

ENHANCING CLASS DISCUSSION

Ever since Socrates interrogated the slave boy, philosophy teachers have been trying to get young people to participate in class discussions. Discussions have strengths and weakness, often opposite to lectures (**Cashin**).

- Advantages: discussions support active learning, give instructors feedback on student learning, and can support higher-order thinking.
- Disadvantages: discussions can be uncomfortable for students, time consuming, and difficult to control or keep on topic.

Students say that they like class discussion, but often it is hard to get them to engage. TΦ101 believes that often times the problem is that students might like to participate but that there are obstacles preventing them from doing so (for example, they are shy, or they haven't read the assignment). Instructors need to analyze those obstacles and overcome them.

| Obstacle to participation | Strategy |
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| Students not interested in material. | -- Choose material that engages students. -- Maintain sensible read/discuss ratio. Don't assign vast amounts of material that is never discussed in class. |
| Didn't do assignment. | -- Set reasonable goals, better to assign fewer pages that they actually read. -- Maintain accountability. Develop some way (such as quizzes or reaction papers) to make students accountable for doing reading. |
| Didn't understand assignment, and didn't really understand why we asked them to do it. | -- Develop preparation materials, with study questions, and specific guides for what students should be looking for. |
| Afraid of being "put down" by teacher. | -- For better or worse, these students have come up through the self-esteem movement. Treat comments respectfully. |
| Fear of other students. Students are scared of us, but terrified of each other. This fear kicks in most when a teacher addresses a question to the whole class, expecting a student to volunteer an answer. -- If the question is easy, the fear is that other students will think the student who answers is a "suck up." -- If the question is difficult and the student gets it wrong, the fear is that other students will think the answerer is a dumb suck up. | A suggestion. "Don't ask a question if you already know the answer." If you know what you want, why don't you say it? Instead, favor questions that have many answers that you don't already know: What does this mean to you? How would you apply this? What is an example of this? How would you compare this to another idea you have heard? |
| Deer in the headlight. "By the time I think of something to say, the discussion has moved on, so I prefer to just listen." | -- Use silence. Allow time for students to think before letting them talk. Don't call on the first person who raises a hand, say, "just take a few moments to think about this." -- Ask students to discuss ideas with a person next to them before soliciting discussion, or ask students to jot down some ideas before starting discussion. |
| Afraid of follow up. Students are afraid that if they volunteer | -- Repeat and rephrase student comment. Address follow-up question to the whole class, not to the person who said |

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| something, the teacher will follow up with a probing question, putting the student on the spot for more information. | it. "Mike says that Descartes must be wrong, because he knows he is sitting in this room right now. Can anyone anticipate how Descartes might respond?" |
| Students may be shy and lack confidence. | -- Let students get support from other students. For example, divide students into groups of three with one student in each group as "talker" for the group and others as "consultants." Only talkers can talk, but give frequent opportunity for talkers to consult with consultants. Rotate roles after a few minutes. -- Reward non-talkers when they do talk. Use their comment for your next point, or thank them after class for their contribution. -- Use role play exercises (e.g, recreate the trial of Socrates). Shy students get confidence from playing a role with an assigned part. |
| Students are too sleepy or groggy to participate (esp. early morning or late afternoon classes). | -- Deal with the issue explicitly. Take breaks in the middle of class, where students can stretch. -- Direct questions to individual students, rather than waiting for students to volunteer. -- Allow students to get up and leave the room if they need to take a break for a few minutes. |
| Discussion dominating students can be a problem for the rest of the class, especially if they get the teacher "off track." Other students will clam up because they don't want to cause more chaos and they don't want to make other students angry at them. | --Deal appropriately with discussion dominators. Don't spend a lot of time dealing with non-mainstream questions. Talk to dominators outside of class, and let them know that you value their input but you might sometimes need to ask them to hold back to let other students have a chance. Often discussion dominators are seeking attention, so if you give them some attention outside of class, they maybe more appropriate during class sessions. |

A Note on Women Students:

Some faculty members have observed that women students seem more reluctant to speak in class than their male counterparts. (This is true despite the fact that, at least in TΦ101's experience, the women students are often better prepared than the men). TΦ101 speculates that the reason for this may be that women are more likely to be sensitive to the emotional forces at play for all students in the classroom. This suggests that the path to encouraging women to participate is to focus on the items above that reduce the emotional risks of class discussion, including giving students more time to think before asking them to respond, and asking open ended questions. Psychologist Carol Dweck believes that because boys usually have more behavioral problems than girls, often boys have gotten used to criticism and have become less intimidated by the prospect of displeasing others. Girls, by contrast, more often identify themselves as being "good," and are thus more deterred from taking risks that might make others think less of them. Dweck explains some of this in an interesting [YouTube clip](#). This fear of risk-taking could, of course, explain why girls may be more reluctant to express themselves in class. For more on [Dweck's theories](#), visit our Theory and Reflection page. Also see our discussion of some of the different issues for male vs. female students.

Sources:

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"Teaching Strategies: Discussion," University of Michigan, Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, 19 January 2008 < <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/tsd.php>>.

Cashin, William E., Philip C. McKnight, "Improving Discussions," Idea Paper No. 15, 1986. 7 January 2008. <http://www.idea.ksu.edu/papers/Idea_Paper_15.pdf>.

Johnston, Kevin, "[Creating Effective Discussions: a Bibliography](#)," Michigan State University

Teaching Assistant Programs. This list of sources has a variety of useful material, much of it on-line.

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