



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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Spring 2008

Rethinking Discussion Leadership

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If you are like me, you have been looking in the wrong place for ways to improve class discussion. I have read books and attended workshops on the topic, and almost all the advice focused on managing students in the classroom—probing with questions, encouraging the silent, quieting the dominant, and so on. All those skills are important, but experience has convinced me they are not the most important.

I'm convinced that the skills with the biggest impact have little to do with faculty or TA performance in the classroom at all. They have to do with preparing students for discussion. I would estimate that 75% of the success or failure of a discussion is determined before students walk into the classroom.

Why? Because the two biggest reasons discussions fail are:

1. Too few students read the assigned materials. We see symptoms of this problem when only a small number of students volunteer and when comments (usually vague or personal) do not engage the reading.
2. Those students who read the assignment do not analyze it before class. We see symptoms of this problem when only a few students are able, quickly and concisely, to answer questions that ask for mastery beyond simple comprehension. Some students can analyze and synthesize on the fly, but few do it well. Most either remain silent while they think or present rambling answers in hopes they chance upon something worthwhile.

Here are three techniques I have used to prepare students for discussion. All place a premium on mastering the content of a reading, evaluating it, and preparing cogent ways to convey one's ideas before class. All also rely on public performance and evaluation. This approach creates a common fund of knowledge about how to do things well, and it shifts the focus from grades (what will the professor give me?) to peer evaluation (how will other students evaluate me?) as a motivation to excel. I coach all students on how to do each of these tasks before they first perform, and I usually make the first efforts pass/fail to give them a chance to learn from mistakes.

1. Book reviews. In my graduate classes, students write book reviews and email them to the class and me the day before the discussion. Students read and comment on each other's reviews in class.
2. Short oral reports. In my undergraduate classes, students prepare one-minute oral reports in which they summarize and evaluate the reading before class. In class, we draw the names of half a dozen or so students to present their talks that day. The rest of the class and I evaluate the presentations aloud, examining strengths and weaknesses in content and delivery. After presenters and evaluators finish, we have a whole-class discussion of the reading. Students are graded based on caliber of comments in the discussion, so they receive a reward for their preparation even if we did not draw their names to present their talks.
3. Student discussion leaders. In class, we draw the name of a student who will lead the discussion that day. This encourages students to formulate key questions beforehand. At the end of the discussion,

the rest of the class discusses strengths and weaknesses of the leader's performance.

These techniques have led to leaps in the rate of participation and the quality of comments in discussions. I usually remain silent for the first 20 minutes or so to allow free rein to student ideas, and then I join as a co-discussion leader to make sure key points get covered. In most cases, though, the student leader has already covered most of those points. With brief training, student leaders can generate excellent discussions with other well prepared students.

These techniques not only improve discussions, but they help students master the content and learn the most important transferable skill of all – becoming more responsible for their own learning.