). At times, you will also want to ask questions that encourage hunches, intuitive leaps, and educated guesses.

**Effective Questioning**

*Ask one question at a time.* In an effort to elicit a response, instructors sometimes attempt to clarify a question by rephrasing it. But often the new wording poses an entirely new question, which sends students off in another direction. The better strategy is to ask a brief question and wait for a response. Instead of “How are Lacan and Freud alike, for example, in their view of the unconscious, or how about their approach to psychoanalysis?” ask, “How is Lacan’s theory of the unconscious similar to Freud’s?” (Source: Hyman, 1989)

*Avoid asking, “Any questions?”* The question “Any questions?” often does not elicit any questions. A better approach is to imply that you are expecting questions and encourage students to ask them. For example, you might say, “At this point, I’m sure you have some questions” or “That was complicated. What did I leave out?” or “What questions are uppermost in your mind?” (Sources: Felder, 1994; Pernell, 2000)

*Avoid asking yes-or-no questions.* The discussion will stall if you ask questions that invite a one-word or short-phrase response. Instead, ask *why or how* questions that lead students to try to explain things. Instead of “Is radon considered a pollutant?” ask, “Why might radon be considered a pollutant?” Leading questions (“Don’t you agree that climate change is the most serious environmental hazard we face?”) also close off avenues for discussion. And the discussion will come to a halt if you answer your own question: “Why can’t we use the chi-square test here? Is it because the cells are too small?”
Pose questions that invite multiple answers. A chemical engineering instructor avoids asking for the correct number by saying, “Before you calculate the answer, how do you predict the system will behave in general?” A history professor asks questions for which a number of hypotheses are equally plausible—“Why did the birth rate rise in mid-eighteenth-century England?” or “Why did Napoleon III agree to Cavour’s plans?”—and emphasizes to students that these questions are matters of controversy or puzzlement to scholars. She also shows how different answers lead in very different directions. (Source: Felder, 1994)

Ask focused questions. An overly broad question such as “What about the fall of the Berlin Wall?” may lead students far off the topic. Instead ask, “How did the fall of the Berlin Wall—the reunification of Germany—affect European economic conditions?”

After you ask a question, wait silently for an answer. Do not be afraid of silence. Be patient. Students may need 10–30 seconds to form an answer to a question. Don’t misinterpret silence as a signal of apathy, resistance, or laziness. Give students time to think and to word a response. Count to yourself while students are thinking; the silence rarely lasts more than 10–15 seconds. Waiting indicates that you want thoughtful participation, and if you communicate an air of expectation, someone will break the silence, if only to say, “I don’t understand the question.”

If the silence exceeds 30 seconds, ask your students what the silence means: “The room has grown quiet. Why?” Or encourage them by saying, “Could someone get us started?” Even then, you might delay calling on someone until several hands are raised; pausing lets students know that replies do not have to be formulated quickly. Wait again after a student has responded, in order to indicate that the response is worth thinking about. Waiting helps students focus on what their peers say instead of planning their next remark. (Sources: Biggs, 2003; Pennell, 2000)

Search for common ground. If one student immediately gives a response, follow up by asking others what they think. “Hadley, how strongly do you agree or disagree with that?” is a good way to involve more students in the discussion.

Ask questions that require students to demonstrate their understanding. Instead of “Do you understand?” or “Do you have any questions about this?” ask, “What are the considerations to keep in mind when you want your evaluation results to be used?” Instead of “Do you understand this program command?” ask, “How would we change the program if we wanted to sort the numbers
in ascending order rather than descending order.” Instead of “Does everybody see how I got this answer?” ask, “Why did I substitute the value of delta in this equation?” (Source: Pennell, 2000)

Structure your questions to encourage student-to-student interaction. Students become more attentive when you ask questions that require them to respond to each other. For example, ask Molly, “Could you relate that to what Sam said earlier?” and, if needed, help Molly recall what Sam said. (Source: Kasulis, 1984)

Draw out reserved or reluctant students. A disguised question may encourage students who are hesitant to speak. For example, instead of “What is the essence of John Dewey’s work?” saying, “I wonder if it’s accurate to describe John Dewey’s work as learning by doing” gives a student a chance to comment without feeling put on the spot. Similarly, these kinds of questions are more likely to engage quiet students: “What aspects of the readings do you think we should discuss?” “What part of the reading surprised you the most?” “Can you give me one or two points from the chapter that seem especially important?”

Use questions to change the tempo or the direction of the discussion. Use questions to pace or redirect the conversation (adapted from Kasulis, 1984):

- To lay out perspectives: “If you had to pick just one factor . . .” or “In a few words, name the most important reason . . . .” This form of questioning can also be used to cap talkative students.
- To move from abstract to concrete, or general to specific: “If you were to generalize . . .” or “Can you give some specific examples?”
- To acknowledge good points made previously: “Zhong, would you tend to agree with Carmen on this point?”
- To summarize or conclude: “Sabah, if you had to pick two or three themes that were most frequently expressed today, what would they be?”

Use probing strategies. Probes are follow-up questions that focus students’ attention on ideas or assumptions implicit in their first answer. Probes can ask for specifics, clarifications, consequences, elaborations, parallel examples, relationships, or explanations. Probes are important because they help students explore and express what they know, even when they aren’t sure they know it (Hyman, 1980). Here are some examples of probing (based on Goodwin et al., 1985):

INSTRUCTOR: What are some ways we might solve the energy crisis?
STUDENT: Peak-load pricing by utility companies.
INSTRUCTOR: What assumptions are you making about consumer behavior when you suggest that solution?

INSTRUCTOR: What is neurosis?
STUDENT: It’s a condition in which . . . a state in which . . . (pause and shrug)
INSTRUCTOR: What are the characteristics of a neurotic person?

INSTRUCTOR: How far has the ball fallen after three seconds?
STUDENT: I have no idea.
INSTRUCTOR: Well, what is happening to the speed of the ball?

Occasionally poll the class. Ask for a show of hands: “Who believes that military dictatorship was, more or less, a foreseeable outcome of the French Revolution?” Follow up by asking individual students to offer reasons for raising or not raising their hand.

Responding to Students’ Responses

Listen to the student. Do not interrupt a student’s answer, even if you think the student is heading toward an incorrect conclusion. Interrupting signals your impatience and hinders participation. Instead, wait a second or two after a student responds to be sure that the student is finished speaking.

Use nonverbal cues to indicate your attention. Maintain eye contact with the student who is speaking. Nod your head, use facial expressions or hand gestures to prompt the student to continue, or adopt a stance that signals you are ready to move on.

Vary your reactions to students’ answers. Depending on the student’s comments, you might respond in one of the following ways (adapted from Hyman, 1989; Kovacs-Boerger, 1994; Yelon and Cooper, 1984):

- Reinforce the point by restating what the student has said.
- Paraphrase the student’s response without judging its correctness to give the student time to rethink the answer, especially if the paraphrase highlights underlying assumptions.
- Ask for clarification: “Could you be more specific about . . .?”
- Invite the student to elaborate: “We’d like to hear more about . . .”
- Expand the student’s contribution: “That’s right, and following up on what you said . . .”
• Acknowledge the student’s contribution and ask for another view: “You’re right about children’s linguistic capabilities, but what about their social development?”

• Acknowledge the originality of a student’s ideas: “Self-selection factors could be responsible for the outcome. I didn’t think of that.”

• Nod or look interested but remain silent. You don’t need to comment on every response. A silent nod keeps the focus on the students’ responses. After a few students have commented, you can condense or combine their comments, and relate them to each other.

**Judiciously praise correct answers.** Students look to their instructors for guidance and support. Be enthusiastic in your praise rather than offering a bland “OK,” “Yes,” or “All right.” If you want to elicit more responses, however, follow the praise with another question: “Combustion? That’s very good. What other outcomes are possible?” The downside of praising every answer is that it becomes awkward when a student gives a vague or irrelevant answer. (Sources: Hyman, 1989; Tiberius, 1999)

**Tactfully correct wrong answers.** Wait a few seconds before responding to an incorrect answer, in case another student volunteers a better response. Or look to another student to provide help rather than providing help yourself. When an answer is partly correct, avoid responding “Yes, but . . .” Instead, encourage students to rephrase or revise incorrect answers. Try to correct the answer, not the student: “I don’t believe that answer is correct” instead of “Gary, you are wrong.” Look beyond the answer to the thought process: “This is a hard concept to grasp. Let’s take this a step at a time” or “You’re right about one part, but let’s figure out the rest together.” Sometimes wrong answers or incorrect but logical directions can be used to help the class figure out the correct answer, for example, in designing multistep experiments to answer scientific questions.

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**References**


Hyman, R. T. *Questioning in the College Classroom.* In R. A. Neff and M. Weimer (Eds.), *Classroom Communication: Collected Readings for Effective Discussion and Questioning.* Madison, WI: Atwood, 1989.


Fielding Students’ Questions

When answering a student’s question, instructors must think about the content, the tone, and the timing of their response. The following tips describe techniques for handling both routine and difficult questions and questioners.

**General Strategies**

**Answer most questions directly.** Offering a direct response signals that the question is worthwhile: “Yes, I do think that historians have portrayed the Trail of Tears inaccurately.” But sometimes it is worthwhile to give students a chance to answer. If you redirect a question to the class at large, let the questioner know that you are not avoiding or dismissing the question: “After we hear what everyone else wants to say, I’ll see if there’s anything left to add.” (Sources: Cashin, 1995; Ducil, 1994; Hyman, 1989)

**Point students toward an answer.** Sometimes you can rephrase a student’s question in a way that points toward an answer (“Sarah, have you thought about . . . ?”) A faculty member in architecture turns students’ questions about design issues back to them. When a student asks, “Should I put the kitchen on the north or south end?” the instructor asks the student, “Why might you want the kitchen on the north end?” Or you can turn some students’ questions back to the class: “What do others of you think are the reasons the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was ignored?” Doing so not only encourages more class participation but also reminds students that their peers are a resource.

**Avoid comments or gestures that discourage students’ questions.** Students may refrain from asking questions if they sense that their instructor doesn’t want to hear them. A dismissive response to a student’s question (“We discussed that last time” or “That question is not really on point”) discourages future questions. Other disincentives include interrupting the questioner, avoiding eye contact, answering questions hurriedly or incompletely, and treating questions as distractions rather than as contributions to the learning process. (Source: Hyman, 1989)
Admit when you don’t know the answer. If you are uncertain about the correct answer, it is usually better to say so (“I’m not sure; let me think about it. It’s a good question”) than to give a wrong answer and have to correct yourself later. Other ways to respond include the following (adapted from Cashin, 1995):

- Ask whether a student has an answer (and check the answer before the next class).
- Suggest resources that would enable the questioner to answer the question (but note that assigning students to look up answers to their questions may lead students to ask fewer questions).
- Show students how to think out loud about the answer.
- Volunteer to find the answer yourself and report back at the next session.

In scientific fields, sometimes a question may not yet have an answer. The best you can do is mention the cutting-edge nature of the question and speculate on possible responses.

Answering Routine Questions

Call on questioners in the order in which they sought recognition. If several students want to ask a question, announce an order (“Lizzie first, then Joe, then Alex”). Remember that students may stop listening once their hands go up and they know what they want to say.

Thank the student for having asked a question. “Excellent question” and “Thanks for asking that” are comments that reinforce the behavior of asking questions. Better still, mention what makes the question a good one: “That question takes us directly to the relationship between inflation and wages.”

Repeat and paraphrase some questions. Use repetition and paraphrase to make sure that everyone has heard the question and to test your understanding of it. Sometimes a paraphrase may help the student answer his or her own question. But do not repeat or paraphrase every question. Such repetition dissuades students from listening to one another and runs the risk of boring the class. Asking students to rephrase or restate a question (your own or one posed by another student) and asking them to compare different ways of posing a question may help them answer it. (Sources: Cashin, 1995; Dillon, 1998)
Prompt students to clarify their questions. If you don’t understand a student’s question, ask for clarification: “Give me an example” or “Do you mean . . . ?” Instead of “Your question isn’t clear,” say, “I’m sorry, I don’t understand your question.”

Don’t answer a question that is based on a false presupposition. If you recognize that a student’s question is based on an incorrect assumption, address that assumption, perhaps by asking the other students to comment on it. (Source: van der Meij, 1998)

Delay answers to questions that will be covered later. If the question will be addressed later in the session, mention this and return to the question at the appropriate time. When you reach the topic, let the student know you have remembered the question: “Here is the answer to the question you asked before, Harun.” (Source: Cashin, 1995)

When responding, talk to the whole class. Don’t focus solely on the questioner, but look around the room to include all the students in your comments.

Check back with the questioner. Before moving on, confirm with the student that his or her question has been answered satisfactorily: “Was that what you were asking?” or “Did that help you?” (Source: van der Meij, 1998)

Handling Difficult Questions and Questioners

Avoid dismissing a naïve question. Sometimes a simple-sounding question can provoke an animated discussion, and even the oddest question deserves a tactful response. Because your students empathize with the questioner, your efforts to put a nervous or confused questioner at ease will win you the class’s goodwill (Sprague and Stuart, 2005). Consider the following two sets of responses (Sprague and Stuart, p. 403):

Not: “Well, as I already said . . .”
But: “Let me go over those data again.”
Not: “You’ve totally confused fission and fusion.”
But: “Many of those problems relate to nuclear fission. The fusion reaction is quite different. It works like this . . . .”
**Try to answer twice, then let a student try.** If your first and second answers don’t satisfy the questioner, ask your class for help: “Sorry, I’ve gotten myself stuck here. Could someone help me by explaining it in their own words?” When answering the question would take the class too far afield, or when students continue to disagree, suggest meeting outside of class for further discussion. (Sources: McAllister, 1994; McNinch, 1999)

**When students raise complex or tangential questions, ask them to stop by after class.** Some questions go beyond the topic of discussion: they anticipate an upcoming topic, seek more detail, or raise a new issue. When such questions require a lengthy response or a detour from the topic, offer to answer them after class or during office hours.

**Be patient with students who ask questions you have already answered.** Although you may have already discussed a topic or even answered an identical question, students may not have understood the point at the time. Only later, when the material makes sense to them, does the particular point become meaningful. When answering repetitive questions, try to use different language and examples so that you don’t bore students who grasped the idea earlier. Or consider asking another student in class to answer the question.

**Preempt long-winded questioners.** Occasionally, a student may incorporate extraneous opinions and comments into a question. One way to respond is to answer what appears to be the student’s main point, and then recognize another student. For example: “You want to know why the university refuses to divest. The Regents’ position is that the Global Sullivan Principles of Social Responsibility are sufficient. Let’s hear from Jean; she’s had her hand up for a long time.” (Source: Sprague and Stuart, 2005)

**Preempt the serial answerer/questioner.** Some students will eagerly answer every question you pose or dominate the class with their own questions. Here are some tips on responding to these students (adapted from PsychTeacher and POD listerv):

- Meet privately with the student. Tell the student how pleased you are that he is so engaged in the class and has so many interesting things to say. Explain that your goal is to give everyone a chance to participate, and ask this student to wait at least 30 seconds before raising his hand to answer a question. You could
also set a limit on the number of times you will call on this student in class and have the student come to office hours to discuss any remaining questions.

- Announce the order of students you will call on. “Bryan, in a minute I’m going to ask people to describe a real-life example of a workplace conflict. Will you please be first? Then, Michele and Debbie, will you be second and third?”

- Before calling on the serial answerer say, “I’d like to hear from someone who hasn’t said much today.” To reassure serial students, call on them at least once during class.

- Ask students to put their answers in writing and share their responses with their neighbors.

- Move around the room and stand with your back to the serial answerer when you ask a question.

**Cut off students who want an extended dialogue.** If a student is reluctant to relinquish the floor, end the exchange and offer a compliment or an invitation: “You’ve raised quite a number of excellent points. Maybe you can come to my office later and talk with me further.” Or “You’ve made a number of good comments; why don’t we hear from someone else as well?” (Source: Sprague and Stuart, 2005)

### References


POD Listserv: An unmoderated online community for instructors and administrators with interests in teaching and learning in higher education; see http://pochnetwork.org
PsychTeacher Listserv: A moderated online community for instructors involved in teaching psychology; teachpsych.org/news/psychteacher.php.
