

# 50 Ways to Hold Discussion

Well, maybe we've exaggerated the count, but here are considerations and ways to get more students talking in class — and therefore learning. All of these techniques are meant to counter a status quo presumption that participation in discussion is not necessary for every student. They also give students room to gather thoughts, try out ideas with peers before being put on the spot, or reflect on their behavior during discussion. Many of these techniques are promoted by the prolific Stephen Brookfield in workshops and in his books (see reference on last page). For best results, always use student names, and move them and yourself around the room.

Whatever you do to shake up discussion, *do it early*. Shape expectations about your class on the first day, before default presumptions set in.

- **Discussion Ground Rules Generation** — Early in the semester, ask students to list attributes of the best class discussions they've been a part of, and the worst. Derive class discussion ground rules from that.
- **Discussion about Discussion** — Early in the semester, ask students what they think the purpose of class discussion is, tell them why it's important to you. Could be staged as an interview. Refer to this meta-discussion throughout the semester.
- **Minute Paper** — Before kicking off discussion, give students 60 seconds to write down responses to a question that demands some thought.
- **Think-Pair-Share** — Before kicking off discussion, ask students to think about a question first, discuss it with a partner, and then share with the room.
- **Snowball** — A variation of Think-Pair-Share. After individual reflection, go to pairs. Then after a few minutes pair up pairs. Then after a few minutes pair up quartets. Then octets. Repeat until the whole class is brought together. At each new pairing, students recap the question, insight, or point of difference in the previous discussion.
- **Circle of Voices** — Organize students into small groups of 4-6. Ask a thoughtful question. After a period of silence to gather their thoughts, each student speaks in turn. After a sequence round when everyone speaks, allow groups to break into free-flow conversation.
- **Circular Responses** — A variation on Circle of Voices: during sequential discussion, each person must springboard off of the preceding speaker's thought.
- **Three-Person Rule** — A technique to shut down conversation monopolizers during whole class or larger groups. The rule is that once you have spoken you can't make another contribution to the discussion until at least three other students have spoken — unless a student directly asks you to expand on your comment.
- **Conversational Moves** — List "moves" on paper or cards, distribute to students before a discussion. These could include: *Encourage another person to elaborate, summarize several people's points, respectfully challenge a person's point, invite someone who hasn't*

*yet spoken to jump in*, etc. Students must make their move at an appropriate time in the discussion.

- **Conversational Roles** — List and assign roles for students to play during discussion. These could include: Active Listener (paraphrases other people's points), Devil's Advocate (cuts against emerging consensus), Appreciator (celebrates interesting and useful ideas), Assessor (presses for evidence to back up generalizations or unsupported assertions).
- **Mutual Invitation** — After a student leads with her view on a topic, she specifically invites another student to speak. After the second student speaks, he invites a third. This continues until a set number of students have spoken. Ground rules forbid speaking out of sequence.
- **Appreciative Pause** — At a good point in the conversation, ask for a time-out or pause. The only comments to follow should be ones that acknowledge something that another student has contributed to one's learning. These could include: a clarifying comment, a question that opened up a new approach or way of thinking, a provided example, a comment showcasing connections between contributions, an intriguing new idea, etc.
- **Structured Silence** — After 15 minutes or so of discussion, ask for a 3 minute period of silence, during which students write down answers to questions such as: What was the last important point made in the last 15 minutes? What was the most confusing point? What assumptions that you hold about the topic were confirmed? What assumptions were challenged? Collect these answers, read some out, and thereby stoke / redirect conversation.
- **Catch the Mistake** — Tell students that at one point during discussion you will deliberately make a point you know to be false, or assert something with no evidential basis, or cite a textual reference that doesn't exist. Glory to the student who calls you out, respectfully, thereby modeling critical disagreement.
- **Critical Debate** — Instructor presents a contentious issue that will result in divided opinion. Frame a debate by defining a motion or resolution to be supported or opposed. Ask for volunteers for pro and con groups. After these groups have formed and shored up arguments, ask them to draft arguments against their positions (ie, 'pro' groups will be arguing against the motion, 'con' groups for it). Then conduct the debate, during which a representative from each team presents arguments (arguments for the proposal, then arguments against it). Teams then prepare rebuttal statements and present them. Break out of the debate to talk about students' experience during the debate: who did it feel like to argue for a position you didn't initially support? If there's no time for a post-debate discussion, ask students to write up a reflection on their experience.
- **Hatful of Quotes** — Cut up pieces of source text or other primary materials on slips of paper, ask each student to draw one slip, read it, and comment. Every student has to comment at some point during discussion. If the same quotes are on many slips, so much the better.
- **Chalk Talk** — Instructor writes a series of thought-provoking questions on whiteboards or blackboards around the room. Students wander around silently, writing answers under the

questions. The class is silent, and students only write when they feel like it. Class discussion can then spring from what has been written — and what hasn't.

- **Whiteboard Dialogues** — Small groups discuss a prompt, with one student recording on whiteboards or posters some main claims that arise during discussion or emerging questions. After 15-20 minutes, students wander around the boards, noting patterns and points worth pursuing for themselves. Open into class discussion that synthesizes.
- **Rotating Stations** — A variation of Whiteboard Dialogues. After groups record thoughts at a station, groups rotate to new stations to discuss and write replies to thoughts at that station.
- **Questions Nomination** — After small groups discuss a topic, they list main questions that arose during their discussion on the blackboard. Students in the class are then allowed a few minutes to review questions from other groups, and vote for ones to discuss further as a whole class.
- **Drawing and Collaging** — Break students into groups of 6-8. Ask them to individually draw creative responses to a discussion question. Give groups time to present drawings and rationales to each other, and then prepare a collage or aggregate representation of the group's discussion. Collages are then presented to the whole class, or students wander around and add comments to collages made by other groups.
- **Discussion Inventory** — Rather than breaking up a lively discussion flow to correct or urge reconsiderations, keep a list as discussion proceeds of perspectives that may have been ignored, oppositional views that weren't really engaged. Save time towards the end of class to present this list to students, along with general thoughts about the discussion. Invite final responses.
- **Muddiest Point** — Towards the end of a class, an instructor asks students to hand in anonymous written indications of what they are still unclear about. The instructor's agenda for next class adjusts to address repeated indications of confusion.
- **Critical Incident Survey** — Towards the end of a class, an instructor asks students to hand in anonymous written responses to questions like the following (keeping a copy for themselves): *At what point in class today did you feel most engaged? At what point in class today did you feel most distanced or disengaged? What did you find most surprising in class today? Was there an action that someone took (teacher or student) that you found particularly affirming or helpful? Was there an action that someone took (teacher or student) that you found particularly confusing or unhelpful?* Discussion in the following class springboards from replies to this survey.
- **Discussion Participation Rubric** — Define attributes of exemplary behavior during discussion, such as: *Make a comment that shows interest in another point of view, Encourage another person to elaborate, Make a comment that specifically links two people's contributions, Respectfully challenge a point of view with evidence*, etc. At the end of class, ask students to grade themselves on this rubric. If you notice real divergence from your own assessment of their discussion behavior, talk about this in office hours.

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For more:

Stephen D. Brookfield, and Preskill, Stephen. (2005) *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for University Teachers*. Buckingham, 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Howard, J. (2015). *Discussion in the College Classroom: Getting Your Students Engaged and Participating in Person and Online*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.