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Reminders for improving classroom discussion

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Reminders for Improving Classroom Discussion

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Use short, ungraded writing to deepen thinking (and to let people prepare before speaking up):

- Have students write for five minutes, then have them read their writing aloud, or list their main ideas on the board.
- For homework, have students write the questions they have about the reading.
 - “What are you wondering about? What does this make you think of?”
- Use helpers to free yourself up to notice more discussion dynamics.
 - Have a volunteer note questions on the board or flip chart (number them for reference).
- Model the life attitude of vulnerably asking questions by wondering aloud, *not knowing*.
 - Put on the board or in a PowerPoint document a question for which you don’t have the answer.

Slow the flow, probe deeper:

- Use groups and assign each a different question, problem, or section of reading to report on.
- Probe for more meaning by 1) extending wait time,* 2) repeating the question, and 3) asking for more:
 - “What did you say, Melanie? Hmm, interesting—why do you think that?”
 - “Good. Can you say what your reasoning is?”
- Ask people to “say back” the opposing view *to the other’s satisfaction before they disagree*.
- Transfer responsibility away from you to class:
 - “Mmm—hmm. What is John getting at?”
 - “If you can’t hear someone, what

can you do?”

- “Others, what does that mean to you?”

*FYI: Most teachers wait less than one second after asking a question. Increasing the wait to three to five seconds yields more and fuller responses, as well as more spontaneous speaking up, use of evidence, and student questions.

Balance students’ voices:

- “Others we’ve heard from less?”
- “If it’s already been said, how would you say it?”
- “Whose opinion on this topic would you like to hear?”
- Regularly remind students: “No question is stupid.” (Say it so much that you as teacher sound stupid.)

Track themes to bring discussion back on track or reframe it:

- Nudge a group to move on: “Why don’t we look at the fourth question you put on the board now?”
- Prompt for links: “Wait, what was the connection between this and Jack’s question?”
- Use evidence to support or challenge ideas: “Do these lines answer Kanisha’s question?”
- Offer your own dawning discoveries to encourage reframing:
 - “Oh, I just realized! Maybe Hector is the real hero of the poem.”
 - “What if we solved the problem this way?”

Comment explicitly on group dynamics:

- “Please, folks, I can’t hear her.” “Let her finish.” “One at a time.”
- “How could we make this discussion better?”
- “What can we do to encourage those reluctant to contribute to share their thoughts?”
- At midterm, email individuals, “I’d really like to hear from you more in class.

As your writing shows, others could gain from the greater diversity you’d bring. Participation counts too . . .”

Summarize what was learned (while valuing uncertainty, depending on the content):

- “Did you learn anything, or are you left thinking about anything?”
- “What struck you?” “What do you want to remember?”
- In general, use open questions (“what” and “why”) over closed questions (“Is this clear?” or “Does that make sense?”) to give practice at putting complex ideas into language.
- At end of class, give a “minute paper” or ask for the “muddiest point” and begin the next discussion by reviewing what students wrote about the previous one.

Further Reading

Brookfield, S. D., & Preskill, S. (1999). *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Finkel, D. L. (2000). *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

Torosyan, R. *From Controversy to Empathic Discourse*. Resources posted at: <http://www.faculty.fairfield.edu/rtorosyan>.