

What's the Secret to Creating Classroom Discussions that Work?

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SIMMONS



CREATING ENGAGING DISCUSSIONS

STRATEGIES FOR "AVOIDING CRICKETS"
IN ANY SIZE CLASSROOM AND ONLINE

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Foreword by Stephen D. Brookfield



Getting to Know You

Chat questions:

- 1.) What institution are you with? Please share institution and the city, state
- 2.) What discipline or topic do you teach?

Getting to Know You

1.) Do you teach:

- A. Undergraduates
- B. Graduates
- C. Both

2.) Do you primarily teach:

- A. In-person
- B. Blended courses
- C. Online

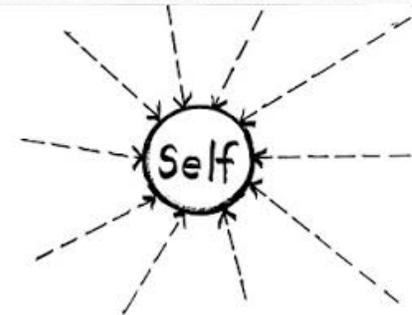
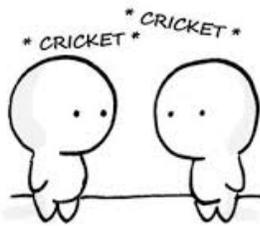
Today's topics

- **Strengths and challenges of discussion**
 - What can go wrong, and why is discussion worth it?
- 12 principles to guide classroom discussion
 - What does research tell us about how discussion works?
- Common discussion pitfalls
 - What are some of the biggest problems? What can you do about it?
- Connecting discussion with learning
 - How can you plan so that students actually *learn* what you wanted them to learn?
- Big takeaways and Q&A

Strengths- Why Discussion is Worth It

- Active engagement with the content, learner-centered
- Fosters complex thought, questioning, communication, interest, and retention
- Can enhance a variety of skills: active listening, analysis and evaluation of arguments and position, clarification of the material, confirmation of one's understanding, critical thinking, deep conceptual understanding, engagement, exposure to new perspectives, integration of ideas, long-term retention of content, increased motivation to learn more, open-mindedness to new ideas and viewpoints, oral communication, problem-solving, transfer to knowledge to new contexts . . .

Challenges – When Discussion Goes Wrong



What's Your Most Frustrating Challenge with Class Discussion? (Poll)

- A. Unresponsive or silent students (“crickets”)
- B. A small number of students who dominate the conversation
- C. Students who make everything about themselves / rely on personal stories
- D. Off-topic or superficial comments
- E. Inattention or multitaskers / students on phones or doing something else
- F. Personal attacks, incivilities, microaggressions

Impact on Students

- Don't learn or are more confused
- Lose faith in discussion generally (waste of time, ineffective)
- Bored, unmotivated, tune out
- Waiting for authoritative answer, dismiss others' ideas and perspectives
- Feel marginalized, resentful, drowned out, angry
- Increases anxiety
- Creates norm of “civil attention” (looks like paying attention, but they aren't)

Impact on Faculty

- A. Feel discouraged, frustrated by lack of learning or participation
- B. Self-blaming, confidence problems
- C. Blaming students for lack of engagement
- D. Dreading future discussions, not enjoying teaching
- E. Worry about impact on class culture, class dynamics more generally
- F. Wonder about the efficacy of the method

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12 Principles to Guide Classroom Discussion

1. Students must be prepared for discussion.*
2. Students must feel safe to express themselves.
3. Students need good reasons to listen actively.
4. Students respond well to a variety of structured discussion formats.
5. Students contribute as equally as the discussion structure requires.*
6. Students respond well to questions with multiple good answers.

12 Principles to Guide Classroom Discussion

7. Students benefit from having time to think before contributing.*
8. Students can benefit from expressing themselves in motion and space.
9. Students can benefit from expressing themselves graphically.
10. Students respond well to novel stimuli, such as outside ideas or research.
11. Students participate according to how effectively a discussion is moderated.
12. Students must see their personal value as separate from the value of their contributions.*

Which of these principles might be the most helpful in addressing your most frustrating discussion challenges, and why? What questions do you have?

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Common Discussion Pitfalls

- A. Students who dominate conversation
- B. Crickets
- C. Narcissists
- D. Perpetually silent students
- E. Students having a lack of opportunity to engage
- F. Inattention and multitaskers
- G. Personal attacks and related incivilities
- H. Sensitive subjects and trigger warnings
- I. Microaggressions
- J. Students with autism spectrum disorder
- K. Asynchronous online discussions
- L. Synchronous online discussions

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Example: Sociology Course on Collective Behavior



Discussion and Course Design

Step 1: Aligning discussion with learning objectives

- Learning objectives – each type can benefit from different approaches to discussion
 - Content to learn
 - Cognitive skills
 - Social or ethical skills
 - Affective or values-based goals
- Be clear about what you want your students to learn (including level on Bloom's)
- **Communicate this to the students!**

Discussion and Course Design

Step 2: Using discussion to support assessment

- Assignment / assessment choices can impact how you design discussion
 - Prepare for assessment (more common)
 - Assess the learning itself
 - Both of these
- Make sure that connection to the LOs and the assignment is actually there—clear and direct alignment
- **Communicate this to the students!**

Discussion and Course Design

Step 3: Improving discussion by setting performance expectations

- What does success on the assignment look like?
 - Criteria that you'll use to evaluate them
 - What does “acceptable” or “excellent” work look like?
- Keep this in mind when designing your discussion
- **Communicate this to the students!**

Discussion and Course Design

Step 4: Using discussion as a teaching methodology

- What learning activities will best prepare students for the assessment?
 - New information or ideas?
 - Gaining experience by observing or doing?
 - Reflecting?
- Discussion can serve any of these purposes
- **Communicate this to the students!**

Discussion and Lesson Planning

- Apply course design method to individual lessons



- Look for alignment
- Have you communicated this to the students?

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Big Takeaways

- Discussion should be part of a larger design – know its purpose as part of the whole
- Structure, structure, structure – plan, plan, plan
- Think about both equitable participation and learning
- Use the 12 principles to guide your work
- Communicate with students!

Photo credits:

Simmons college campus (slide 2): <http://www.simmons.edu/cec/employers/about-simmons/simmons-at-a-glance>

Bored students (slide 3): <https://www.scholarshippoints.com/campuslife/freshman-year-when-you-dont-love-college/>

Phone cartoon (slide 6): <https://me.me/i/do-you-mind-if-i-strap-your-phone-to-my-11848828>

Natural disasters (slides 19 and 25): <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amazing-natural-disasters.jpg>