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ILLUSTRATION BY SAM KALDA

NEW SEMESTER

By Jay Howard

It should have gone well. You crafted provocative discussion questions. You chose compelling and relevant texts. Yet your every attempt to get the students talking fell flat. Question after question was met with a silence that seemed to last hours.

Why the blank faces? Did the students fail to read the assignment? Was it the early hour? Perhaps you were the problem. Did you make interesting material seem dull? Did you misjudge what they would find engaging?

You have plenty of company. Most every college teacher has experienced that anxiety-producing moment when a promising class discussion fizzles out. It's important for professors to use active-learning strategies, but why does accomplishing that task sometimes feel so difficult?

Faculty members often assume it's a matter of serendipity. The reality is that effective class discussions — much like effective lectures — are the result of careful planning. Students must do their part by coming to class ready to participate. But there are ways to increase the likelihood that they will be prepared, and to avoid the frustration of a sea of impassive faces.

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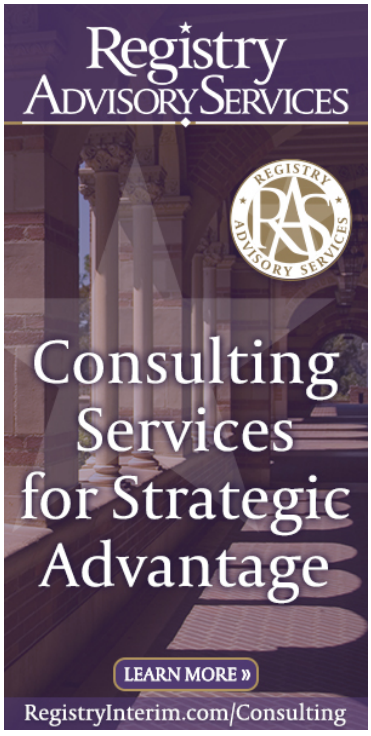

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Who is this guide for? Whether you are a new faculty member or a teaching veteran, if you're looking for advice on how to hold a better class discussion, you'll find it here in *The Chronicle*'s guide. You'll learn how to structure your course and particular class sessions in ways that will get students actively participating — and will enhance their learning.

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- 7 Strategies to Change the Norms of Class Discussions
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Why Discussion Matters

Class discussion involves risk-taking — on the part of the students and the professor.

For students, there's always the risk of embarrassment: *What if I raise my hand and I'm wrong? How will the professor and my classmates see me? Am I talking too much? If I haven't finished the assigned reading, will speaking up expose my lack of preparation?* Many students will decide it's safer to stay silent, and leave the floor to the handful of classmates who are eager to talk.

For you, as the instructor, opening up class for discussion means you risk losing at least some control over what happens. Your efforts may succeed wonderfully or lead to tense and awkward moments. *What if their responses are all misleading or incorrect? Worse, what happens if a student makes a comment that is sexist, racist, homophobic, or otherwise offensive? Isn't it safer just to stick to lecturing and keep control firmly in my own hands?*

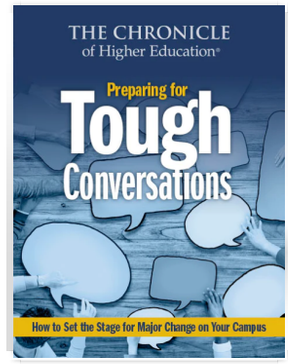
Don't let the uncertainties dissuade you. There are good reasons to engage students in class discussion. First, as studies have shown, discussion leads to greater student learning and the development of critical-thinking skills. If you had to summarize the findings of more than 30 years of research on teaching and learning in higher education (as Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini have handily done), you could safely conclude that students learn more when they are actively engaged with the material, the instructor, and their classmates. Perhaps the most common way to engage them is via discussion.

In any college classroom, as Elizabeth F. Barkley wrote in her 2010 teaching guide, the people doing the most work are also the ones doing the most learning. If you, the instructor, are doing the most work as you design and present a compelling lecture, you may be relearning a lot, or at least solidifying your understanding of the course material. However, it's the students who should be learning the most in class, and so they need to be doing the most work.

Discussion is one strategy for shifting the work from instructor to students. Rather than being vessels into which you pour information, they become co-creators of knowledge and understanding.

Sometimes as novice learners, students are better able than the instructor to clear up confusion and identify next steps in logic or problem-solving. Because of your expertise, you might view those steps as so obvious that you don't think about them anymore; they go without saying to you. Students have an easier time seeing the steps that an expert takes for granted and, as a result, can clarify them for one another. Your role is to guide them in the endeavor.

So how do you go about creating the kind of class discussion that will lead to greater learning?



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7 Strategies to Change the Norms of Class Discussions

As a starting point, you must recognize that the college classroom is a social environment. Whenever humans get together, our behavior is guided by social norms — patterned and unspoken ways of interacting that are so ingrained they go unnoticed until someone violates them.

The college classroom is full of norms that guide student and faculty behavior. For instance, there's a seating norm: Wherever students sit on the first day of class tends to be where they will sit for the entire course. Few faculty members assign seats or stipulate on the syllabus that students must sit in the same spot all semester. Yet they do. But imagine your surprise if, during the sixth week of the term, you arrived to find that they had all switched seats. You would suddenly become aware of this norm because students were violating it.

Likewise, student participation — or lack thereof — is influenced by two key classroom norms. First identified by sociologists in 1976, the two norms work together to keep most students from speaking up in class. As an instructor, you will have to take deliberate steps to counter both:

Norm No. 1: Civil attention. In a typical classroom, students aren't required to "pay attention," only to pay "civil attention." What that means: So long as students appear to be listening, they can expect that the professor won't call on them unless they signal a willingness to participate. How do students demonstrate civil attention? By nodding their heads, taking notes, chuckling at the instructor's attempts at humor, or making brief eye contact. And by the things they don't do: sleeping, texting, whispering to classmates. Students who are paying civil attention aren't necessarily listening: They may, in fact, be daydreaming or deciding on their lunch plans. They may be writing a paper for another course when they appear to be taking notes. But by paying civil attention, students perceive that they have met their obligation to the course and to you, the instructor. Engage in discussion? They see that as optional.

Student participation — or lack thereof — is influenced by two key classroom norms.

This norm also allows students to avoid accountability for failing to come to class prepared. Because they know that the instructor will not question them unless they volunteer, their silence may be hiding a lack of preparation.

Norm No. 2: Consolidation of responsibility. Regardless of class size, only a small number of students — typically five to eight — will account for 75 to 95 percent of the comments made in a discussion. It's easy to be deceived into thinking that you helped facilitate a great discussion when, in reality, you had a great discussion with five students, while the majority were spectators. The "consolidation of responsibility" norm means that a few students assume responsibility for most of the discussion.

How to Disrupt Those Norms

The good news is that social norms can be changed. They exist only because we implicitly comply with them. Here are seven strategies you can use to change students' behavior and disrupt the norms that get in the way of a good discussion.

No. 1: Ask better questions. That's more complicated than it probably seems. Most faculty members know a poor question when we hear it. "Are there any questions?" is typically an ineffective way to start a productive discussion. Yes-or-no questions rarely lead to a thoughtful exchange. Asking questions for which there is a single correct response may be a good way to check whether your students did the reading, but it's not an effective discussion starter.

A good question is one that allows for multiple perspectives. It shows that the topic can be viewed from a variety of angles, even though they may not all be equally relevant or helpful. Here are four ways to do that:

- Frame the question to inspire a range of answers. Don't ask, "When did President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation take effect?" — a question with a single correct answer. Instead, ask: "Why did Lincoln issue the Emancipation Proclamation in the fall of 1862 but make it effective on January 1, 1863? What explains the delay? What factors led to the choice of these dates?"
- Ask students to apply a variety of theories or perspectives to a particular example. In a criminology course you might ask, "We've covered five theories that offer explanations of why people commit crime. Take the case of Bernie Madoff, the financier convicted of running the largest Ponzi scheme and the largest financial fraud in U.S. history. Which of the five theories helps us understand a white-collar crime like this one? How does the theory help us make sense of Madoff's crime?"
- Conversely, after illustrating a topic or concept, ask students to provide their own example: "We've just covered social-learning theory, and I provided you with an illustration. Give me a different example of someone learning new behaviors through observing and imitating others. Where and when have you have observed this in your experience?"
- Ask about process, not content. In some fields, like science and mathematics, there often is a single correct response. So instead of asking questions that seek the correct answer, ask about the process: "Here's a new differential equation on the board. What is a good first step in solving this equation? Where do we begin?"

No. 2: Set the stage on the first day. Many faculty members spend the first day of class checking names against the class roster and going over the syllabus in hopes of clarifying expectations and procedures. The professor's voice is the only one heard that day.

If you spend your first class session in that manner, you're signaling that the norm in your course will be civil attention. If you try to change students' expectations after, say, the first three weeks, they are likely to be surprised and may not adapt well. Instead, establish on the first day that you want them participating regularly in class — that civil attention will be insufficient. For more advice on how to teach a good first day of class, read this Chronicle guide.

No. 3: Use a syllabus quiz to show that you value participation. Rather than

reading the syllabus to students on the first day, create a multiple-choice quiz of 10 to 20 questions on key elements of the syllabus. Divide the class into small groups (five to eight students in each) to work on the quiz. Afterward, ask the groups to provide the correct answer to each question in turn, and check to see if further clarification is needed. The quiz sets the norm in your course: Student participation in discussion is required.

Ask the members of each group to exchange names and contact information. That helps to build a sense of community and gives students a peer-contact list should they miss class or have a question about the homework. In high-enrollment courses, small groups can make large classes feel smaller and safer. Students leave class on the first day understanding that you expect more than civil attention. (Read this Chronicle guide for tips on how to craft an effective syllabus.)

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No. 4: Try a discussion about discussion. This is another effective first-day strategy. Some students, because they see taking part in a class discussion as optional, may be resentful of your expectation that they participate.They may even feel you are out to "catch" them unprepared for class and embarrass them publicly. Shy students, and those for whom English is a second language, may feel that you are making them unnecessarily anxious by requiring verbal participation.

Those perspectives, left unattended, can fester and lead to an an unnecessarily hostile relationship between professor and student. A discussion about discussion can help everyone overcome those concerns. Try these steps:

- Ask students why they think you're making participation in discussion an expectation (and perhaps a percentage of their grade).
- Inquire about their time in other courses that have made heavy use of discussion. Were those positive experiences? Why or why not? What made discussion helpful to them in other classes? When did a discussion seem unproductive?
- Then explain: Research demonstrates that when students participate in class discussion, it benefits them. Point out that most students will pursue careers that require them to work in teams. To be an effective team member, one must be able to engage in dialogue, learn from colleagues, and help deal with challenges as a group.
- Use this time to develop discussion guidelines for the class. You might adopt a civility guideline: "It is OK to challenge and refute ideas or positions, but not acceptable to attack someone personally or engage in name-calling." Discuss the difference between unsubstantiated opinions and reasoned, supported arguments. When students participate in crafting the discussion "rules," they are more likely to take ownership of their own involvement in those conversations.

No. 5: Don't give up on discussion in a large class. Even in the largest courses, instructors can build in brief periods for discussion. Try organizing students into teams, and have them sit with their teammates for the entire semester. I recommend randomly assigning students to groups, because self-selected groups of friends can easily get off topic. At multiple points during class, pose a question for team discussion. To ensure that the teams stay on topic, wander the room and eavesdrop on the debates. After a few minutes, randomly call on a few teams to offer their responses.

An online forum is a place where the in-class discussion can be continued or extended, allowing students with anxiety to contribute.

Create names for the teams. In a science course, for example, teams might be named after elements on the periodic table or famous physicists. This team-based approach gives students a small number of classmates whom they know and makes participating in discussion feel more comfortable and safe.

No. 6: Have students pair up. Try a classic assessment technique like think/pair/share to encourage discussion: Pose a question or topic and give students a minute to write a response. They then pair off and share their responses.

Typically, you would next ask for volunteers to share their answers with the whole class. However, by asking for volunteers, you risk the consolidation-of-responsibility norm rearing its ugly head — that is, the same few students who regularly speak up will volunteer again. Instead, I suggest asking, "Whose partner had a brilliant insight? Whose partner really hit the nail on the head and summarized an important point? Call out your brilliant partner and let's make them speak up."

This approach is particularly helpful with those very bright, yet very shy students. The exercise means they've already had an opportunity to collect their thoughts and rehearse them with a partner. They are now being publicly affirmed for the quality of their comments, making it much less anxiety-provoking to speak up in front of everyone.

No. 7: Take the conversation online. You might have strong reservations about requiring students who suffer from severe anxiety to speak in class. But you can compromise: Try moving some of the discussion online.

It can be difficult to attain the same quality and depth of discussion online as in face-to-face settings, because of the tendency of many students to post no more than "Good point" or "I agree." Nonetheless, an online forum is a place where the in-class discussion can be continued or extended, allowing students with anxiety to contribute. If an online discussion proves fruitful, start the next class session by referencing some of the comments. That way you give reluctant public speakers some recognition for their online insights — and review the previous course material in the process.

SAM KALDA FOR THE CHRONICLE

How to Keep a Discussion on Track

So you've set the stage for a good discussion. Your students know that you expect participation, and they are ready (if not necessarily eager) to dive in. Now you face a different challenge: keeping the conversation focused, fair, and inviting for all students.

Some of the following suggestions are steps you can take during class. Others are things that you — and your students — can do ahead of time to encourage focused discussion and broad participation.

Slow down the dominant talkers. Classmates tend to have a love/hate relationship with the dominant talkers.

- On the one hand, the talkers are appreciated. When a question is posed, students know they can count on the dominant talkers to respond, which greatly decreases the likelihood that the professor will "cold call" those who are unwilling or unprepared to participate. In such moments, the nontalkers will sometimes physically adjust their position to look at one or more of the dominant talkers, as if hoping they will speak on behalf of the class.
- On the other hand, students can be annoyed by those who talk too much or share too much tangential, personal information.

Dominant talkers are typically more extroverted and willing to process material aloud. They may wander around a topic, figuring out what they think as they speak. More-introverted students need to gather their thoughts *before* sharing them in class. If suddenly called upon to speak without having had the opportunity to process their thoughts, introverts may perceive the instructor as engaging in hostile behavior.

How can you slow down the dominant talkers and allow time for other students to process? The aforementioned think/pair/share technique is an obvious strategy, but there are many others. Some are as simple as saying, "Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken up yet" or "I have heard a lot from the front of the room — now I want to know what those of you in the back are thinking." That signals to the dominant talkers that it is time to allow others to join in.

- **Control the rhythm.** One way to ensure broad participation — not just reining in the dominant talkers but opening up the floor — is to limit who can speak, and how often. How you do that can be fun, not just restrictive. For example, try using:
- **Poker chips:** As students enter the classroom, they each pick up three poker chips. When they speak, they place a poker chip in a basket. Once they've used up their three chips, they may no longer contribute. To make sure everyone participates, require all students to use up their chips by the end of class.
- **Nerf balls:** Use an object like a Nerf ball to give students greater ownership of the discussion. Only the person holding the Nerf ball is allowed to speak. When the speaker finishes, he or she selects who goes next by tossing the ball to a classmate.

Quizzes are good for more than just the syllabus. Many professors use quizzes of one sort or another to make sure students do the reading. It's an effective technique. Your challenge is to structure quizzes in a way that does not feel punitive yet results in students' being well-prepared to discuss the material. Here are some ways to do that:

- When students arrive, provide a question on the board or screen tied to the assigned reading. Give them five or so minutes to write a response and then randomly call on students to share their thoughts. They can simply read their response or elaborate on it. Their comments become a starting point focusing the discussion on important ideas from the reading.
- A variation on that approach: Give students the question ahead of time and ask them to bring a response (from a paragraph to a page) to class and be ready to share it. Just-in-time quizzes are another strategy. Ask students to complete a brief online quiz within the hour or two before class starts. The quiz can be a combination of multiple-choice and short-answer questions on key ideas or controversies from the reading. Grade the quizzes before class, and select some sample responses to share (without naming names) as a starting point for discussion. Depending upon the objectives of that day's session and the nature of the material, you may want to provide examples of well-written responses. Then ask: *What makes this a particularly strong response?* Or provide examples of responses that illustrate common misunderstandings or errors in logic, while keeping the student anonymous. Open the discussion by saying, *Here's a good attempt that ended up going astray. Where and how did this response get off track? How could the writer have made it better?*

Together, these approaches help students learn to identify the differences between a well-argued response that uses evidence from the reading versus one that is merely unsubstantiated opinion.

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Use discussion questions to focus their reading (and the resulting debate). Hand out the questions in advance of a reading assignment. This is particularly helpful when the texts are difficult. As the students read, the questions help them identify key points, concepts, or controversies. Then during class, the questions become the basis for the day's discussion.

Try to frame your reading questions in ways that might result in a more engaging discussion. For example:

- **Make them relevant to students' lives.** Ask students to apply concepts from the reading to their lived experiences or to situations they may encounter in their careers.
- **Make the questions analytical in scope.** Ask students to summarize or critique an author's argument, thereby pushing them beyond mere reading and into higher-order thinking skills.
- **Make sure they don't miss the big points.** Students often find it difficult, especially in their first year of college, to discern when a key idea or an important nuance is being communicated during a class discussion. Especially in the midst of a vigorous debate, students easily lose track of what they're

supposed to take away from the discussion. Among the ways to counter that tendency:

- Sometimes the simplest strategies work best — like asking a student to repeat a key idea while you write it on the board.
- When a student makes a crucial point, overtly emphasize it by saying, "That's it. Did everyone hear what Omar just said?"
- Summarize the discussion of one topic before moving on to the next. That can also help keep the discourse on track. "OK, we've had several key insights. LaShon noted that social-conflict theory pushes us to ask 'who benefits from our health-care system.' Katie countered that structural functionalism points out the need for multiple institutions to work collaboratively. Vince took us to the microlevel by focusing on provider-patient interactions in the healthcare system. Now we're ready to move on."

Your goal here is to help make the learning more obvious. But in the process, you can also keep the discussion focused.

Shine a light on the "muddiest" point. A tried-and-true assessment technique, known as the "Muddiest Point," can help you clarify challenging concepts in a discussion and, at the same time, give reluctant talkers an additional opportunity to participate.

Here's how it works: In the last few minutes of class, students write a brief summary of the topic or idea that they felt was the least clear in that day's discussion. It is often helpful to directly ask them to summarize either the "muddiest" or the "most important" point. Collect their comments as they leave. Then, before the next class, review the responses to see which topics you should revisit.

The exercise gives you insights into any gaps between what you tried to emphasize and what students perceived as the most significant material discussed in class. For example, if students focus on a colorful illustration but fail to recognize the concept being illustrated, you can recap the key points at the start of the next class meeting.

Encourage comments from students of varied backgrounds. The research on women's participation in class discussion extends back to the 1970s, when the "chilly-climate thesis" first argued that a hostile environment meant that female students were called on less frequently and volunteered less often in class than their male counterparts. However, much of the evidence for that thesis was anecdotal. In recent decades, systematic research has found no consistent patterns regarding the relative participation rates of men and women in class discussion.

There's been far less research on discussion participation by students of color. Most of the literature that does exist also leans toward the anecdotal, making generalizations difficult.

Nonetheless, in terms of what you should — and shouldn't — do to encourage female and minority students to speak up in class, there are some guidelines:

- It should probably go without saying, but: Do not call on a woman or a person of color and ask that person to speak for all those in their particular demographic. It's an unfair and impossible burden, and one person hardly represents an entire gender, race, or ethnicity. Of course, students from underrepresented backgrounds on your campus may have life experiences that are illuminating and different from the majority. Invite sharing — just don't treat a student as an authority who speaks for an entire class of people.
- Recognize that students from underrepresented groups may suffer from "impostor syndrome," doubting their own abilities and their deserving to be on campus. It might help to mention their previous comments, submitted papers, or online discussion posts when inviting their participation.
- Students who are the first in their families to go to college may also suffer from impostor syndrome. They may not have had spring-break trips to warm climates, parents with extensive professional networks, or childhood visits to museums. If you assume that all of your students shared such experiences, you are implicitly and unintentionally communicating that the ones who didn't don't belong. This attitude can show up in something as seemingly innocuous as the illustrations you use when introducing concepts. For example, a reference to certain kinds of ethnic food may leave students from rural or working-class backgrounds lost because they have never eaten such foods.
- While providing discussion questions ahead of time will benefit all students, it can be particularly helpful to students whose first language is not English.
- Ensure that at least some of the class discussion occurs in pairs or in small groups — it's less stressful than commenting before the entire class.

Sam Kalda for the Chronicle

Common Challenges: Participation Grades, Bad Answers, Divisive Topics

Should You Grade Class Discussion?

Clearly, you can grade the quizzes or the short-essay responses that are part of your class discussion. But what about grading students' participation in the actual dialogue itself? Knowing they will be graded certainly motivates students to speak up in class. But there are two schools of thought as to whether it's a good idea:

- **The argument against:** Some students are painfully shy. To require them to speak in class is unkind and unreasonable, because of the severe anxiety that the expectation provokes. What's more, it's inherently unfair to judge the quality of students' fleeting comments in the midst of a class discussion. The task becomes impossible as the number of students increases. The result is that extroverted students are rewarded for being extroverted rather than for the quality of their remarks, while introverted students are devalued.
- **The argument in favor:** We ask students to do a variety of things that may make them uncomfortable. Some students find multiple-choice or essay exams stressful, yet we give those tests anyway. Other students struggle to be articulate in writing, but we still assign papers. We require students to read challenging and difficult texts even when they find the material discomfiting. Math-phobic students must complete quantitative-reasoning courses. Why? Because we as teachers believe that this will lead to greater learning. Sometimes being uncomfortable is necessary to facilitate learning. Why should we treat class discussion any differently?

The one thing we can agree on, whatever our position, is that grading class discussion is a highly subjective endeavor. It's hard enough to track who speaks and how often, let alone assess the quality of the contributions.

But there is an alternative: Have students assess their own class participation. At the end of class, ask students to score their participation based on a rubric you've created. Alternatively, three or four times a semester, ask students to write a narrative assessment of their participation in class discussions, guided by a rubric. In the latter case, you can evaluate the narrative, indicate whether or not you agree, and offer advice on how to improve.

Self-assessment has two key advantages here. First, it relieves you of the burden of simultaneously managing a class discussion while attempting to note the frequency and quality of individual comments. Second, it pushes students to evaluate their contributions to their own learning.

What If a Student's Remark Is Wrong or Misguided?

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There was a time when some professors — at least in the movies — would publicly humiliate a student for an incorrect or ill-advised remark. Few academics would regard that as good teaching today (if many ever did). One harsh or unsympathetic response to an incorrect answer can shut down the willingness of the entire class to engage in discussion for the duration of the semester.

That said, when you structure a course to include regular class discussions, you open the way for students to give false or misleading responses. You don't want those to be the ones other students remember from the discussion. Here are some useful strategies for dealing with such situations, without alienating your students.

Affirm, then correct. Some critics will see it as "hand-holding," but if you want students to keep participating, it's important to first affirm their contributions. You don't want to discourage those who were anxious about responding yet took a risk and were wrong in what they said. So look for something you can reinforce in the student's remark: "You got the first step correct but then ran into a common misunderstanding," or, "OK, that's one strategy. But it's not as effective as others. Who can help us identify another approach?"

But what if a student makes an ill-conceived argument and neglects to offer any evidence? Here, too, you can affirm the articulation of the position. Then invite the student or the rest of the class to critique it: "That summarizes the liberal [or conservative] viewpoint well, but let's play devil's advocate for a minute. If you wanted to rebut the position Josh just articulated, what evidence would you present?" That allows classmates to challenge Josh's unsupported argument without appearing to attack Josh. You may even want to pose that question to the speaker himself: "Josh, assume for a moment that you believed the opposite. How would you challenge the argument you just made?" You're not asking Josh to disagree with himself — you're asking him to consider and articulate the counterarguments. This approach helps all of your students question their own assumptions.

Be respectful when they've lost the plot. On other occasions, a student's comment isn't necessarily wrong — it just seems out of left field. In these situations, I respectfully ask the student to make the connection between their comment and the topic we are discussing: "You've lost me. Sorry, I am slow on the pickup today. Explain the connection for me." This shifts any "blame" away from the student and onto you as the instructor. Often there is a connection between the topic and the student's comment, only it is two or three unarticulated steps removed.

Another approach is to ask classmates to assist the student who is on the wrong track: "We're not on that subject yet. It is easy to get off track here. Who can help us out and redirect us to finish what we were discussing?"

How to Handle News Events and Controversial Topics in Class

When should an instructor invite students to discuss recent news events, particularly controversial ones?

The college classroom should be a space where contemporary and controversial topics are open for debate. We should be modeling how to engage in civil dialogue, especially when people hold strongly differing views. So the fact that a topic is controversial is not a reason to exclude it from classroom discussion — assuming it's relevant to your course content. In fact, such topics may be an ideal means of teaching students how to engage in reasoned dialogue, critique, and critical thinking.

Yet that sort of class discussion can go quite wrong if you're not careful. As Noliwe M. Rooks wrote in a Chronicle essay on this topic: "Revising a syllabus to include popular culture and current events is not always in the service of the course or in the best interest of students. Not all current events are easily incorporated into every classroom, and it's all too easy for a professor inexperienced in handling sensitive topics to do more harm than good."

Here are some guidelines to help you ensure that when you do bring current events into your class discussion, the dialogue turns productive rather than ugly:

When to raise controversial issues. Relevance is key. Discussion of the removal of Confederate statues from public places fits well in U.S.-history courses, for example. It's much harder to make the argument that such discussion belongs in an organic-chemistry course. Likewise, discussion of the merits and drawbacks of the Electoral College are an obvious fit for political-science or sociology courses, but it's a stretch to see how that could be relevant in business accounting.

The college classroom should be a space where contemporary and controversial topics are open for debate.

However, there are cases in which current events affect a particular campus to such a degree that students want to talk about it in class, whether or not the topic relates. If, for instance, your college faces a debate about changing the name of a building because the person for whom it was named turned outn to have been an avowed racist, the consequent tensions can affect classrooms across the curriculum. In such situations, faculty members may see a need to provide students with a forum to discuss the issue and the related tensions even if the topic is unrelated to the course.

In such circumstances, you need to be careful not to abuse your position of power in the classroom. It isn't a platform to impose your view and ban all others. If you decide to take a political or moral stance, you must be clear that agreement or disagreement with that stance will not affect a student's grade.

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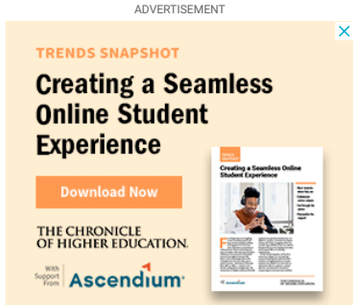

Should you stake out a position? There are differing schools of thought:

- One view is that faculty members should not only be open and honest about their political positions but also be advocates for social justice, offering evidence and a rationale. Inevitably, the argument goes, the classroom cannot be value-free. However, because a majority of college faculty members lean left politically, conservative students may feel that their views are unwelcome and may even perceive faculty members as hostile.
- Another approach is to not reveal your personal position on any issue. In this view, it is better to ask students to articulate the pro-and-con arguments while you serve as moderator of the discussion: *Why should the name of the building*

be changed? What are the arguments in favor? What is the counterargument? What values underlie each position? How is the issue viewed by people in differing social locations (e.g., race, gender, social class, geography)? Can we begin to understand how our identities and backgrounds cause us to weigh some values more heavily than others in a given context?

Decide for yourself which is a better fit — both with your institution's policies and with your teaching persona and pedagogy.

Be clear about the ground rules. Think back to my suggestion on holding a discussion about class discussion. Laying out the ground rules can be helpful. They give you a means to ensure that the discussion remains civil and is driven by reasoned argument and evidence rather than degenerating into name-calling or character assassination.

As the instructor, you can model kind-but-committed disagreement and show how to challenge someone's misinformation or poor logic. Depersonalizing the discussion — moving from a debate between Monica's and Manuel's personal opinions to a critique of positions on the issue, weighing the evidence for and against, and considering the implications (intended and unintended) of various stances — can help keep the class discussion civil.

Ground rules are also helpful when a student — intentionally or unintentionally — makes a racist, sexist, or homophobic comment. Remind the class and the commenter of your ground rules, which prohibit attacks on individuals or unfair generalizations about categories of people. This is, of course, easier to manage when students don't recognize how a comment would be perceived as offensive. Things get more complicated when the student is intentionally, perhaps even proudly, sexist, racist, or homophobic. It might help if you explain the difference between secondhand anecdotes and systematic research. But you may have to rely on the agreed-upon ground rules precluding such comments in the classroom. Then change the subject.

Ask students to take sides. Yet another approach is to ask your class to "take sides" on an issue. Divide the students into small groups who hold similar views on the topic. Have them develop a list of arguments in support of their position and report back to the class. Then have the groups take the opposite position: *Imagine you are an advocate for the other view. How would you challenge your initial position? Where are the weaknesses in your argument?* They then report back again.

That way you are encouraging students both to sharpen their own stance and to see issues from another viewpoint. The group tactic can help soften some strident views.

Resources

Effective class discussions rarely occur by chance. They happen because (a) you've structured your course to ensure that they happen; and (b) you've established from Day 1 that students will be expected to take part in discussions. The benefit of active participation for students is that they will learn more and develop the thinking skills that a higher education is supposed to facilitate.

Here's a list of additional resources to help you improve your own discussions.

Books

- Elizabeth F. Barkley: *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*
- Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill: *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*
- Jay R. Howard: *Discussion in the College Classroom: Getting Your Students Engaged and Participating in Person and Online*
- Multiple authors: *Just-In-Time-Teaching: Blending Active Learning With Web Technology*

Journal Articles

You might have to hunt down the first one in print, but the second is online. Both are worth reading:

- "The College Classroom: Some Observations on the Meaning of Student Participation," published in *Sociology and Social Research* in 1976, written by D. A. Karp and W. C. Yoels
- "Student Participation in the College Classroom: An Extended Multidisciplinary Literature Review," published in *Communication Education* in 2010 and written by Kelly A. Rocca

Advice and Opinion Columns

- A 2018 advice column from *The Chronicle*: "The 'Holy Grail' of Class Discussion"

- A 2015 essay from *The Chronicle*: "How to Build a Better Class Discussion"
- A 2018 report from Faculty Focus: "An Approach for Helping Quiet Students Find Their Voices"
- A 2019 article from Faculty Focus: "'Everybody With Me?' and Other Not-so-Useful Questions"
- A 2016 advice column from *The Chronicle*: "The Beauty of the Virtual Discussion Section"
- A 2018 report from *The Chronicle*: "Running Class Discussions on Divisive Topics Is Tricky. Here's One Promising Approach"
- A 2014 advice column from *The Chronicle*: "Knowing When to Teach Current Events"
- A 2017 essay from *The Chronicle*: "Don't Ignore Your Republican Students"
- A 2018 blog post from the Association of College and University Educators: "How to Ensure Success in Discussions on Controversial Topics: Structure"
- Advice from the University of Michigan's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching: "Guidelines for Discussing Incidents of Hate, Bias, and Discrimination"

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

TEACHING & LEARNING | INNOVATION & TRANSFORMATION

Jay Howard

Jay Howard is a professor of sociology and dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Butler University. His most recent book is *Discussion In the College Classroom: Getting Your Students Engaged and Participating in Person and Online* (Wiley, 2015). You can reach him by email at jrhoward@butler.edu and follow him on Twitter @JayRHoward.

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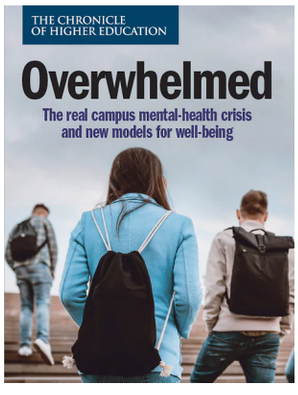

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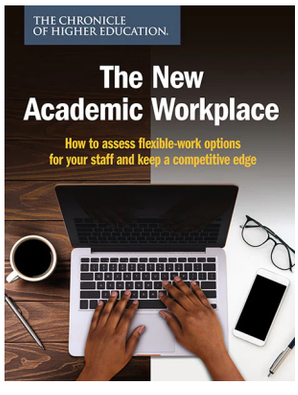
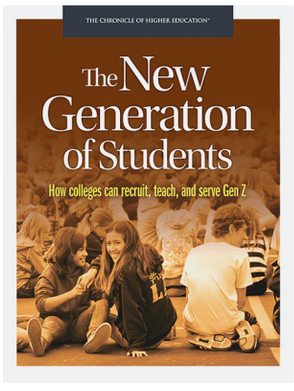
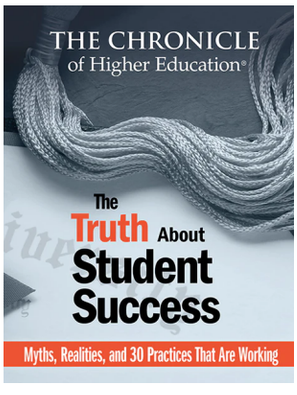


The New Academic Workplace



The New Generation of Students



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