

Orchestrating More Effective Classroom Discussions

Many instructors often fail to orchestrate classroom discussions in a way that students' minds are effectively engaged in course learning objectives. They must be orchestrated by a sensitized listener who protects the ideas and dignity of students. The following should be:

- Early in the term - at the first class meeting, if possible - conduct some problem solving in groups of 2 or 3 students. Over time, expand group size, as problems become more complex.
- Establish clear ground rules for discussions that foster validation of all opinions, civility, and participation from all students.
- Through an icebreaker, name tents, and other activities, ensure that students know one other's name and understand something of each other's background.
- Scan the entire group and encourage participation from those at opposite locations within the classroom, fostering a more dynamic and inclusive atmosphere.
- Avoid calling on those whose body language communicates they are clearly not engaged - it will only stifle their later participation. Instead talk with them individually after class, assess, and encourage.
- Be very reluctant to directly criticize an "incorrect" student response, or to provide the "best" answer. Instead clarify in a non-threatening way, and perhaps ask if someone else "sees it another way."
- When discussion bogs down, clarify, summarize, and add additional support information before moving on.
- Close discussions positively by asking if someone would like "the final word" or by connecting the outcome of the discussion to course objectives.

Like so many teaching and learning activities, orchestrating discussions is a balancing act between the costs of time and potential learning benefits. To ensure the greatest reward, always plan effectively with your learning goals foremost in your mind.

SOURCE: <http://www.developfaculty.com/tips.html>