

Center for Instructional Development and Research

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Information for People who Teach
at the University of Washington

Teaching through Discussion

Class discussion can be a powerful tool for teaching and learning, but good discussions rarely happen by accident. Here are suggestions to help make discussion an interesting, lively, and – most importantly – effective tool for helping your students learn.

GOOD DISCUSSIONS ARE PREPARED IN ADVANCE.

What do you want students to learn from the discussion? Before a discussion takes place,

- Clarify your goals for the discussion.
- Plan guiding questions for the discussion.
- Design activities that will prepare students to discuss. For example,
 - Provide focused study questions before class
 - Post guiding questions prior to the discussion
 - Ask students to respond to the guiding questions, in writing or in small groups, prior to the discussion

GOOD DISCUSSIONS ARE PURPOSEFULLY LED.

What strategies will keep the discussion moving?

Before

- Work with students to set ground rules for participation, courtesy, and inclusiveness.

During

- Ask questions that establish what students understand (comprehension and review) before asking them to do more complex or original thinking (apply or critique).
- Pause 5-10 seconds after a question so that students have time to formulate thoughtful responses.
- Ask follow-up questions that allow students to develop or clarify a response.
- Be aware of the effect of non-verbal cues such as eye contact, gestures, posture, and position in the room.

After

- Provide a record or summary of key points as they have emerged, either orally or on the board.
- Draw connections between the day's discussion and other topics students are learning in the course.

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GOOD DISCUSSIONS ARE ASSESSED.

How will you determine what students learned from the discussion?

- Leave time at the end of class for debriefing. Ask, "What have we learned from today's discussion? Where does this discussion lead us next?"
- Leave time at the end of class for students to write key points from the discussion or list important questions that remain for them.
- Develop continuing assignments or quiz questions based on discussions.

GOOD DISCUSSIONS LEAD TO MORE DISCUSSIONS.

How will the next discussion build on the learning created in this discussion?

- Use students' end-of-class comments or written responses to help you plan the next discussion.
- Emphasize connections between the new topic and earlier discussions.

HOW CAN CIDR HELP?

At CIDR we can help you apply these teaching suggestions in your class, and we can visit or videotape your class to observe your discussions in action and offer feedback.

We can also consult with you on different ways to plan and teach your classes, and provide you with print and videotape resources on discussions and other ways of teaching.

For more information, visit our web site: <http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb>



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CIDR promotes excellence in teaching and learning at the University of Washington through its work with individual faculty and TAs, departments, campus-wide initiatives, and University leaders. CIDR staff are available year-round to collaborate on the design, implementation, and assessment of ways to advance teaching and learning for all students in the diverse UW community. Consultations are confidential and offered at no charge to UW faculty, TAs, and departments.

If you have questions about teaching and learning, or you would like to find out more about working with CIDR, you can call us at 543-6588, send a message to cidr@u.washington.edu, or visit our web site:

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