



Strategies for Leading Discussion Sections

By the Bok Staff

Leading discussion sections effectively requires a lot more listening than speaking, and the speaking done by the instructor comes, in large part, through questions. There are many types of questions you can use to guide discussion, and the following is a taxonomy of common types.

Planning Discussions

- Consider background knowledge. First, think about the material in light of your students' knowledge and experiences. The sorts of questions you start with should meet students where they are.
- Plan your questions. Think of lines of questioning that will—whether they arrive at answers or just more questions—get students thinking their way from where they are toward the concrete objectives of the section (e.g., helping them process or apply a new concept, preparing them for an upcoming assignment, or introducing a set of unresolved questions that will take up the next few weeks of the course).
- Share concrete objectives. Whether you lay out the objectives in an email before section or write them on the board at the start of class, it's important that students have a clear sense of what the goals of the section are, and why.

Getting Students Involved and Keeping the Discussion on Track

- Clearly identify discussion questions in advance. Hand out or email to students two or three discussion questions before class so they can prepare. Allow each student to become the “expert” on some aspect of the discussion.
- Ask students to prepare for discussion by writing a short paragraph or responding to prompts. Look at the responses ahead of time so you can plan the discussion based on student input. You can do this by having students email their comments to you or by having them post to the course website ahead of time.
- Develop a joint agenda. Tell students that you will ask them to suggest topics for discussion before each class (you may want to begin the list with a few topics of your own). Have the group pick the ones they want to discuss or the ones they found most provocative or difficult.
- Ask students to take a position on a text or an argument. Students can also pair up or divide into small groups to present different sides in a debate.
- Encourage study groups. Explain the virtues of collaborative work and exchanges of information. In many courses, it is appropriate for students to study together, even as they pursue independent efforts.

- Call on students by name and encourage them to do the same. They will be gratified to hear that you think their ideas are important and that you're creating a more personal discussion environment.
- Take notes on what students say (maybe listing the most important points on the board) and use them to refer back to their contributions.
- Don't fill every silence. Leave sufficient time for students to consider a question before repeating it, rephrasing it, or adding further information.
- Don't bail yourself out by always calling on the most eager students. Rather, look for students who are obviously thinking, i.e., who might want to speak but seem hesitant, and invite them to weigh in.
- Rephrase students' questions and partial answers and direct them back to the students. This can keep students talking to each other and help maintain the momentum of a discussion that is turning into a question-and-answer session with the teacher.
- Stimulate discussion with relevant outside examples or material objects, such as poll results, historical documents, pictures, anthropological artifacts, etc.
- Divide a large section into smaller groups that will focus on a specific question or topic from a list. You can then visit each group. Leave some time for the class to reassemble so that the groups can report to each other and you can tie up loose ends.

Arriving at Closure

- Leave time to recognize what students have accomplished during section. Make sure to leave a few minutes at the end of class for debriefing and looking ahead.
- Gather a summary of the important points raised during discussion, write them on the board (if you haven't already) and walk through them with students to lend a narrative to the discussion you had.
- Tie the outcomes of discussion to goals you set beforehand (Which ones did you meet? What's the gameplan for the ones you didn't meet? Did you meet goals you hadn't imagined at the outset?)
- Look ahead to upcoming homework, course themes, or major deadlines. This sort of framing can remind students that the progress made in any given section is in fact progress toward more general goals and milestones within a course.
- Invite students to reach out if they have unresolved questions or concerns based on the discussion. If the discussion has gone well, they should!