

FACILITATING DISCUSSION:
A BRIEF GUIDE

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FACILITATING DISCUSSION

A GUIDE TO THE CONTENTS
(so you can look up only what you need)

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction..... | 3 |
| What is a “Good” Discussion?..... | 4 |
| Creating Rapport..... | 5 |
| Names..... | 5 |
| Seating..... | 5 |
| Beginning the class..... | 6 |
| Closing the class..... | 6 |
| Encouraging Participation..... | 7 |
| Techniques specifically aimed at eliciting full participation..... | 7 |
| Non-participating students..... | 8 |
| The excessive talker..... | 9 |
| Minorities/women..... | 10 |
| Facilitating Discussion..... | 13 |
| Preparation..... | 13 |
| Questions..... | 14 |
| Kinds of questions to ask | |
| Formulating questions | |
| Responses..... | 15 |
| Appropriate behaviors for the teacher | |
| Ways to follow-up on what students say | |
| Ways not to respond to students | |
| Responding to questions students ask | |
| Getting Students to Talk to—and Argue with—Each Other..... | 18 |
| Using Small Groups..... | 20 |
| Goals..... | 20 |
| Forming the small groups..... | 20 |
| Topics for small groups..... | 20 |
| Other Ideas for Invigorating Your Class..... | 22 |
| Use writing..... | 22 |
| Use visualization, drama..... | 23 |
| And Finally—Are You Doing as Well as You Think You Are?..... | 24 |
| Handout: “Suggested Guidelines for Classroom Discussion” | 25 |
| by Cynthia Nieb | |
| Acknowledgments..... | 27 |

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INTRODUCTION

Most teachers, I've noticed, agree in wishing that they lead better discussions than they do. We don't mean to lecture, but it's hard to get students to talk, or at least to talk "well," and it's really easy to keep talking ourselves, even when the faces in front of us are blank. Or perhaps in our efforts to cover material and keep our courses tightly structured, a good discussion rarely gets underway. We're unhappy; and our students are bored.

**We don't mean to lecture,
but it's hard to get students to talk [. . .].**

A good discussion, of course, serves more than our own self-satisfaction. When students consider themselves to be participants, they learn more (even if coverage is less), and they take pride in what they learn. Discussion, because it helps students to become personally involved in their education, helps them toward important goals. Through discussion they may become not just ready receptacles for our wisdom but active participants in learning how, for instance, to evaluate a theory or synthesize approaches. They may develop new interests, figure out what they believe, or don't believe, and, in general, gain confidence in their intellectual abilities. Far too often students do little questioning in our classes, and less tough thinking. Discussion can help them learn how to learn.

WHAT IS A “GOOD” DISCUSSION?

When worrying over our leadership abilities, it may be helpful to recognize that “good” discussions come in many forms. Not every “good” discussion consists only of students engaged in animated, self-directed conversation. How frequently do we have intense, intellectual hour-long conversations with our best friends? We shouldn’t be surprised if such conversations are harder to achieve with a class of seventeen students, or that when we do achieve them, the topics sometimes drift just as aimlessly as our own conversations may, and drift in ways that don’t best serve educational goals.

...“good” discussions come in many forms.

The needs of students and of our subjects are often better served by varying the kinds of discussion and the kinds of participation in class activities. On any one day, especially in a seventy-five minute class, we may well plan on varying the pace and nature of activities, with a range that may include student-led discussion, dialogue with the teacher, and small group work. Sometimes, or even often, we may deliberately absent ourselves from a conversation, encouraging students to take over. For some purposes we as teachers may take a very central role: if I want students independently to analyze the style of each other’s essays, I first help them study style, using investigations and presentations in which I’m centrally involved. But I can help everyone to participate freely and happily in this process.

What follows in this essay are ideas for encouraging full and fruitful participation; the suggestions vary in their usefulness depending on (1) the kind of situation you are encountering in your class and wish to work on (e.g., a too talkative student), (2) the kind of discussion you’re interested in cultivating, and (3) your educational goals. And remember that these suggestions are not cure-alls: some, for instance, act as spot remedies, others may serve as one-time catalysts for change.

CREATING RAPPORT

Good discussions of any kind generally depend on a class's developing a productive esprit de corps. Here are some suggestions for getting an appropriate ambiance established.

Names

Students need to know each other's names (it goes without saying that you need to learn them, too).

For the first few meetings students can put name cards in front of their places: you can provide these inexpensively on 8 x 11 paper folded in three with the first names written in bold felt-tip pen. If you're bad with names, this strategy is especially helpful.

Try a few "getting to know each other" routines: on the first day students meet in groups of three and then introduce each other. On that day and for a week or two thereafter, the students and you see who can name every person in class. During the semester, to get a class warmed up you can have three or four students write their names on the board and then say something about their names. Set the model by speaking about your own name first.

When you distribute handouts in class, you can get to know students by putting each individual's name on a handout. As you distribute them, you will be forced into learning who's who.

Seating

Make sure students can see each other; don't let anyone sit on the fringes—pull loners in and insist on everyone's adjusting chairs to accommodate all members of the class. If "bad" combinations of students develop, re-arrange seating (for example, have students count off to four or five for small group work: all 1's work together, all 2's, etc. Then keep the seating arrangement). I usually take the trouble to get to class early and make sure that there are enough chairs, suitably arranged in a small circle or square.

Think about where you sit: Do you sit apart from the class, distancing yourself, or do you join the group? It's a good idea to vary where you place yourself: rapport can develop most with those students to whom you are physi-

cally closest—or you may overlook the person immediately to your right. You might shift your seat in order to see the students who prefer to lurk in corners, or to take away daily the face-to-face confrontations with the student who chooses to sit directly opposite you. Sometimes you can control disruptive students more easily by sitting right next to or near them; you can also sit between two students who whisper or create other disturbances—generally a first-semester hangover from high school. Students may develop better rapport in the class as a whole by shifting their seats rather than clinging to one dependable friend.

Beginning the class

The first few minutes of a class can be the most awkward, especially at the beginning of the semester. So plan some good first moves:

- Hand back papers and give the students time to ask you questions.
- Have students discuss comments they've made on each other's papers since the last class.

- Check in with each other: this technique is especially valuable for classes that meet two days a week, so that there's quite a big gap over the weekend. Have people say a few words about what's been going on in their lives. You can include everyone, or just let those people speak who feel like it.

- The "discuss-your-name" game described above is a surprisingly engaging warm-up activity.

- Some teachers recommend gentler, quieter ways to get the attention and ambiance of the class established in those first minutes: to greet students when they come in, put up a picture related to your topic for the day; play a piece of music; write a quotation or question on the board that students will read and then discuss or write about.

Closing the class

Like a fine essay, a fine discussion should come to a fine ending. Don't let students end your class for you by starting to load up their backpacks. Keep track of the time and bring the session to a fitting close. One good way to conclude is with a final bit of writing: give students five minutes to enter an observation about the class into their notes, or to write you a brief note asking a question or commenting on the day's activities. Collect these as they leave. In general, if students observe that you structure classes carefully and capably bring each class to an appropriate conclusion, they will remain attentive participants until dismissed.

ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION

In the course of time every teacher, no matter how capable, experiences the class in which only two or three students willingly talk; or you have a semester in which one student dominates the conversation; or another student will not participate. Occasionally your class may consist of seventeen students of whom only one is a man, or a woman, or an African-American, or Asian-American. What to do?

Techniques specifically aimed at eliciting full participation

Despite what your instincts may tell you, most students much prefer that teachers insist on participation rather than letting one or two students dominate while the rest drowse, and most do not mind your calling on students. They do mind being bored, and being silent. (I get my evidence from having read stacks and stacks of evaluations. I have yet to read a complaint about a class in which the teacher insisted on active participation. I have read many complaints about teachers who let one or two students dominate.)

- To prepare students for general discussion, I've finally learned that it's wise in the first few weeks of a semester to have students actually discuss the nature of a good discussion. Is it helpful to be the only person talking? How can a person who talks easily encourage others to talk? What role do listening and asking questions play in a conversation? Can a good discussion occur if students only praise each other for fear of hurting feelings? What kinds of responses make people feel bad? If you want to disagree with someone, can you acknowledge and explore his or her point of view before trying to demolish it? To whom should students address themselves? (Remind students that they should often address the class, not just you, that they should ask each other questions, and in general should follow-up each other's comments, rather than leaving that job to you.)

- It's easy to plan questions that automatically include everyone. At the beginning of a discussion, I often deliberately ask questions that every student can and will have to answer, either with an oral yes or no or with a show of hands.

- I also include in my plans for each class questions or projects that systematically allow for brief contributions from all participants. A simple and effective review exercise is to have every student describe one thing he or she

has learned from the day's/week's/semester's work. When I'm teaching a very short essay, I may have every student read a paragraph aloud. (Surprisingly, this routine is not boring; it also ensures that every student has the text freshly in mind.) Every student can be asked to pinpoint an important image or word or scene in a text being studied. You'll think of round-robin tasks that make sense for the job at hand.

Non-participating students

Some students may just be too shy to talk; others can't gear up their nerves enough to utter that first word; others simply have quiet conversational habits—in a room populated with students used to barging in on or overlapping another person's last sentence, these students don't stand a chance. Still other students may think that everyone else in the room is better prepared or smarter than they are and so they are afraid to speak up. (And some students may indeed have weaker preparation, so this is a genuine problem.) A few techniques, in addition to those just described above, may help to include these would-be or reluctant participants. (A number of these suggestions are designed with the teacher-directed discussion in mind.)

- Wait. Don't get in the habit of calling on the easy talkers first. Keep looking around the room; call on someone who is making non-verbal signals of readiness.

- When a student has talked, don't automatically be the first respondent. Count to ten and see who else may speak up. Remind students that they can ask someone else in the room, other than you, to respond to their comments.

- Once a discussion gets going, try changing a speaker's opinion into a question, which you then ask of the students who have not been talking. Or ask these non-participants if they know of evidence which supports opinions being offered.

- A truly shy student can usually read aloud just fine; remember this person when you need to have a paragraph or handout read.

- If you have had all students write an in (or out-of) class response to a text or problem, take this occasion to pick non-participants to read aloud what they have written. The words are already formulated. Students who find the class difficult can also more easily be drawn into participation on these occasions.

• Quiet students may sometimes be the best observers and note-takers. Choose one to act as class recorder of a discussion; he or she can read aloud the notes later. If you ask for a summary of the previous class at the beginning of a session, or for a summary of the day's discussion, again try calling on the student who usually doesn't participate; he or she will certainly have material to present. (Obviously, you'll want students to be prepared for the possibility of this task.)

• If you get an entire class of quiet students, discuss the situation with them and have them come up with their own ideas for increasing participation. Then systematically use their ideas.

• Of course, sometimes it's helpful to talk with individual shy students outside of the class about methods for his or her inclusion. Discuss whether the student feels comfortable talking; would he or she like to be called on? Emphasize that this is the student's class too, and you'd like to make sure he or she is getting the most possible out of the experience.

**... include in [your] plans for each class
questions or projects which will systematically allow
for brief contributions from all participants.**

The excessive talker

Many of the above methods control the excessive talker by dint of including other students. But here are further ideas:

• Talk to the student outside of class. Make it clear that, like most people, you value the student who listens well, who asks good questions of other students, or who is sensitive to the needs of others in the class.

• Silence the excessive talker by putting him or her into the role of discussion recorder: he or she must simply observe and record; he or she cannot talk until handing in (or giving) the final report.

• The bouncing ball (but try some other odd object, such as a candy bar): The person talking holds the ball. When done, she throws it to the next person she wishes to speak. No one can speak unless holding the ball (including the teacher). This same procedure can be accomplished without the ball: each speaker must

call on the next speaker. This rather silly sounding technique actually works quite well in some classes; it has the added advantage of getting quieter students to participate. Used as a surprise maneuver, it may get the discussion ball rolling (sorry; blame Jonathan Monroe for this pun).

- Another silly-sounding but effective game to try on an unresponsive or shy class (know yourself, know your class—and be brave): give everyone six to ten rubber bands, pretzels, paper clips, or chocolate chips (i.e., any cheap small object). Each time a person speaks, he must throw a rubber band into the center of the table. When students have used up their pretzels (or eaten them), they can't talk anymore, until everyone is done. You can then issue a fresh supply if the talk needs to go on. Again, the technique encourages quiet students while controlling overly talkative ones. And again, it's not something you'd do every day!

- Have the class discuss who is talking, who isn't, what changes they would like, and how they might achieve them.

- If the one or three students who dominate a discussion are not elbowing others into silence and are making valuable contributions, and if you're finding other activities to help the rest of the students participate each day in some way, relax. You're doing what you can; so are your students.

Minorities/women

Sometimes we and our students inadvertently trip into what would appear to be rather obvious traps. A few "do's and don'ts":

- Don't make the one woman/man/African-American/Asian in your class responsible for reporting on "the woman's/man's/African-American's, etc., point of view." The ignorance of the rest of the class is not that person's responsibility. Nor is it the job of that person to report on "the" view (should there be such a thing) of a group to which she or he happens to belong. It's more than dismaying to hear stories such as that of a student—the only woman in the group—who was routinely asked, in the last ten minutes of class, for the feminist position on the subject discussed. This after having been ignored during the rest of the class.

- Don't stereotype your students and therefore your expectations of them. The color of a person's skin does not determine his talents, his personality traits, or how he will participate in class. Don't inadvertently pre-tailor your own responses.

•Don't presume to know your students' backgrounds because of their names, skin colors, or college affiliations (to name a few possibilities). Don't assume they want everything about their backgrounds known and that you are free to inquire; on the other hand, don't assume they *don't* want to share their culture. And don't assume everyone shares your cultural heritage: not all students, for instance, are as intimately acquainted with the Adam and Eve creation story as you perhaps are.

•Do think about how you respond to students in your class and how they respond to each other. Sometimes it's a good idea to have an up-front discussion of factors that can influence the workings of a classroom conversation. How can you and your students respect different styles and approaches rather than silencing them? It's common, for instance, for a group to value the contributions of men but not of women—a woman makes a comment and gets no response; ten minutes later a man makes the same comment and everyone applauds. (As a teacher, you may want to be aware that studies reveal a tendency for teachers to praise women for a response and let it go at that, but to challenge men and make them produce more.) Men also tend to be more confrontational in conversation, while women tend to take a more cooperative approach. Men also may dominate a discussion: if this starts to happen, the class will probably need to discuss the situation and decide on ways to resolve it. A relatively minor but interesting point: in some parts of the U.S., it's common to enter a conversation by overlapping the last speaker's words; students accustomed to waiting for a pause can be effectively excluded.

Students benefit from advice about how to conduct themselves when they are discussing sensitive matters. Cynthia Nieb, an experienced teacher of First-Year Writing Seminars, many of which have concerned controversial topics, developed the appended "Suggested Guidelines for Classroom Discussion." These or similar "Guidelines" might be useful as a handout in your class. They should be accompanied by (frequent) discussion and review.

•Do consider how you will respond if a student makes a racist/sexist/homophobic, or other discriminatory comment or uses an expression or behaviour you abhor. While these situations are never easy, this is not a time to reveal the temperature change under your collar, if only because anger is rarely an effective teacher, and you especially want to be an effective teacher at this juncture.

Will you be happy ignoring such an episode? If not, a simple response may be an effective first step: "I believe that to be a mistaken way to speak/think about"

It may be effective first to distance the student from the comment, which you can then address. For instance, you might recast a sexist comment by beginning "It's common for people to say that . . . People often say that . . . I've heard other people say that." Then you can address the comment, having put it into a new context. Another possible response to an offensive joke or comment is to "put the joker on the spot by pretending not to understand, and asking the person to repeat or explain the joke, which probably won't sound funny the second time."¹

If you're comfortable with the kind of conversation that may ensue, you can ask the class to respond to the comment: "How do you see J.J.'s opinion?" "Do you agree with M.M.'s argument?" You also want to make your own position clear (the power of the example you set is not to be underestimated), while at the same time indicating respect for the student's right to express opinions of even a discriminatory sort.

If follow-through on a situation seems desirable and you can't think of an immediate strategy, give yourself time to consult other teachers and figure out a good teaching plan. There's always the next class, and in any case learning takes place gradually. I sometimes talk with the student before carrying through with further activities on the subject, just to be sure I do understand the situation.

- Some teachers carry with them expectations about the "level" of a student or class that shapes their treatment of it; or they may prefer to ask safe "right or wrong" questions which will elicit "right or wrong" responses and then be upset by the student who doesn't fit into this mold. Are you squelching a student because she gives answers that differ from those you hoped to elicit? Are her answers actually "bad"?

¹"Strategies for Classroom Success by Women Faculty."
Women in Higher Education. December, 1993. 5.

FACILITATING DISCUSSION

Preparation

Good discussion sessions are usually the result of good preparation—yours and the students’.

If you’ve chosen readings that set out a debate, you and your students will start with the advantage of having an issue to consider. But if your readings seem purely informative, or if they present only one side of an issue, your students—and you—may have trouble finding good discussion material. Good preparation can start, then, with your presenting genuine puzzles to the class. Look for a crux, a dilemma, a problem, a paradox, a contradiction between two thinkers on a subject. You know the issues in your own field that warrant discussion. Have you given your students suitable material for genuine discussion? Make sure students are aware of the issue you’re focusing on, the problem; make sure that inquiry occurs.

As students become more sophisticated in your field, they can increasingly search for its puzzles themselves. Get students to provide the questions for discussion of a topic and then analyze which questions are most valuable and in which order they ought to be taken up. It’s important to have students learn how to ask questions, and which questions to ask. Questions lie at the heart of a discipline.

Clearly, it helps to define your goals and the kinds of discussion that will achieve them: do you want argument? Do you want students to present information; compare concepts; criticize? In-class preparation may include defining needed concepts and terms. Preliminary brainstorming sessions on a topic can be valuable; they can be student led. Use the blackboard and/or a student recorder.

Preparation for a good discussion may also well include starting with material from students’ own experiences and interests. This immediate connection can make the rest of the study more accessible as well as more valuable. For example, before conducting a discussion of *Lear*, students can do some informal writing about their sibling relationships (a really torrid topic for many freshmen) and/or relationships with their fathers (it’s important to offer options so that students without fathers or siblings are not put into awkward situations).

Or students might write about and discuss the role and treatment of old people in the U.S.—the topic should, obviously, depend on the intended approach to the play.

Here are some matters to consider:

Questions

Kinds of questions to ask

It's much easier, and much more automatic, to ask information-seeking or "yes/no" questions than to formulate questions that help students to think and that provoke a conversation. Unfortunately, a series of information-seeking questions is highly unlikely to stimulate either good thinking or good discussion.

So work out your goals before entering the classroom: do you wish to encourage students to synthesize ideas from different readings? to encourage comparison? to stir up criticism? to have students apply ideas to experiences drawn from outside the texts? What questions will lead to these ends? Some questions may better be provocative and open-ended: questions with no right answer, they're designed to set loose a free-for-all. Perhaps you in fact wish to elicit information or to test how well your students are reading. Then you will indeed need questions that elicit information and that have yes and no answers.

It's not easy, especially during the first years of teaching, to ask questions that will achieve your goals; it's critical to prepare your questions in advance of class—and to be clear about your goals.

Formulating questions

- If you use a specialized vocabulary, don't assume your students understand you. Run checks to discover which terms are specialized as far as your students are concerned.

- What do you do if students look blank when you have just asked a question? You can try rephrasing it, to clarify your meaning or to explain your vocabulary. Be wary: your rephrasing may just throw further confusion on the original question; and you may end up asking so many questions the students don't know where to begin or what you want. Wait, therefore, before rephrasing to see if you really need to do so.

- Keep the topic of your question focused. An essay assignment that asks four or five (seemingly) equally weighted questions usually elicits poor essays: a barrage of questions in the classroom usually elicits silence, as students wonder where to begin or “what you want.”

**Get students to provide the questions for
discussion of a topic and then
analyze which questions are most valuable [. . .].**

Responses

Appropriate behaviors for the teacher

If you want students to answer questions, and to talk with each other, it's a good idea to keep an eye on your own behaviour.

- Avoid habitually answering your own questions. Students will in turn acquire the habit of letting you do so.

- Wait for responses. Allow at least ten seconds after you or a student has asked a question. Give students time to reflect.

- When students do respond, listen to what they say; don't focus only on your own goals and on the (perhaps tiny) part of the student's response that applies to that goal.

- Act as mediator/facilitator: summarize, organize, re-direct; keep the question or problem in view; keep order. Keep a written record of students' contributions and questions on the board.

- Welcome disagreement. Handle disagreements creatively to lead to learning—disagreement is a normal and even desirable academic behaviour. Your positive handling of disagreement can help students learn how to disagree agreeably and without fear or anger.

- Challenge students to perform well, but don't put one student interminably on the spot; encourage other students to leap in when they can help someone out.

Ways to follow-up on what students say

- Ask the student why she has made a certain response.
- Ask the student to provide evidence; or can the student provide an example?
- If necessary, ask the student to clarify his response.
- When in doubt about what a student has said, paraphrase, or get another student to do so.
- Try referring to your own experience to help draw out students and make them comfortable.
- Teach other students to provide the above kinds of follow-up.
- A student presents an opinion that you consider anathema. How do you respond without discouraging the student from full and free participation, but also without seeming to agree with what the student has said? Sometimes in our efforts to acknowledge a student's position, we lead other students to conclude that we agreed with it. In a small discussion class, you can encourage the rest of the class to take up the topic: often other students will do the work of critical analysis for you. If you remain on the spot as respondent, keep in mind that giving air-time to a position repugnant to you on one day doesn't mean that you can't come back to it on the next. Then you can compliment the student by virtue of reopening the matter, but you can present your own position. Students quite reasonably expect to learn not just about the opinions of their peers but about the results of their teachers' carefully considered thinking. Obviously, if you take students with you through your thinking process, so much the better.

Ways not to respond to students

- Never respond with ridicule, sarcasm, or with a heated, emotional put-down.
- Don't interrupt; let students finish. Give them time to complete their thoughts.
- "Good point, but . . ." This response resembles, "This is an interesting essay, but . . ." Try to respond positively to each student's comments, if only to rephrase. Then pose your criticism. Or redirect the response to another student: other students often do the job of criticism quite well.
- Avoid responding routinely with evaluation, with judgment: "Good." "That's right." Avoid developing a formulaic response. (This is really hard!) You'll stay fresh if you try to pick up on the interesting part of a student's comment. Provide positive re-enforcement for the student as a person with ideas, not just as someone who provides right and wrong answers. (If you ask only "right

and wrong” questions, you’ll have trouble with this aspect of humanizing your responses to students. Answers to information questions do indeed merit strong evaluative feedback: Exactly!)

**Avoid habitually answering your own questions.
Students will in turn acquire the habit of letting you do so.**

Responding to questions students ask

- Never put down a student’s question or suggest in any subtle way that the student was stupid or out of place to ask it. If questions bother you, figure out why: are you afraid you’ll lose control of the class? That you won’t know the answers? That you won’t complete your class plan?

If the questioner is routinely a trouble-maker, talk to him or her out of class. In class, you can put off the question: the other students also know a trouble-maker when they see one, and they won’t appreciate your spending a lot of time on a question that shouldn’t have been asked.

- Respond positively to questions. If you re-direct a question, make sure that it gets answered, and that the student won’t feel you ignored her.

- Feel free to admit your ignorance if you get a question you can’t answer or that you need time to answer—model what you hope students will do when they, too, are stymied. Unless you downright grovel, students won’t take your admissions of ignorance as a sign of incompetence; usually, they won’t even believe your admission.

- If questions move the discussion into new areas, say so, and then decide whether or not to go there. Use your role as facilitator graciously here.

GETTING STUDENTS TO TALK TO —AND ARGUE WITH—EACH OTHER

More often than not students talk mostly to the teacher, because the teacher wants to do most of the talking. It takes an effort to change this pattern, but there are ways to do so.

- Try looking at other students while one student speaks—to encourage the speaker not to look just at you. Ask students to look at each other. When a student has finished speaking, don't respond immediately. Wait for other students to speak; look around as if you expect them to do so.

- Re-direct questions students ask you to other students.

- Have students provide the evidence for a student's opinion.

- Have students ask each other questions in response to what has been said. Have students learn what kinds of questions they can ask of each other.

- Be personal. Make a point of referring back to points made by individual students in the class. "Dorothy suggested that"; "But Bruce argues . . ."

- Find out if everyone actually agrees. This is best done in writing: students who don't agree haven't chosen to speak up. But they may be thinking up. I recently heard one student explain that she never speaks up in class because her ideas are so different from everyone else's. It didn't occur to her that hers are probably the very ideas the teacher is hoping for. It's our job to stir such students into speech.

- Help students to see conflict as a good thing and learn ways to disagree without being harmful. They can learn to first acknowledge and analyze what the person with whom they disagree means before beginning their own critical analysis. Also help students learn to address not personalities but the issues: "That idea suggests that . . .", rather than "you are . . ." Bring conflict into the open and work on it. What are the issues? What can be argued, and how? Be direct in taking on conflict and helping students learn to make the most of it: "Let's figure this out." "How can we resolve this?" "Let's work this through carefully and clearly." If several students appear to be stuck in an argument or present conflicting opinions, ask other students to help resolve the seemingly irreconcilable positions (it's tempting to take on this task yourself).

- Rotate the leadership of discussion to individual members of the class. Be sure they receive their assignments well in advance and that they've also received some advice from you about how to do a good job. A preliminary conference may even be in order. (Having students make presentations, by the way, encourages individual participation but it doesn't necessarily encourage students to talk with each other.)

- Act as facilitator—perhaps at the blackboard. Provide summaries, and so on. Students will get used to you in this role, as someone on the sidelines providing guidance, not as the major source of energy. Having your back to the class while you take notes at the blackboard can increase the volubility of students and their willingness to talk directly with each other.

I recently heard one student explain that she never speaks up in class because her ideas are so different from everyone else's.

- If you are trying to be a complete non-participant, announce that you will be the note taker; everyone else is to talk while you listen and take notes for the class; you'll provide a summary and comments when the discussion is over. Turn the discussion over to the class, making clear that you won't be speaking for ten or so minutes (or perhaps until you're invited to do so by the class). This is an excellent procedure to follow with fair regularity. It's a good idea in the first weeks of the semester to precede these "students only" discussions with a review of discussion "rules" (that one person not dominate; that they speak to each other, not to you; that they listen to and ask each other questions, and so on). The class should also have a clear understanding of the topic and purpose of the discussion, and of course it must be adequately prepared in terms of subject matter.

USING SMALL GROUPS

The use of small groups can be especially valuable: they're an excellent resource for a shy teacher who doesn't desire the steady beam of the spotlight, and they provide an excellent means to help students develop a working rapport. All students (including the shyer ones) get a chance to participate in desirable ways. Often excellent large-group discussion follows preparation in the small groups. Some suggestions:

Goals

Be very clear in your own mind about what purpose the small groups are to serve. What are their goals? Provide the groups with explicit, simple instructions about the work they are to do and why they are to do it. Write the instructions on the board or provide hard copies. Don't rely on oral instructions. Follow-up on the work the small groups have done, in a way which makes it clear how the work matters. As the semester progresses and as students become accustomed to certain kinds of small group work, you won't always need the instructions.

Forming the small groups

You can plan in advance who should work together; you can let students randomly form their own groups; later in the semester you can ask students to work with people they haven't worked with before; you can rely on proximity, and so on. Groups can range in size from two on up. Again, knowing your own goals will help you to make these decisions. Sometimes (especially at the beginning of the semester) assign roles to individuals in each group (recorder, reporter, and so on).

Topics for small groups

Topics are limited only by your imagination and the demands of your discipline. Some possibilities:

- Small groups may look for solutions to a problem; try to reach consensus on an issue; define a term; provide data or evidence for a position, and so on. The groups then compare and evaluate their results; conflicting "facts" will be of special interest. The debate continues. You can record and moderate the discussion.

- Students may examine a text for various purposes: to examine style, analyze imagery, compare what two writers say on a given subject, and so on. Be explicit—have them make lists, prepare written statements, and so on. Then use this material for discussion with the entire class.

- Have students select significant quotations from the text being studied; students can lead discussion of their own passages. The class can examine which passages were selected, how they fit together, and so on. (Most teachers of writing know that most students need practice in learning how to find and use quotations.)

- Students may work together on improving sentences from student essays.

Be very clear in your own mind about what purpose the small groups are to serve [. . .].
Provide the group with explicit, simple instructions.

- They may brainstorm together on the development of essay topics; this is especially effective if you place students with similar or identical topics together.

- Small groups provide an excellent situation in which to have students read aloud their essays and receive comments on their work. Students in small groups can also give each other suggestions on *drafts* of essays; students take this work seriously, and they value advice received at this early stage. At first be sure to provide guidelines, *in writing*, for the work to be done.

And so on and so on.

But remember: *don't assume students already know what they have come to class to learn*. If they've never commented on papers before, for instance, make sure they learn with you what to do: how does one analyze style? what is "voice"? what kinds of questions does one ask about diction? argument? thesis? organization? evidence? and so on. Explicit preparation and directions make the big difference in the success with which small groups function.

OTHER IDEAS FOR INVIGORATING YOUR CLASS

A good discussion may be facilitated by strategies not obviously related to conducting a discussion. For example:

Use writing

Writing often facilitates good thinking and good conversation because it helps students to get engaged.

- Have students free-write in class for a few minutes to gather their thoughts together—or to create some thoughts. They might examine an important passage in a text, reflect on the topic for the day, or recall what happened in the previous class. This may be the first quiet ten minutes for reflection that they've had in days. The discussion will benefit.

My students especially enjoy writing for five minutes before beginning to discuss an essay written by one of their classmates, an essay that has just been read aloud. They put these responses into the form of a letter, which they actually give to the writer. (The writer later has the benefit of seventeen responses to his or her essay.) Responses may be personal and the result of “free association”; or they can be as formal as students wish. When discussion of the student's essay proceeds, some students read their letters aloud or use them as the basis for comment.

- Assign informal writing in advance. For example, students might answer questions about the text that you provide, or they might write a one-paragraph personal response. The writing might involve role-playing (a good way to get students personally involved): “You are Goneril writing from hell. Justify your behaviour toward Lear well enough and you can go to purgatory.” Use these paragraphs in class, and/or collect them for your examination later.

- Journals are another kind of informal preparatory writing that helps students to investigate a subject before the discussion begins. These can be directed journals or free-form.

- Have students write out their own questions. You might begin class by having students write on one or two of the questions brought in by their peers. You can also put students in charge of leading discussion on the questions they

wrote up and brought in. Small groups can also work on such questions.

- If a discussion flags, pause to have students write for five minutes. They can write their comments about the topic, or you can provide a specific question or passage for analysis. Then resume discussion.

- Have students write summaries of and commentary on the inquiry that has occurred in class; also have them examine their own part in the discussion. These summaries can act as an encouragement for students to reflect on ideas discussed and on their contribution to those ideas. The notes can provide an informative record for both you and the students. Another way to approach this task: have each student write down one thing he or she learned that day. You can collect these for your own information; you can have the class share their collected wisdom.

- Combine individual pre-writing, small group work, and general discussion. For instance, begin by having students individually write down (at home or in class) their definition of a term: define “feminism.” Next have students meet in groups to compare notes and refine their positions. Then have the class convene to share observations and conclusions and further refine their definitions of “a feminist.” Students then rewrite their definitions at home or in the next class.

- Use your own writing: mention in your comments on papers something the student said in class. It’s a very flattering and encouraging thing to do; it encourages students to think their ideas matter.

Use visualization, drama

Like writing, visual and dramatic techniques can help to elicit fuller, more thoughtful and creative discussion.

- Use the blackboard (or have students use it) to create diagrams, visualizations of the problem or concept. E.g., Venn diagrams (those overlapping circles).

- Bring in cartoons, films, or pictures to illustrate abstract ideas.

- Make pictures: have students draw (in groups, preferably) the concepts represented in a text. Then they should compare their drawings. A good way to elicit both right brain and left brain strengths!

- Enact a mini-drama to make your point. When I’m about to discuss style, I occasionally act out three ways of asking for a group’s attention: “Shut up and

pay attention!" "Hey, guys, listen up!" "Could we now please turn our attention to a new subject?"

- Have your students try role-playing—the judge presiding over a case, a character in a short story. Preparation and subsequent discussion are important for the success of this technique.

- Set up debates during which students argue out an issue and you, as debate judge, assign points.

- Create academic panel presentations, as for a conference. Students prepare papers, read each other's in advance, act as respondents, etc. This helps students get a taste of a real academic world in which the writing they've been doing matters.

AND FINALLY—ARE YOU DOING AS WELL AS YOU THINK YOU ARE?

Don't forget to find out what students are really thinking—is there hidden hostility about the way discussion works? Have students check in with you occasionally, *in writing*, for privacy, and for individual opinions, not group consensus based on the loudest voice. Mid-term evaluations work well to find out what students think about the way the discussion is going. Their impressions may differ from yours; and they may have good advice.

You can also get other faculty to visit one or more of your classes; each of us has accumulated expertise that we can (and should) share with each other. It's exciting, after all, to find new ways to interact with our students.

One of the great pleasures of teaching comes from the class in which students have participated vigorously and usefully. It's not always easy to help this happen, but it's worth trying for, even with that class of seventeen admittedly shy and retiring students. They'll appreciate your help. If nothing else, your efforts will show students that you care about them as thinking individuals. That can be the most effective educational assistance of all.

SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

by Cynthia Nieb, *History Department, Cornell University*

Classroom discussions can elicit defensive, hurt feelings, or they can help everyone to question and think through problematic matters. Here are a few suggestions on how one can maintain a discussion that is relatively “hurt free.”

In general

1. When someone is speaking, that person has the floor. That means the speaker has the right to “dominate” the conversation until he or she yields that right and turns it over to somebody else.

2. Avoid discussing subjects about which you don’t have adequate information. You may bring up a controversial topic, but make it clear from the beginning that you will be discussing ATTITUDES and FEELINGS (YOUR OWN), not facts. The alternative is to do some research on many sides of the issue, photocopy articles, and share them with the class at a later time.

Listeners

1. Try to refrain from giggling and making faces while someone is talking. Most of the time, nervous laughter is a response associated with the inability to confront difficult issues. What it feels like to the person who “has the floor” is another matter. Whatever the source, laughing at a speaker is a sign of disrespect and dismissal and should be avoided at all costs. (The exception to this is when someone is telling a funny story.) Scribbling notes to your other classmates while someone is speaking sends the same message.

2. If you have something to say, wait your turn. Write your points down on a piece of paper and bring them up later.

3. When thinking of responses, do not attack the speaker on personal grounds. In fact, attacks of any kind are out of the question. Poised argument is associated with clear thinking, not with insults. For example, it is poor form to begin a sentence, “What I think that you are trying to say is” The speaker isn’t “trying” to say anything: the speaker “said” it. In addition, derogatory comments on the speaker’s level of intelligence, morals, dress, or looks are out of order. This does not mean that you cannot ask open-ended questions.

4. If you are bored with someone's ideas or comments, you can remark on them privately to your teacher in a letter or conference. Don't announce in class that you've heard enough. Everybody thinks that what they have to say is important, or they should. If you want people to respect your time to speak, respect theirs.

The speaker

1. When you begin to speak, be sure to let your listeners know the context of your comments. Are you joking about this topic? Is it something close to your heart? Have you had professional/volunteer experience working on this subject? In other words, what is the basis for your comments, and are you being a devil's advocate (arguing the point for the sake of argument) or do you feel strongly about your ideas?

2. Think about your sources. Are your comments stemming from one personal experience? A political belief? Daily reading of the *New York Times*? (Take into consideration the political slant of the *NYT*.) An irrational prejudice? Be honest with yourself and the class. If you do not do this preliminary work, you should be prepared to be questioned by colleagues on the validity of your argument.

3. At Cornell University, it is stressed that we should have strong ideas. This can, however, contribute to hyperbole, blowing things out of proportion to make a point. When ideas are not identified as feelings or vague notions, and generalizations are made as fact, you invite strong retorts, and you exhibit poor judgment. For instance, what if I say, "All lesbians really need to do is to become romantically-linked with a man, and their problems will be solved"? Do I have the expertise to be making such a statement? Did I do any reading on the topic? Have I gathered any studies? Perhaps what is more irritating, however, is the implied disgust associated with the comment. What sorts of "problems" are lesbians supposed to be and to have? Whose problems are they in actuality? If lesbians don't desire "to change," isn't the problem the speaker's inability to accept the lesbian? My point is that it might have been better to say, "I'm confused. It seems to me that after reading Nestle and Faderman, society (i.e., a great deal of heterosexual society) sees lesbians as a problem. I don't see why lesbians don't just give up and pair with a man. Why wouldn't this happen? It seems to me that it might be . . ."

The point of this handout is to reinforce the idea of discussion as communication, not as an exercise in winning or shaming. It is wonderful to think critically about belief systems and to ask philosophical questions. What is not wonderful is when we lose our dignity and respect for the person with whom we are talking and instead talk AT them.

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One text which acted as a useful resource and reminder of important issues and methods was *Classroom Communication: Collected Readings for Effective Discussion and Questioning*, edited by Rose Ann Neff and Maryellen Weimer (Madison, Wisconsin: Magna Publications, 1989).

And finally, my thanks to all those whose names don't appear here but whose ideas have remained with me, unlabelled though much appreciated.

NOTES:
