



How To Series

Pedagogy

October 2013

Discussion

Guidelines:

Discussion According to Random House:

dis-cus-sion [dih-skuhsh-uhn] :an act or instance of discussing; consideration or examination by argument, comment, etc., especially to explore solutions; informal debate.

The Ground Rules:

To facilitate a discussion, it is sometimes best to first establish some guidelines. This sets the parameters for what **is** and what is **not** acceptable and can circumvent a potentially uncomfortable situation later since you can “remind” everyone of the “guidelines” instead of being forced to merely react to an event.

So, what makes for a **good set of Guidelines**? That is really up to you and your students and should be tailored to your *specific* class. For the most “buy-in”, let students suggest the considerations. In general, students will, with guidance, intuitively create the following: **1)** Discussion involves **BOTH** listening and speaking. Everyone can and should participate, **2)** While it is fine to disagree with another's viewpoint, make sure the comments are about the *content* and not the *speaker* personally, **3)** Treat each other with respect- no name calling or putdowns, **4)** The point of a discussion is to learn more and examine our own and others' views, not to reach a consensus or determine a “right” and “wrong” position.



Why Use It?

Discussion has the potential to allow students to interact with material in new ways. When they become active in their own learning they are more likely to move toward higher levels of understanding and thinking critically within the discipline.

Critical thinking skills are easily encouraged in this format as students share their viewpoints and have to reconcile them with the viewpoints of others. Thus, the collaborative process inherent in discussion allows them to not only build meaning *with* others but also begin to delve into and expand their *own* critical thinking skill set as well as their knowledge base.

Another benefit, in the form of assessment, allows the instructor to gather feedback in real time and see, in real time, where the thinking and comprehension levels of the students are located. In doing so, the **“stuck” places** of the students may also be revealed. This allows for refocusing on the material students are struggling with to enable their success in the topic. It may simply be a case of spending focused time in discussion to allow students to wrestle with the new knowledge and work it out as they process together.

It is possible to make content more tangible to students when they are given real life applications for the material they are studying and discussion allows this to happen. By way of case study or current news issue, problem based learning can bring the theories of our respective disciplines into the reality of the now.



Student Involvement Tip:

*Instead of you, as the discussion leader, summarizing and asking **all** of the questions, encourage **students** to listen and summarize what was just shared and to ask the speaker if their summarization is correct. Summarizing in this way begins to open the doors for students to examine their own assumptions and biases. In addition, encourage **students** to formulate questions to ask the group in order to contribute to and grow the discussion.*

So, you decided to give discussion a try but aren't sure where to start? Maybe a bit nervous about not wanting to get into a debate or argument, or taking the risk of somehow losing control?

An easy, yet effective technique to begin a discussion, and maintain control of the environment, to an extent, while still encouraging participation, and building critical thinking skills is the **"Six Thinking Hats"** exercise.

The technique was originally developed by Edward de Bono and published in his book, *The 6 Thinking Hats*. While it was created for business, it has been used successfully in numerous environments to look at information from a variety of perspectives. It forces the participant to move outside of their habitual thinking style, and creates a more objective view of a situation. It benefits the more timid among us as each participant takes on a clearly defined "role", thereby removing a large portion of the personal risk involved in stating one's opinion.

It works like this:

- 1) You decide a **discussion topic** for the day and inform the students, who prepare by reading or watching the prescribed materials. They come to class ready to assume one of six "roles".
- 2) In class, they receive **one of six hat colors** and the accompanying directions for each hat personality. *You, as the instructor, decide if it is more beneficial to have students **ALL** assume the **same** role at the same time or to assign each participant a **different** role. It may depend on your class size, but even large lecture courses can divide themselves into groups of six. [The Six Thinking Hats instructions can be found here on our website.](#)*
- 3) At various intervals, call a time out and check in to see what members are experiencing in their varied roles. They (and you) will learn a lot about their progress in critical thinking as well as their progress with using the material in a way acceptable within your discipline. You can then have them change roles, or debrief the topic. The debrief is especially effective when you have used discussion groups, as you can then build on group experience and knowledge.



Contact the TennTLC for more information, workshops, or consultations at 974-3807 or tenntlc@utk.edu.
Visit our site: <http://tenntlc.utk.edu>.

Can't We Just Talk?

Well, yes and, no, not really.

A well planned discussion will allow your class to engage in more dialogue at a higher/deeper level. While students may initially feel as if discussions are "slow days", and somehow not really worth attending, discussion is a complex teaching method that requires careful planning and preparation for both you and your students (Brookfield and Preskill, 2005).

The instructor prepares by identifying the topic and the reviewing the reason(s) the assignment was made in the first place. What do you want students to be able to **DO** with the information in the end? Knowing what the end outcome for the student is will help you create an outline for the discussion. As the acting facilitator, you can steer the conversation. It goes without say that you are a content expert, but be prepared for questions that veer off the course you have chosen. Even the best planned outlines sometimes go awry when a student asks a question you were not anticipating. Creating an outline and anticipating questions and how you might respond to them helps you feel more in control even when the conversation takes a different route. Being willing to "let go" of preconceived ideas about having to cover "x" amount of material frees up the learning process and lets you and the students create content and value together.

To participate fully, the students must have read the material or viewed the video, etc. It is sometimes helpful to ask them to prepare a couple of related questions to bring with them, especially if some are more hesitant to speak up or your class is large and you will be dividing them into discussion groups.

By reviewing the guidelines with the class and sharing excitement about the exercise in the session prior to the discussion date, you can anticipate a great class session.

Additional Resources

Brookfield, S.D. & Preskill, S. (2005). *Discussion as a way of teaching* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

http://www.debonogroup.com/six_thinking_hats.php