MANAGING DISCUSSIONS

Discussion teaching is second only to lecturing in popularity. Socrates, probably the most famous discussion teacher, developed the dialectical approach of asking questions that would stimulate student thinking and subsequent discussion. Even with its lengthy and well-established history, however, discussion technique is for many instructors a focus of concern and fear. The idea of relinquishing some control over the focus of a class and the uncertainty over what questions students will ask are daunting to those who can’t compete with Socrates in intellect and confidence. It need not be so. If you can give up on the often-held idea that the professor has to know it all and accept that you may be able legitimately and professionally to say, “I don’t know—let’s find out,” then discussions will not be threatening.

In some ways, managing a discussion is like conducting an orchestra. You see in the room a variety of melodies to play, experiences from which to benefit, intellects to open and discover, and theories to examine. With the appropriate waving of questions as batons, the instructor hopes to bring all of these together in a way that produces a harmonized whole for everyone in the room.

The discussion technique is also a means of discovery. It is through thoughtful questions and searching answers that students can be led to understand things they did not before. Discussion technique is much more than simply asking, “Are there any questions?” This careless beginning does not do justice to the range and depth of things you can do to create a vibrant, instructive discussion.

You can also view the discussion technique as a pedagogical bridge between lecturing and the case method. It is distinct from both, for it is more participative and bilateral than lecturing and yet less problem-focused and participative than the case method. You can use discussions both within lectures and within case classes for particular purposes. And developing your discussion management skills will provide a good introduction to class management of case discussions.

In this note, let us consider the following aspects of managing classroom discussions: (1) benefits and disadvantages, (2) types of discussion, (3) planning, (4) posing questions, (5) stimulating participation, (6) offering periodic summaries, and (7) using audiovisual techniques.
Benefits

The discussion method has many benefits for students and instructors alike. First, discussions allow the instructor to see the students’ attitudes and levels of understanding. The unilateral approach taken in lecturing does not permit you to know what the students are thinking or how they are reacting to the material.

The discussion technique also helps to bring students into a more cohesive learning team. This sense of membership in a group whose purpose is to study and discover can add significantly to the students’ motivation for learning. Discussions help the students to better understand not only the lecture material but also each other. This often leads to continuing discussions outside the classroom, thus extending the instructor’s influence beyond class hours.

The discussion technique also allows students to clarify gaps in their knowledge. If you have gone over a topic too quickly, discussions allow students the opportunity to fill in what they missed and to explore areas in which they have further curiosity.

This insight into the students’ level and depth of understanding also serves the instructor. Questions represent usually more than one student’s concerns; they give voice to the questions of others in the room. You should respond to each question, therefore, not only to answer the student asking the question, but to address all students. Those who are shy or confused will welcome discussion breaks so that some of their questions may be voiced by others.

Discussion also brings the experience of the students in the room to bear on the topic. If you look at the room less as a group of empty heads waiting to be filled than as a group of people with widely varying experiences, backgrounds, and beliefs, discussion will allow you to begin to tap that richness and variety. The students then become partners in the pedagogy; and by virtue of what they may see and explain, you will become a partner in the learning.

Finally, to the extent that learning is more effective when it is participative, the discussion technique involves people more than lecturing does. While our minds may doze during the attention gaps common in lecturing, it is difficult to stray far from the subject when you are asking a question or being asked how your thoughts compare with those of the last person who spoke. This managed involvement builds a more natural engagement in the topic, as one’s peers begin to express their thoughts and relate the subject to their own experiences and understandings.

Disadvantages of Discussions

The instructor who chooses the discussion method over the lecture necessarily relinquishes some control over what happens in the classroom. Loss of control, however, refers only to outward behavior, because paradoxically, inward behavior—what people are thinking and feeling—is less under the instructor’s control in lecturing than in any other technique. Lecturing gives the illusion of learning by virtue of the passive, forward-sitting, outward behavior of the students. Yet some
instructors fear the loss of control—for any number of reasons, including being asked a question they cannot answer, being confronted with mistakes in the lecture, being asked about seemingly irrelevant matters, and even not being able to cover everything planned for the day.

Discussions create a more equal classroom. To conduct discussions, instructors must at least recognize students and engage them on a more personal and direct level. At the same time, students must, at whatever level of understanding, step up and engage the instructor. For some, this is a disadvantage; for others, it is a wonderful advantage of the discussion technique.

Discussions can also hurt people. Someone may ask a question that others think is stupid and suffer embarrassment because of caustic comments made by the instructor. A student may lay out a train of thought or analysis that others conclude is poor—expressing their distaste in giggles, snickers, sighs, bored expressions, or outright catcalls. This may be an advantage if it helps the student gain confidence by speaking in front of people and defending his or her own position; however, if the possibilities for personal pain are not managed by the instructor or fellow students, it can be a devastating experience, causing a student to retreat from further social intercourse in the class or elsewhere.

Pain is not restricted to the students, either. Cutting comments, hostile behavior, and derision can also be directed at the instructor. I am aware of at least one situation in which the open class hostility toward the instructor led in large part to the instructor’s suicide.

The possibility for pain leads some instructors to avoid discussion techniques. Some don’t feel qualified to handle the variety of situations that might occur. Unfortunately, teaching is a social profession and requires teachers to be comfortable and facile with social exchange and to develop skills that enhance learning. Teachers must learn to anticipate, to allow some tension for learning’s sake, and to be willing to stretch themselves and their students intellectually and emotionally. People are more resilient and more adaptable than we sometimes give them credit for. We can, if we are aware of what’s happening in the room and if we value learning and personal growth, make some mistakes and still have an overall positive effect on our students.

The discussion technique is also less participative, less problem-oriented, and more instructor-dependent than the case method. These features can cause discussions to become overly abstract or theoretical and, therefore, less applicable to students’ immediate needs and concerns.

Settings have a big influence on the success of a discussion. If one is assigned to teach in a room arranged in the usual elementary-school fashion, with students lined up in rows facing the front, it is difficult to get students to talk to each other. They cannot see each other easily, cannot face each other, and end up talking to the instructor or the chalkboard instead of each other. Thus, for discussions to be done well, a different room type may be required, which may not be available.
Types of Discussions

There are several types of discussions: developmental discussions, gripe sessions, problem-solving discussions, buzz sessions, and solidifying discussions.

Developmental discussions

Developmental discussions are those which begin at a particular point of knowledge in an area and move step-by-step toward a higher or broader level of understanding. In this type of discussion, the instructor has a clear map of where he wants the class to go and has formulated questions that will move logically from one thought platform to the next. Carefully planned developmental discussions allow the instructor to retain a large proportion of control over what happens in the classroom, but they can begin to feel more like orchestrated lectures than discussions. Be careful not to give a lecture in a “discussion’s clothing,” since students will see through that quickly and tune out. You may lose control at the very time you were trying to maintain it.

Gripe sessions

Gripe sessions are common dumping grounds where students are allowed to vent their feelings and resentments, and where little learning is likely to take place. Some instructors and, indeed, some managers will discount discussions as little more than opportunities for gripe sessions and avoid participative discussions altogether. But gripe sessions can be turned into productive sessions if the instructor is skilled and knows how to do it.

Students in educational settings, including degree programs and executive education programs, often build up resentments, frustrations, concerns, and strong feelings about either the subject matter or the process being used to introduce it. If not vented or recognized, such emotions can seriously impair the learning process. Sometimes the causes of the emotions are characteristics of the students themselves. Maybe somebody was sent to the program who really doesn’t want to be there, or maybe he or she has just had a fight with a family member or is overwhelmed by other aspects of the program. Other times, things the instructor is doing cause these feelings. These may include a course design that doesn’t fit the students or not accepting questions in order to continue “moving ahead.”

Allowing students to vent their feelings, concerns, resentments, and frustrations may be essential to recharge the learning motivation and really move ahead. The instructor’s willingness to do this signals his concern to the students about their learning and not just about his material. Instructors can watch for signs of building classroom pressure that signal a need to set aside the teaching plan and deal with the students and their feelings. Sometimes these signs are angry faces, sometimes short comments before class, sometimes a disproportionate number of people reading other material or not paying attention.

When you sense that the students are not with you, you may wish to stop and ask them, “What’s going on?” In my experience, it is best not to draw conclusions about where the signals are
coming from. If you conclude that they don’t like you, or the program, or anything else, you could be creating more problems than do really exist. Rather, describe what you see and ask them for the conclusions. “You seem uninterested in this class. I see people nodding, others reading, and others whispering. What’s going on here? Is this the wrong day or something?” (That has happened before—going to the right place and the right class but on the wrong day or with the wrong material.)

This invitation and a little silence will usually produce some comments and discussions about what is bothering the group. You have to be sincere in your commitment to learning, however, and to hearing what they have to say. It may take only five minutes, or it may take the rest of the hour. I remember one executive program class in which I did this; the discussion that resulted filled the rest of class time, and we never got to the day’s case. Later, though, participants’ evaluations almost uniformly mentioned that class as the best of the seminar because it showed faculty flexibility and sensitivity to the condition of the people—who were struggling to link concepts they had heard in several different classes and just couldn’t input any more new information. We didn’t cover the material I had planned for the day, but we greatly accelerated the group’s learning.

Those in business or education who argue that asking what’s wrong is only an invitation for griping, and who, therefore, bypass such opportunities, are callous to the students’ desire and willingness to engage the instructor or the material. (The same is true in management, but that’s for another forum.)

When one or two in the group begin to respond and vent their feelings and you listen, other hands will go up. After a while, you will begin to hear the same complaints—in other words, the comments will become repetitive, a sign that the venting has come full circle. You can then point out that things are beginning to go in circles and you would like to move ahead. You can also point out that it is easy to raise complaints but much more difficult to suggest what should be done. You may then invite the group into a problem-solving discussion. You should be an active part of that discussion, and if you have information about why you want the group to go in a direction that’s counter to their wishes, now is the time to lay your strategy out on the table. It is this persistence in developing suggestions for action that can change a “gripe session” into a productive discussion.

Again, unless you are willing to adjust your plans to fit the objectives of both the course and the people in it, this exercise will become a counterproductive one. It is better not to ask than to ask and ignore. I have not yet seen a group that could not be turned from complaining to productive problem-solving when the people in power (in school: the instructor or the administration; in business: the leadership) were willing to recognize the complaints and invite the complainers to become involved in solutions.
Problem-solving discussions

The *problem-solving discussion* involves identifying a particular problem and asking the students how they would solve it. The idea is to use problems the students can relate to in order to engage their concentration. The problem-solving discussion is really much closer in content and style to the case method. You can use problems of your own choosing or invite students to present problems from their experience that relate to the subject matter.

Buzz sessions

*Buzz sessions* are a common and effective technique for creating more discussion among students during a class. You can do this regardless of how large the class is. You break the class down into groups of two to six and assign a topic of discussion for a brief period of time—perhaps as little as two minutes or as much as 15 to 20 minutes. Given several questions or a particular focus and your go-ahead, the room will erupt almost immediately into a high-level “buzz” of conversation. This is an excellent way of bringing everybody in the room into a setting where they can express their thoughts and feelings. The noise level is a good monitor of student energy for the assignment you’ve given them. When the noise begins to drop a little, you can announce, “Okay, two minutes!” and the level will increase as people hurry to finish their assignment before the time runs out.

When time is up, you can debrief these sessions either by inviting reports from various groups or alternatively asking for brief samples of conclusions from many groups until suggestions and solutions become repetitive. Some instructors feel it is important to hear from each group, to continue the principle of allowing all to be heard (which is a main reason for having buzz groups in the first place), but this can become repetitious and boring. If you find yourself bored, the students may be as well. You can then accelerate the process by asking, “Do any of the remaining groups have anything different to add, that is, something that is not a minor variation of what we’ve already heard, something really new?”

Solidifying discussion

The *solidifying discussion* is another discussion type in which the instructor provides an opportunity for students to identify their misunderstandings or lack of understanding and to clarify or solidify the basic principles that the instructor was trying to teach. This give-and-take discussion at the end of the presentation of a conceptual framework can be extremely important. In this type of discussion, the instructor asks, “What are the key points you think we should take away from this discussion?” Usually several people will raise their hands to round out or solidify the key points.
Planning for Discussion Classes

Beginning a discussion is much more than simply asking, “Are there any questions?” In planning effectively for a discussion class, perhaps most importantly, you need to make sure that the participants have something to discuss. The discussion method presumes that the students in the room have enough information about or experience with the topic to comment on it. You have to make sure that your lecture or the materials you assign in advance provide this foundation for the students. The content doesn’t necessarily have to contain more than one viewpoint, but it should maintain a clear position to which the students can react. Make sure that the students will be able to enter the discussion with a sufficient grasp of the relevant theoretical constructs or concepts.

In William Hill’s book, Learning through Discussions (pages 51–54), Hill recommends making certain that one is precise about definitions of terms and concepts that are introduced into (or prior to) the discussion, so that everyone is clear about their meaning. Discussions that use different definitions of the same terms become chaotic, confusing, and undermine the learning process.

Another useful preparation is making a flow chart of how you expect the discussion to go, leaving room for various alternative directions the students may take (similar to the case-mapping technique). It will help to keep track of the various topics you want to ensure the students cover, and it will help you formulate transition statements to get you from one topic to the next in the midst of the discussion.

Questions

Conducting an effective discussion depends greatly on the quality of the questions you ask. Some basic principles are important to remember in framing questions.

First, frame questions that have no single right answer, that cannot be answered by either yes or no, and that ask the students to do the following: describe something, compare two things, or express their opinions on a particular topic or principle. Asking a question in real-time, in the middle of class, that comes out in a yes/no format is like slamming on the brakes of a car at 65 miles an hour. The class careens and skids for a while, an awkward silence develops after the student replies, and everyone is left wondering what to do or rather, what the instructor is going to do.

One way to avoid yes/no questions is to ask comparative questions—asking students to compare one theory with another, one management style with another, and so on. As they do this, they will begin to identify the pros and cons of each side and to compare both approaches with some overarching larger principles of management.

Don’t let your questions become too abstract or theoretical. When this happens, students may lose interest or fail to see a relevance to what they are trying to accomplish. Although this may not be true in the higher levels of mathematics and the natural sciences, for management classes it tends to be the common case.
Another discussion-generating approach is to ask for the arguments for and against a particular framework, theory, or set of concepts presented in an article or lecture. As students articulate the pros and cons, they not only deepen their understanding of the subject but learn what other views there are and how they might counter them. A central technique in debate and legal training, this applies well to many learning situations.

One useful discussion opener is, “Who could use this concept, framework, or principle?” This stimulates students to think not only of immediate management applications but also of other creative applications of the topic.

Of course, the old standby is, “Why?” If you happen to get a question out in yes/no format, you can always come back with “Why?” In fact, you might intentionally ask the yes/no version, even recording answers for the entire class in the form of a vote on the board and then ask, “Why?” Usually, after one student has given his reasons, another will be eager to jump in to show that there are better reasons for doing or not doing this or for this concept, and off you go. A common and powerful technique in developing good discussions is to ask for a vote on a topic—for instance, on students’ assessments of a leader’s actions in a given situation. You might even ask for a distribution of votes; for instance, “How do you assess the leader here on a scale from one to five?” After you’ve taken the votes, you can ask those who voted in the tails of the distribution (say, the ones and the fives) to give their reasons; as a result, a nice discussion develops.

When you begin to probe a student’s thinking with the “Why?” question, trying to find how deep and how broad it goes, remember that there is a fine line between probing and attacking. If you get students on the defensive, their openness to learning diminishes. That’s not to say that you shouldn’t challenge or push them, but if you start on this course, be persistent enough to get through the defensiveness and push the person so he sees why you are doing it. In my view, to attack, humiliate, and then walk away doesn’t do much good. I’ve known faculty who, for instance, would “nail” somebody for weak thinking. Sometimes that would galvanize the student to work harder the next time, but sometimes it left a scar that never healed.

The difference between those two outcomes has to do with the motivations of both the instructor and the student. For example, consider the oft-told story of Socrates, who was asked by a young person if he could join his school. Socrates sized him up and took him to the beach, where he put him under the water until he nearly drowned. When he came up gasping for air, struggling, and panting, Socrates declared that when he desired knowledge as much as he desired air, then he might reapply. When we take this kind of pressing, intense approach with students, we ought to ask ourselves, “How do we view our craft?” Are we there only to deal with the brilliant, those who would shine with or without us? Or are we there to deal with people where they are and travel with them as far as they can go? If you don’t have time for some of your students, maybe you ought to mount a charge on the admissions office or revisit your thinking about your job.

Students don’t have the same depth and experience in our field that we do. Our job, in part, is to set them on fire for the field. If they feel attacked, overwhelmed, and associate bad experiences with us, what is likely to be their motivation to continue learning our area on their own when class is
over? If we ask them questions that lie around the borders of their understanding and encourage them to expand their boundaries, then they are more likely to carry on without our pressure later. We can stretch without embarrassing or attacking.

One more comment on questioning: avoid the Easter egg hunt. This is the technique that revolves around the instructor’s “best answer.” The instructor has a word or an answer in mind that he wants them to get and he keeps asking different questions trying to get them to say his word or answer. This is extremely transparent and frustrating to students. If you have an answer and don’t want them to think, then simply tell them and go on. Learn to accept students’ responses and not to have a preferred “best answer” as you ask questions.

Stimulating Participation in Discussions

Some instructors find it difficult to get students actively involved in discussion classes. If you find this to be the case, consider the following suggestions for overcoming the problem.

If you ask questions or select topics for discussion that have little emotional content, it will be difficult for the student to engage in the topic. Try to frame questions or select approaches to topics that have potential for engaging students at more than an intellectual level. If you are discussing medieval history, for instance, and the students are falling asleep, you might ask them what they would do if soldiers had come down the dormitory halls that morning, stolen all their food, and given it to the president of the university. After getting them engaged in this discussion, you can then shift to the perspective of the serfs in feudal manors and build from there.

On the other extreme, you might choose topics that are so emotional that students won’t touch them. This is rare in my experience among college students, but there are taboo areas. A student’s relationship with his or her parents is not often something they can or want to discuss. If you have built a trusting relationship with the student, you might pull it off, but the point is that there are some topics that are too emotional for them. Racism, sexual practices, and sexual discrimination among the students are topics that they may well shy away from.

In between these poles, you may select emotionally charged issues that relate to your topical area and find ways to bring the students to the subject through them. You may think these machinations unnecessary; but again, the intent is to engage them so they remember what you are trying to communicate, not just to have them endure the class. Legislative outcomes, recent business discussions or events, or other political activities in which there is a good deal of controversy all can provide an emotional as well as an intellectual gateway to the subject at hand.

Another approach is the “two-column” method, in which both sides of an argument are placed on a chalkboard and either groups of students or the students all together work on both columns, identifying and clarifying pros and cons. You may ask the entire class, for instance, to work on argument A, even though they don’t all believe in it, and subsequently, to work all together on column B. Or you may divide the class in half and encourage them to take sides and argue the
points for and against each of the two columns, regardless of their personal beliefs. This helps proponents and adversaries to see the strengths of the other side, which is a useful managerial skill.

You may also call on people with no special knowledge in a topical area and make it easier for them to respond by gently prefacing, “This is a highly complex and difficult subject. There are many people in the country who may not have a special understanding of it, and it would be useful for us to understand how these people might approach this topic. I know that you don’t have experience in this area, and that’s okay. Would you tell us what your assessment of this situation is?” This approach works with topics that anyone could have an opinion about, even if special training or experience would give one greater insight.

On the other hand, you could call on people who have special knowledge in the topical area. This technique can have the effect of creating a lot of participation in the short run but shutting down participation thereafter, since the other, less knowledgeable people in the room may feel intimidated and not want to offer anything after the “expert” has spoken. As a rule, I tend to save my experts for later in the class and let them try to fill in gaps or straighten out confusions created by the others. The creation of confusion and its unraveling can be more educational for the rest of the class than the alternative of simply listening to the expert repeat, without much pedagogical experience, what he or she knows.

Another discussion generator is to ask why this particular article, case, or subject is being introduced in the course at this time. This helps students think about the flow of the course and how each piece fits in.

Another good question is: “What is the key message or theme that the author is trying to present?” This question encourages the students to put themselves in the author’s mind and consider the main points and concepts that they are trying to communicate. The class can then decide how effective the author was in making those points and learn from them as to their own means and skills of communication. You might also ask what arguments either for or against the author’s case have been omitted (or under- or overplayed).

Asking the students themselves to frame the questions that they should consider for a class or set of materials is another excellent way of engaging them. You can do this in anticipation of a class or at its beginning. I have had excellent results with both approaches. In the latter, you begin the class by asking something like, “We have 90 minutes to use here, and I want to make sure that we use it to your best advantage. What questions do you think we should consider today?” I then list these on the board to the side of the main board. They often come up with better questions than I have formulated for the class. When the main ones are out, I may add a couple of my own and then ask for a logical sequence of addressing them.

This approach points out several things to the students. It shows them how difficult it can be to ask the right questions. In their own professional settings, they will be left on their own to decide the major questions to consider, and this is good practice. It also points out to them and to the instructor how dependent a class can become on an instructor through such seemingly little things as
who asks the first question. You as the instructor can also learn a great deal about the students’ real level of understanding and insight into your topical area. This can be a humbling approach; you learn how much they really know—that is, what can they do and how do they think when left to their own devices? As instructors, we can lull ourselves into a false sense of accomplishment if we allow the quality alone of the classes we have shaped and directed to inform our sense of what the students are learning.

One warning: don’t use this approach if you have something specific you want to cover that day, because this opening will often redirect the class in ways you may not have anticipated.

Peter Frederick, in his article, “Dreaded Discussion: Ten Ways to Start,” also suggests that you might read key quotes from the assigned articles. Sometimes there are inspirational or especially dense sentences or paragraphs that seem to capture the essence of a piece. Reading these carefully chosen parts at the beginning of the discussion may help to focus and drive the group further.

Another discussion generator is to ask the whole class or buzz groups what the main takeaways from the day’s class are. This often works well as a summary, one that the students (rather than you) construct. Takeaways are the “true statements,” as Frederick puts it, that students should glean, retain, and use. This is particularly effective among executive groups, who are more concerned about the effectiveness of each class than younger people tend to be.

**Periodic Summaries**

Periodic summaries are an important feature for increasing the effectiveness of the discussion technique. When you think students are winding up a discussion of a subtopic or beginning to get a little confused, it is wise to pull things together by either inviting a student to give a summary or offering one yourself. Reviewing where the class has been, what the key points are, and how these fit in with where the class is going will help cement the key points for those who have been down in the trenches of the discussion and need to pause, rise up, and get a larger perspective. I often use a separate flip chart or chalk board to periodically note key points as they arrive during the class. Then, when it seems time for a summary, I have a list of key points to refer to. This also saves the time of trying to rewrite those points.

**Conclusion**

The discussion technique is a powerful teaching tool. It demands that you learn to ask provocative and well-framed questions. It demands that you be willing to yield some control as compared with your lecture classes. In return, you get a much better view of where the students are; the thrill of engaging bright young minds at their boundaries; and the real possibility of seeing a topic in a new light, providing learning for you. When introduced with a set of materials that provides the students with knowledge, skill, and understanding of the topical area, and when guided by well-phrased and well-timed questions, the discussion technique can be an enormously effective
approach to learning. Good discussions are fun and can encourage students to learn more in a topical area. Approached as an afterthought with spontaneous questions and ideas, though, the discussion technique can be dangerous and boring. Perhaps the suggestions given here will help you plan and conduct more effective discussions in class.
References


