

How do I generate discussion in my classroom?

Module focus

- encouraging students to contribute to classroom discussions

Module outcomes

- you will become familiar with some strategies to improve classroom discussions

'I noticed in the room opposite me that the class was involved in a lively discussion about something. Why doesn't that happen in my classes? I tell the students that next week we are going to discuss "A and B and C" and they come along and won't say anything. I'm not going to tell them everything – they need to contribute too!'

Take a moment to reflect on this issue.

What challenges does this pose for *your* teaching?

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Possible solutions

1. All students need to be familiar with the topic being discussed. So, begin with something general with which all students can identify.
2. Make a controversial statement (or write it on the whiteboard or overhead transparency) - students are often more willing to offer an opinion rather than having to come up with a 'right' answer.
3. Give the discussion some structure by asking one student to respond to another student's comment, and then asking a third student for an opinion.
4. Be prepared to wait for students to formulate their ideas before responding to a point of discussion - silence is not always an indication of student unwillingness.
5. Acknowledge all contributions no matter how trivial.
6. Distribute two or three different versions of a document, without students realising it. Asking for discussion then arouses interest amongst students who have different versions.

More help

Here are some resources from which you may seek some advice. They are all annotated so as to assist you in making judgements about what might be useful advice for your particular teaching context. By exploring some or all of these resources, you may well be able to generate strategies to suit your particular circumstances.

1. <http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/discussions/index.cfm> - practical advice for leading class discussions
2. <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/firstwords/fw16.html> - this site from Oxford Brookes University provides some really helpful and practical tips for tutors who are leading discussions in the classroom.
3. <http://www.yorku.ca/srowley/tahomepage/partic.htm> - contains some practical tips for generating discussion, easily applied in the classroom.
4. http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/Dawes_DL.html - ten useful tips from Harvard for leading effective discussion.
5. <http://depts.washington.edu/cidweb/Bulletin/Participation.html> - a FAQ approach by the University of Washington, covering three strategies for improving classroom discussion.
6. <http://www.teachtech.ilstu.edu/additional/tips/genDisc.php> - suggests some strategies for generating discussion on readings and class materials (Illinois State University).
7. <http://teaching.concordia.ca/resources/teaching-strategies/questioning-skills/> - a succinct look at several tips for promoting classroom discussion.
8. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1490189?seq=1&Search=yes&term=discussion&term=leader&list=hide&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoAdvancedSearch%3Fq0%3Ddiscussion%2Bleader%26f0%3Dall%26c0%3DAND%26q1%3D%26f1%3Dall%26c1%3DAND%26q2%3D%26f2%3Dall%26c2%3DAND%26q3%3D%26f3%3Dall%26wc%3Don%26ar%3Don%26sd%3D%26ed%3D%26la%3D%26jo%3D%26dc.Education%3DEducation%26Search%3DSearch&item=8&ttl=8305&returnArticleService=showArticle&resultsServiceName=doAdvancedResultsFromArticle> - this short article makes good sense, and offers some advice from an experienced teacher on well designed questions, patience, ingenuity and flexibility on the part of the discussion leader.

Related topics

How do I ask questions effectively in class?