
DISCUSSION METHOD TEACHING

HOW TO MAKE IT WORK

Teachers interested in discussion method teaching are probably convinced that improving their interactive skills in the classroom will improve their teaching. There is a good deal of research, primarily from cognitive psychologists, suggesting that active, experiential learning is the most effective. Beyond that, our common sense as thinking, feeling human beings tells us that finding ways to involve students actively in what they are supposed to be learning is a worthwhile undertaking.

Most faculty in American colleges teach what they were taught in the limited ways they were taught. They value content and theory, and they feel the most efficient way to communicate that is by content-laden, theoretically based lectures. Even when they feel uneasy about students who "aren't getting it," there seems no other way. Attempts at discussions degenerate into directionless bull sessions or meaningless debates in which the facts are all wrong and the logic nonexistent. Ideal-

ly, we'd all love to teach graduate seminars but face a daily reality of mixed classes of many dozens of "average" undergraduates. So we lecture. What's the alternative?

There is a way to energize your classrooms, to excite a much higher percentage of your students, and to add more value to their education. You can get out from behind your lectern and still communicate content and theory—do so better, in fact. But to do this you will have to pay far more attention than you have in the past to teaching *process* questions, to the teaching *methods* you are using.

Most faculty don't know how to begin this activity. What follows here will help you understand discussion based teaching and, perhaps, get you started doing it.

I came to understand the discussion teaching process through use of the case method in my work as a faculty member in a graduate school of business. Much of what I have to say derives from the work of others, decades of work to perfect the case method of teaching. It is my premise that the case study method used successfully in business schools can work for discussion teaching in the arts and sciences, and that teaching methods that make for successful discussion classes can be learned by interested faculty members.

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by William M. Welty

While the "case" may be a Yeats poem or an eighteenth-century census or a Reagan speech, the discussion process is similar and works by the same rules.

I do not, of course, contend that discussion teaching is the only, or even the best, pedagogical method available to college teachers. Successful college teaching demands that the teacher have available a number of techniques to use at the proper time and in the proper situation to maximize learning. One of those techniques—underused because most faculty do not understand its dynamics—is the discussion.

The particular technique described here is really a first step away from the lecture method of teaching. It is a method for leading a discussion in which a good deal of authority and control remains in the hands of the faculty member and in which a good deal of content and theory is still imparted by him or her as discussion leader.

The authority issue is an important one. Many advocates of discussion method teaching argue that for true learning to take place, the faculty member must relinquish authority and control and seek to empower students so that they are able on a continuing basis to learn for themselves. I do not dispute that goal as an ultimate one, but for the new convert, the approach must provide an orderly transition from the lecture method. Once the process becomes second nature, he or she may then be willing to consider methods that relinquish greater authority to students. This authority issue is an important one—keep it in mind as you grapple with the suggestions that follow.

Preparation before Class

When I demonstrate discussion method teaching to colleagues, the question they most often ask is how I prepare for a class. Let's begin, then, by taking a look at the process, keeping in mind that preparation for a discussion class needs to marry process and content—we are looking for ways to communicate, to enliven, to bring home the content; we want to find ways to help students internalize the theory.

• **Read the assigned material**—It goes without saying that the teacher

must be *very* familiar with the reading assigned for discussion. She must be ready for almost any nuance to be discovered, for almost any connection to be made. The more thinking and reading she does about the assigned material, the better prepared she will be for the discussion about it. Most faculty do this as a matter of course, but as you gain experience with the discussion process you will find that assignments that were once familiar to you take on new meanings and new connections with other parts of the world as a whole host of different, and now inquiring, minds grapple with it.

• **Decide important concepts and outline**—Once you are sure you have a good grasp of the assigned material and its many nuances (be especially alert to any relationship, no matter how obscure, to popular music!), decide what important concepts you want to be sure are understood by every student in your class. Ask yourself, "Why did I assign this material?" Important concepts usually have somewhat important subconcepts, and before long we content-theoretical types are several layers deep in important concepts. Such thoughts usually lead to an outline, and soon there emerges a logical pattern that we can hope the discussion will take. Such an outline should make you more comfortable, but be sure the outline reflects in layers or levels what is most important and what is less, for in the heat of a good discussion you will have to discard getting at some of the less important concepts for the sake of making sure the more important ones are really understood.

At this point you should, as well, makes notes about specific facts—important people and their relationships, chronology, sets of figures, any particulars that bear on the matters you feel are important. Nothing destroys the attempt to communicate the necessity of reasoning from the facts more than if the discussion leader can't keep the details straight. It is important to communicate this message to your students early in the discussion process, for the euphoria of the free-wheeling exchange of ideas is sometimes so overwhelming that even the best students forget to deal with the concrete aspects of the material.

• **A question outline**—Once you are sure of your grasp of the facts, prepare a question outline to match your concept outline. It is important at this stage that you carefully think out questions that will promote *discussion*, not answers, about the concepts you want understood. If you are having trouble promoting discussion in your classes now, examine the kinds of questions you are asking. Do they signal that you know the answer and are asking to see if the students do? Such questions are the kind that promote participation from only those students anxious to show they know exactly what the teacher is looking for. The idea of a discussion is to encourage contributions that aren't necessarily the "right" answer, but that can be used to work toward a better understanding of the topic discussed. Most students are programmed to think that there is only one right answer, that the teacher knows it, and that he or she will reward those who know it and punish those who do not. Such thinking spells doom for a discussion class. Serious discussion teachers must work at overcoming this mindset; they must encourage creative and critical thinking, not memorization. Careful, well thought-out questioning is the first step in this process.

Build your question outline at least as many layers deep as your concept outline—one group of very general questions that covers the whole assignment and serves as a macro-outline for the class, then groups of more specific questions about different aspects of the outline that will serve to expose important points. Try to anticipate possible responses to the questions and think through what can be done with them—how they can be used positively—to move the class toward more understanding. Ask smaller questions, action questions, first; work up slowly to more global, thought-provoking questions.

With a general as well as a specific outline of questions to guide your discussion, you must think carefully about the really important questions—beginning, transition, conclusion—and highlight them in your outline. You should know *exactly* what question, word for word, you are going to use at these important times, and perhaps

