

# Guided Discussion in the Classroom

Tennessee Teaching and Learning Center

"How To" Pedagogies # 3

## WHAT IS GUIDED DISCUSSION?

The guided discussion pedagogy is an active learning technique which offers many benefits to your students. Guided discussion exposes students to a variety of diverse perspectives, helps them recognize and investigate their assumptions, improves listening and conversation skills, fosters connection to a topic, and affirms students as co-creators of knowledge. As they participate in discussion, students situate new knowledge within the context of their current understandings, thus facilitating a more thorough understanding of the course material.

Despite the many benefits, instructors are sometimes hesitant to start discussions because of its unpredictable aspect and its potential challenges. This worksheet offers basic tips and strategies on how to effectively plan and conduct classroom discussions, as well as prevent problem situations. Guided discussion, when used strategically and intentionally, can excite and engage students, fostering a deeper understanding of the content and its application to their lives.



## PREPARATION TIPS

*The following are some useful strategies for preparing effective discussions:*

1. Spend some time getting to know your students and allow them to get to know each other. Use names as much as possible. Praise students for contributions. Great discussions are a product of respectful and trustworthy relationships. Your students will be much more comfortable contributing if they feel respected and valued.

2. When preparing to guide a discussion, consider your objectives. What do you want your students to gain from the discussion, and how can you best facilitate the process? Assign a preliminary reading or writing assignment to introduce students to the topic and help them formulate a perspective. Plan the preliminary assignment and the discussion to suit your desired outcomes. For example, if you intend to promote connection to a topic, plan ways to get students thinking about how the topic applies to their own lives.

3. Come prepared with prompts to promote participation and facilitate transition from one point to the next. (See the reverse page for ideas.) Prepare students to engage in the discussion by emphasizing that through discussion, we test ideas and explore new perspectives, and that you intend for the classroom to be a safe learning environment. Have students brainstorm about what such an environment might look like. Once you establish this environment, students will trust it.

4. When you plan to have students work in groups, circulate the room, listening and even contributing an encouraging word.

*By modeling responsible preparation and respectful discourse you will create an atmosphere reflective of these values, thus enhancing the quality of your discussions.*

"Learning is not so much an additive process, with new learning simply piling up on top of existing knowledge, as it is an active, dynamic process in which the connections are constantly changing and the structure reformatted."

K. Patricia Cross

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# Guided Discussion in the Classroom

## KEEPING VOICES IN BALANCE

A common challenge of guided discussion is involving all students and keeping all the student voices in balance. You may have one student that dominates the discussion, a select group that participates while the others remain silent, or a student who never contributes no matter how "inviting" the discussion. One way to foster active and equal engagement is to divide the class into groups. Three is an effective group size namely because it is small enough that students feel comfortable sharing and large enough that they feed off each others' ideas.

Whether or not you divide the class into groups, you can help discussion by creating a democratic culture in your classroom. Preface the discussion by saying "I really would like to hear from everyone on this issue, so let's be careful that we keep our voices in balance". Ask students to offer their insight into what makes for a good discussion. If a student begins to dominate, you could divert to others by saying "So Leslie has expressed her perspective on the issue, now let's hear some other reactions". For a student who under-contributes, you may ask the student to summarize the previous points, and ask "What is your perspective on the issue?" If the problem of the talkative student continues, however, speak to the student privately. Tell her that you really value and appreciate her contributions but need to be able to hear from less participatory students as well.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brookfield, S. & Preskill, S. (2005). *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Christensen, C., Garvin, D., & Sweet, A. (1991). *Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Davis, B. (2009). *Tools for Teaching*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

McKeachie, W. (2002). *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

## FOSTERING ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

Here are some strategies for promoting active involvement in class discussions:

- Have students bring in a question or reaction to an assigned reading, then let the class vote on ones to discuss.
- Begin class discussion by quoting a contentious statement and allowing students to challenge or argue the merits of the statement.
- Ask students to respond to a reading, documentary, or other preliminary assignment by writing a paragraph describing an experience they have had related to the content. Have students discuss the relationship between the concept and their experiences.
- Divide students into small groups and assign roles such as "problem poser," "reflective analyst," "devil's advocate," "detective," or "theme spotter." Then have each group report their findings to the class.
- Create a "circles of voices," in which students form groups of five, and each person speaks for three minutes on the topic. Then the discussion opens into a free-flow format; however, students are only able to expand upon ideas presented in the circle of voices.
- Bring in a "hatful of quotes" related to the designated topic, and have students pull a quote from the hat, then offer a short response to the quote (bring in "lifelines" for a game-like approach).
- Create a "fishbowl" of 8 students to discuss a critical question. Other students sit around this inner circle and observe the debate. When they want to step in, they can switch places with someone in the fishbowl by tapping on their shoulder.

These are only a few of the many strategies documented for fostering active participation in classroom discussion. For more ideas, refer to Brookfield & Preskill (2005), an item available for loan through the Tenn TLC library.