

Strategies for Leading Discussions

LEADING A DISCUSSION

1. General Strategies

- Keep in mind the purpose of discussion
- Plan how you will conduct each discussion session
- Discuss your expectations at the beginning of the term

2. Setting the Context for Discussion

- Explain the ground rules for participation
- Give pointers about how to participate in a discussion
- Help students prepare for discussion
- Show a videotape of a good discussion session

3. Starting a Discussion

- Refer to any study questions you may have distributed
- Ask for students' questions
- Pair students to discuss assigned reading materials in a question and answer format
- Phrase questions so students feel comfortable responding
- Pose an opening question and give students a few minutes to write down an answer
- Ask students to describe a "critical incident"
- Ask students to recall specific images from the reading assignment
- Ask students to pose the dumbest question they can think of
- Pose questions based on a shared experience
- Make a list of key points
- Use brainstorming
- Pose a controversial question
- Generate "truth statements"
- Have students divide into small groups to discuss a question you pose
- Ask students to respond to a brief questionnaire
- Use student panels
- Use storyboarding
- Stage a role play

4. Guiding the Discussion

- Take rough notes
- Keep the discussion focused
- Use nonverbal cues to maintain the flow
- Bring the discussion back to the key issues
- Listen carefully to what students say
- Clarify students' confusions
- Prevent the discussion from deteriorating into a heated argument
- But do not shut off disagreement as soon as it occurs
- Change the task if the discussion begins to stagnate
- Be alert for signs that a discussion is breaking down
- Vary the emotional tone of the discussion

- Bring closure to the discussion
 - Assign students responsibility for summarizing the major points
 - Ask students to write down a question that is uppermost in their minds
5. Evaluating the Discussion
- Ask students to write briefly on how their thinking changed as a result of the discussion
 - Make your own informal evaluation of the discussion
 - occasionally save time at the end of the period to assess the day's discussion
 - Videotape the discussion

ENCOURAGING STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN DISCUSSION

1. General Strategies
- Encourage students to learn each other's names and interests
 - Get to know as many of your students as class size permits
 - Arrange seating to promote discussion
 - Allow the class time to warm up before you launch into the discussion
 - Limit your own comments
2. Tactics to Increase Student Participation
- Make certain each student has an opportunity to talk in class during the first 2 of 3 weeks
 - Plan an icebreaker activity early in the semester
 - Ask students to identify characteristics of an effective discussion
 - Periodically divide students into small groups
 - Assign roles to students
 - Use poker chips or "comment cards" to encourage discussion
 - Use electronic mail to start a discussion
3. Tactics to Keep Students Talking
- Build rapport with students
 - Bring students' outside comments into class
 - Use nonverbal cues to encourage participation
 - Draw all students into the discussion
 - Give quiet students special encouragement
 - Discourage students who monopolize the discussion
 - Tactfully correct wrong answers
 - Reward but do not grade student participation

Adapted from: Davis, Barbara Gross. *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993