



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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Teaching Strategies: Effective Discussion Leading

While lecturing is a fast and direct way to communicate a body of knowledge, discussion encourages students to discover solutions for themselves and to develop their critical thinking abilities. They learn how to generate ideas, consider relevant issues, evaluate solutions, and consider the implications of these solutions. Thus, although discussion is not as efficient as lecture in conveying facts, it helps students learn how to think better and more clearly about the facts that they should learn from their reading and their lectures.

Leading a discussion, however, offers its own set of challenges: participants can spend too much time exploring small, sometimes irrelevant issues, forget that they are progressing toward an identifiable goal, and become bored. The leader must guide the conversation carefully without stifling creativity and students' initiative and without surrendering to some students' desire for answers that they can write down and memorize.

Here are four strategies that can help faculty and TAs encourage students explore issues themselves:

- _ For that class period, resolve to have a discussion and dedicate yourself to discussion as a valuable teaching technique. As inconsequential as this determination may seem, it will direct your preparation and overcome student inertia. Without resolve on your part, it can be all too easy to slip into lecture mode if students hesitate to participate.

- _ Prepare for the discussion by consciously deciding which conclusions you hope that students will reach and/or which issues should be raised. Then select a discussion framework, structure, or context that will help you and the students come to those conclusions. Careful planning will enable you to ask a series of clear, compelling questions at the right times in the discussion.

- _ Give up your physical position of authority. If you are in the front of the class, with all eyes on you only, students will direct their comments to you. You can redirect their comments to other members of the class by asking another student to respond, by ensuring that your students can see and hear each other, and by joining their circle or group as another member.

_ Attend carefully to the progression of the discussion: note where it began, where it is now, and how it can be pushed in the direction you have in mind. When students express similar ideas, lose track of the main question, or stop citing relevant points from lectures and reading, intervene to redirect the discussion. Repeat a comment that was made before the discussion digressed; relate a recent comment to one of the main questions you've asked the students to treat.

We all know that creating a fine lecture requires research and planning; we sometimes forget that leading a good discussion requires the same research and planning *and* demands spontaneous responses in the classroom. The beauty of the extra demand is that developing the skills for intervening and directing discussions leads to exciting, productive exchanges that help students learn to think clearly and creatively, while simultaneously inspiring you to teach more thoroughly and carefully.

(Adapted from "Discussions: Leading and Guiding, but Not Controlling," *The Teaching Professor* VI, 8 [October 1992].)

NOTE: If you would like to discuss your questions and ideas about discussions, come to our October 7 BYOB Luncheon, "Keeping the Lights in their Eyes" (see below).