

# Facilitating In-Class Discussions

Class discussions require careful planning and facilitation. The format of the discussion and the instructor's ability to facilitate the conversation determine discussion's effectiveness.

## Discussion Formats

There are many formats for discussions. Some formats work better in larger or smaller groups. Consider the objective of your discussion as well as the size of your group before choosing a format. If you are new to facilitating discussions, you may also want to choose a lower-risk format like the think-pair-share before using some of the more intensive formats like the fish bowl. Although the approaches listed here are intended for face-to-face classes, most can be adapted for remote teaching (see *Facilitating Discussions in an Online Classroom* for more information). Brief descriptions of some common discussion formats are listed below.

### Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a method of discussion in which all members of a group contribute ideas. Brainstorming can take a number of formats, including: the group generating ideas/responses to a question or prompt; individually responding to a question or topic and then sharing responses and consolidating them; students anonymously responding to the question and the facilitator collecting and sharing the ideas.

### Queststorming or Quescussion

This process involves brainstorming the questions, rather than trying to come up with immediate answers or solutions. This technique is relatively low risk because there is no need for solutions. It also works for different levels of student preparation, knowledge, and skill level.

### Luck of the Draw

Prior to the discussion, the facilitator puts key concepts or questions into a hat and invites each student to take one at random. Each student has a few minutes to think of a response. The facilitator then asks for volunteers or does a roundtable to hear responses to the key concepts or questions. There may be repeats, which is a great way to reinforce ideas and build on contributions.



**Snowball**

Students each write a question on a scrap piece of paper, crumple the paper and throw their paper ball across the room. Students then pick up someone else's paper, open it and respond to the question. Alternatively, students could write responses to questions on a piece of paper, crumple and throw the responses at the facilitator who then gets "snowballed" with responses.

**Think-Pair-Share**

Invite students to take a moment to "think" about a posed question. Students then "pair" up with the person sitting next to them to discuss their responses. Finally, these pairs "share" their responses with a larger group (either the whole class or a group of 4, 8, 10...)

**Case Studies**

Either in small groups or as a whole class, provide students with a real-world problem or situation (either a text summary or video) and have them discuss responses to the problem or situation.

**Debate**

Discuss a controversial topic by holding a class debate. Either assign teams or allow students to choose a side. Give the sides time to prepare arguments for and against the topic/question and then invite the sides to debate one another.

**Post-it!**

Require students to come to class with a prepared question for the assigned reading/lecture material. Have each student "post" the question by writing the question on a whiteboard/chalkboard or a piece of paper, which can be taped to the board or wall. Then students should respond in writing to a question posted on the board (not their own) before having a large group discussion about the posted questions.

**Expert Panel**

Either designate ahead of time, or nominate in class, a few students to sit on the "expert panel" related to the assigned reading or lecture materials. These students will speak for a few minutes about the topic before answering questions from the "audience" (the rest of the class).

**Guided Reading**

Provide students with a few questions to "guide" them as they read the assigned reading. Ask students to prepare written responses to these questions before you discuss these questions in class.



### **Pass it Forward**

Ask students to write a question on a scrap piece of paper. The participants then pass this piece of paper to the person sitting next to them or in front of them. Once the students have a new piece of paper, they provide a response to the question. After responding, the students pass the question a few more times. The papers are then returned to the original asker who now has two or three responses.

### **Fishbowl**

Like watching fish inside a fishbowl, in the “fishbowl” exercise a small group of students are physically moved to the centre of the classroom where they discuss a question or solve a problem. The students on the outside watch the discussion inside the fishbowl and can either shout out additional ideas and questions or write responses to what the inner group discusses.

## **Facilitating Discussions in an Online Classroom**

Many of the strategies listed above can be modified for synchronous online classes.

- Remind students to mute their mics when they are not speaking
- Use the “raise hand” feature (in Microsoft Teams) or other non-verbal cues for students to indicate that they would like to contribute to a discussion
- Use polling software such as menti.com to gather ideas from the group
- Split students into large classes into smaller breakout rooms (available in Zoom) so students can discuss their responses with another student or small group of students. Groups can then “share” their responses in the whole class chat or on a shared class Google Doc

## **Discussion Facilitation**

The following facilitation techniques can be used when facilitating any discussion.

### **Clarification**

When a student offers a response that is either unclear or incorrect, you can use clarification as a technique to elicit more information about what the student meant or how they arrived at the (incorrect) response. You can ask questions like:

- Could you elaborate on that point?
- Can you clarify what you meant by...?



### Return to Evidence

Sometimes during a discussion, students may stray from the key ideas or objectives for the discussion or may be too influenced by opinion. You can use return to evidence as a way of focusing the discussion. Invite students to reference readings or lectures. Try:

- Which part of the text led you to that view or conclusion?
- How could we relate this idea to what we discussed earlier?
- That's interesting. Let's return to our objective for this discussion, which is...

### Summarizing

You can use summarizing in a discussion to introduce the discussion topic, to focus the conversation, to check understanding of an individual or the group, to give assurance, as a springboard for deeper discussion, or to close the discussion. Try:

- So what I've heard so far is...
- During this discussion we have talked about...

### Reflecting Back

Similar to summarizing, reflecting back checks that you accurately hear, understand and recall an individual's point of view. You can check perceptions by asking questions like:

- What I hear you saying is...
- If what I've heard is correct, you're saying...

### Redirection

If you notice some students are not participating, or some are participating too eagerly, you can use redirection to solicit responses from all participants. Try:

- Can you summarize your idea in one sentence? (dominating student)
- Please give a one-word response to the reading. I'll call on you in turn – you can "pass" if you don't have a word.

### Gatekeeping

Part of your role as the instructor is to monitor who speaks and to widen participation. You can gatekeep by: setting up group norms about participation; scanning the group for non-verbal cues that someone wants to speak; inviting participation through non-verbal cues (like eye-contact and hand motions); seating quiet people across from talkative people or by seating the group in a circle; and, using activity structure to build from small to large groups.

### Listening

Make sure you can hear the student and ask them to repeat if their voice is quiet or you couldn't hear. Attend to what the student says and avoid thinking about how you might respond. Be sure that you also avoid selective listening, when you listen only to particular students or only to what you want to hear. Attempt to remember what you heard so that you can summarize or redirect.



### Information Relating

You can use discussions to encourage students to relate new information or ideas to something they already know. Invite students to generate these connections themselves by asking questions like:

- How might this theory apply outside of [this specific context/group]?
- What is the relationship between the idea and what we discussed last time?

### Note-Taking

Discussions have a spontaneous aspect, so the content is not usually linear. As a result, students may become confused or unclear about the key points or takeaways. An important facilitation technique is to unscramble the ideas and issues. You can use note-taking to monitor and summarize the discussion. Try:

- What are the issues or questions being discussed?
- How are these issues/ideas connected?

### Responding to Feelings

Feelings can impact the tone and success of a discussion. Part of your role is to monitor the emotions of a group and respond as appropriate. Acknowledge feelings and discuss feelings, if appropriate. Encourage students to use phrases that start with “I” when giving opinions and when you respond to feelings. Try:

- I noticed you were quiet in today’s discussion.
- When we discuss morality in this text, I feel upset because I do not agree with the position in the article.

### Giving Feedback

If you hold regular discussions in your class, make sure to provide students with feedback on their participation. How might they improve? What are their strengths in the discussion? Similarly, invite your students to provide you feedback with your discussion facilitation. Try a one-minute paper by asking your students to tell you the most effective and least effective part of how you facilitate discussions.

### Further Reading

Bligh, D. (1999). *What’s the Point in Discussion?* Exeter: Intellect.

