

## CREATING THE CLIMATE

- 1. Eliminate noise.** Shut the door, turn off the projector, wait for everyone's full attention.
- 2. Sit in a circle.** Everyone is in the front row. Draw in those on the fringes. Put the chairs close together.
- 3. Learn names.** Have a short warm-up question so that each person around the circle shares his or her name and the answer. Consider having each student make a nameplate out of a tri-folded 8 1/2 x 11 piece of paper for the first few class periods. Plan group-building exercises early in the semester.
- 4. Discuss discussion.** What makes for a productive conversation? Discuss this early in the semester. Talk about active listening, too – and model it.
- 5. Express your commitment to conversation.** Let students know that you encourage them to express their views. Assure them that they are free to say what they really think.
- 6. Create a covenant.** Agree on guidelines for discussion. See the “Sample Ground Rules” handout for ideas.
- 7. Signal the start of discussion.** Use discussion to break-up lectures and mini-lectures to break up longer discussions. Signal verbally and nonverbally when lecture time ends and discussion begins.
- 8. Frame the purpose of the discussion.** Do you expect brainstorming? Critique? Debate? Dialogue with the instructor? Questioning assumptions? Personal sharing? Quoting from the reading to support arguments? Let them know what you expect – and how long you expect it to take.
- 9. Deal with uncivil remarks.** When a student makes a comment that disrupts the class, engage that moment. Some inappropriate remarks may call for discipline; others pose an opportunity for great learning.
- 10. Go meta.** Periodically talk about your talk. E.g. “Why is everyone so quiet on this issue? Is it a sensitive topic that strikes a nerve or is the technical jargon just overwhelming?”

## DESIGNING THE QUESTIONS

### Productive Questions

**The Playground Question** -- Here the instructor designates a carefully chosen aspect of the material for intensive study (the "playground"). This kind of questioning encourages the students to choose freely their own concepts or themes in dealing with the material.

*Examples:*

"Let's see if we can generalize about the play as a whole from the nature of the opening lines. " (Instructor reads a sentence from the novel under study.) "Well, that's a very rich sentence. . .there's a lot there. . .OK, what's there?"

**The Focal Question** -- Students are asked to choose from among a limited number of positions or viewpoints, and to support their views in discussion. They are thus more guided conceptually than by the Playground Question, but less restricted in the material they may bring in to substantiate their positions.

*Examples:*

So where is this wild boy better off? In the forest where he started, or in civilization being socialized?"

"Is Ivan Illych a victim of his society, or did he create his problems by his own choices?"

**The Brainstorm Question** -- Here the structure is thematic: the title is derived from the brainstorming technique, which encourages participants to generate a large number of ideas on a single topic in a short space of time. The question should deliberately encourage all kinds of ideas or opinions, while the theme delimits the range of what is appropriate.

*Examples:*

"What possibilities are there for refuge in *A Farewell to Arms*?"

"What kinds of things is Hamlet questioning, not just in his soliloquies, but broadly throughout the whole play?"

### Questionable Questions

**The General Invitation** -- This is a Playground Question that has lost its boundaries. It encourages a wide range of response, but the arena of discussion is so broad and vague that there is insufficient direction. Students are likely to get confused or keep quiet because they aren't sure what is "really" being asked.

*Examples:*

"What about the lecture?"

"Any comments on Plato?"

**The Shotgun Question** -- These are really multiple questions which pack in several weakly related sub-questions all in one breath or ask for radically different kinds of thinking. They often seem to be fired off in the hope that one fragment will hit something. Unfortunately, the confusion which results is usually inhibiting to students. In many cases the individual questions which make up the Shotgun Question would be valuable if the instructor would simply *wait* between questions instead of throwing them out all at once.

*Examples:*

"So, we're talking about the fact that everybody's roles are changing, we've mentioned religion and education, how did religion and education during this period affect these changes, or how did the changes affect the kind of religion and education people had?...Let's start with religion...have women always had a divine place in religion?"

"How do you interpret what the narrator tells you about the hero? What do you make of his return from law school? Why did he decide he didn't really expect too much?"

**The Analytic Convergent Question** -- These questions can elicit complex, analytical thought, but tend or seem to aim at a single correct answer. Discussion is likely to be short lived because students sense a "right or wrong" atmosphere, or because active thinking will stop when one answer is labeled as correct by the instructor.

*Examples:*

"So in this story, when (is) the point of truth for Kurtz?"

"What was the most important reason for the revolution's failure?"

**The Quiz Show Question** -- While questions of this type produce excitement on daytime television, they may well create an impoverished intellectual atmosphere because they are factoriented, single-answer, convergent questions which, not surprisingly, produce the least discussion of all.

*Examples:*

"What was the name of the institution?"

"He talks about envying one character. Who was it?"

"Assistants in Instruction Handbook." Princeton University. Available.

<http://www.princeton.edu/~aiteachs/handbook/index.html>

## **Open vs. Closed Questions**

Questions are the potent tool of the discussion leader, and the open-ended question has the most potential. This is a question with no single, correct answer. "Why is this important?" is a closed-ended question. Asking "In what ways could this be important?" is open-ended.

Ask members of your group to *diagnose*. "What is your analysis of this situation?" "What conclusions can you draw?" Ask them to *hypothesize*. "What would happen if...?" Be willing to *challenge* participants. "Why do you believe that?" Finally, encourage *expansion of thinking*. "What arguments might be developed to counter that point of view?"

When a participant responds to a question, don't say "That's right," and move on to another. Encourage other responses, to build on what was said. You can encourage this both verbally ("Anyone else?") and nonverbally (with a questioning look).

John C. Miles. "Guidelines for Leading and Facilitating Discussion." Western Washington University. Available. <http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~gmyers/ehe/disclead.html>

## **PRIMING THE PUMP**

### **Think First**

Think in silence about \_\_\_\_\_. Be prepared to say one thing you think about it.

### **Pair First**

Talk with one other person about \_\_\_\_\_.

### **Write First**

Write down two questions about \_\_\_\_\_.

Write down three things you know about \_\_\_\_\_.

Write one question you would like to ask the group (not the discussion leader).

### **Group First**

Discuss with three or four others your response to the idea that \_\_\_\_\_.

In groups of four or five, quickly list ideas with which you agree/disagree.

Talk with one or two others, and note a couple of things you heard from the group that you would like to explore more fully. Be prepared to address the issues to the people you think will have some insight into them.

### **Brainstorm First**

Ask the group to brainstorm things they know about this topic/story/etc.

### **Read First**

Provide a short text such as a selection from the course readings, newspaper editorial, movie clip, etc.

Skim for information about \_\_\_\_\_.

Read with this question in mind: \_\_\_\_\_.

Take the role of \_\_\_\_\_ as you read.

## FACILITATING THE DISCUSSION

### *1. Have Patience...*

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

**Wait for responses to responses.** When a student has talked, don't automatically be the first respondent. Count to ten and see who else may speak up. Wait for other students to speak; look around as if you expect them to do so.

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

**Avoid responding routinely with evaluation,** with judgment: "Good." "That's right." You'll stay fresh if you try to pick up on the interesting part of a student's comment. Avoid the phrase, "Good point, but..." Provide positive re-enforcement for the student as a person with ideas.

**Listen.** 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.

### *2. Stir the Pot...*

**Try calling on students by name** rather than asking questions of the group as a whole.

**Encourage a conversation between students** as opposed to dialogue with the instructor. Ask students to look at each other, not just the instructor, when they speak. Remind students that they can ask someone else in the room, other than you, to respond to their comments.

**Turn 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.

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

**Have students provide evidence** or an example for their own opinion or the opinion of another student.

**Engage conflict.** 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. . ."

### ***3. Experiment...***

**Try choosing a note-taker.** Quiet students may sometimes be the best observers and note-takers. He or she can read aloud the notes later. 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 giving the final report.

**Try the bouncing ball.** 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.

**Try allocating chits to talk.** Give everyone six to ten paper clips. Each time a person speaks, she must throw a paper clip into the center of the table. When students have used up their chits, they can't talk anymore, until everyone is done.

**Try student-led discussions.** Turn the discussion over to the class, making clear that you won't be speaking for ten or so minutes. 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).

Adapted from "Facilitation Discussion: A Brief Guide." Katherine K. Gottschalk. Cornell University. Pamphlet. Available. <http://instruct1.cit.cornell.edu/courses/taresources/leadisc.html>. Last updated September 26, 2001.

**Try a "fishbowl panel" discussion.** 3-4 students hold a discussion at the center of the room while the rest, in a large circle around the outside, observe – perhaps with particular instructions. Then, tag-team style, switch-in new participants to the center.

**Try a "pinwheel" discussion.** Form small groups each with a different assignment, such as analyzing a different reading. Then, create new small groups with a member from each of the old groups in each of the new groups. Everyone reports, teaching each other.

### ***4. Encourage Discussion Without Asking Questions...***

1. Declarative statement--stating a thought that comes to mind as a reaction to what a student has just said
2. Reflective restatement--repeating or paraphrasing what a student has said
3. Statement of interest--stating that you would like to hear more about what a student has just said
4. Speaker referral--stating the relationship between what a student has just said and another student's comment (Dillion 1994)

Refuting Misconceptions about Classroom Discussion. By: Wilen, William W., Social Studies, 00377996, Jan/Feb2004, Vol. 95, Issue 1