

Expert Insights

Narrator [00:00:00] Great discussions don't just happen. Great discussions are made to happen by instructors who understand that discussions take planning.

Jay R. Howard, PhD, Dean, College of Liberal Arts & Sciences, Butler University [00:00:08] It is a myth that great discussions happen spontaneously. Great discussions happen because the faculty member structured the situation to facilitate that discussion happening. Yes, occasionally there are times, there are events when, you know, serendipity strikes and you have a great discussion without really planning it. But you're much more likely to be successful in having a deep, meaty, thorough discussion that looks at an issue from multiple angles and multiple perspectives if you as the instructor have structured the situation to facilitate that happening.

Narrator [00:00:53] Do your best to create an environment that's conducive to discussion. When possible, arrange desks in a circle or horseshoe. Sit with your students and be part of the group. In large auditoriums, move around the room to make the space feel more personal. From day one, let your students know they'll learn more through active participation, that you expect to hear different voices, and no one can just sit out of a discussion.

Jay R. Howard, PhD [00:01:19] So you can use discussion at the start of the class as a way of getting students engaged, of setting the norm that this class is going to require your participation, that we learn from each other, that learning is a social process, that learning is a, a social construction.

Narrator [00:01:37] Invite your students to suggest norms for respectful, thought-provoking participation, especially when opinions and interpretations differ. Find ways to record which students contribute so you can be sure to engage all students. Alternatively, have students track down their own participation.

Jay R. Howard, PhD [00:01:55] What I do is I pass out little squares of paper. The student writes down their name, gives themselves a grade of one to five using a rubric that I provide to them and they have to reflect at the end of class, did I participate? What was the quality of my participation? Part of my rubric involves, did you read the assignment ahead of time? And sometimes there are topics where a student can contribute to this discussion without having read the assignment, but you should get more credit for having read the assignment and there are insights that you will gain from, from doing that. So I think putting the pressure on the students is a good thing because it forces them to be reflective about their participation in the course. It gives them some, some control. And then they're not mad at me because I assigned them a grade that they think is arbitrary. They're assigning that grade to themselves, which reinforces the idea that learning is a social process, that they have something to contribute to their classmates' learning.

Narrator [00:02:54] At times, some students appear to pay attention without actually engaging.

Jay R. Howard, PhD [00:03:00] The norm in the college classroom is not that students have to pay attention. The norm is they have to create the appearance of paying attention. That's what civil attention is. So they make occasional eye contact. They write things down. They chuckle when you're trying to be funny. You know, they're not holding a newspaper in front of their face. They don't have their phone out and they're texting. You know, they're, they're creating the appearance of paying attention.

Narrator [00:03:25] To combat civil attention, build rapport with students before and after class so that they're more comfortable contributing. Use students' names when possible, cold-call students throughout the class, and positively reinforce active involvement.

Jay R. Howard, PhD [00:03:40] One of the ways in which we faculty members often fool ourselves into thinking we had a great discussion is a problem, a norm called the consolidation of responsibility, and this has been the focus of my research throughout my career. What the consolidation of responsibility says is that regardless of class size, you can have a class of 15, you can have a class of 250. It doesn't matter. There will be roughly five to eight students that will account for almost all of the student verbal participation. That is the default norm in the college classroom. And as a teacher, think about the last class you taught. I'm willing to bet you can name on one hand those five dominant talkers. And sometimes we're kidding ourselves, we think, we had a great discussion in class today. It went so really, went really, really well. I'm so proud. But if we stop and reflect for a moment, I had a great discussion with five students while 25 students observe me have a great discussion with five students. So faculty members have to find ways, how do you get more than those five to eight dominant talkers involved? We want more involved because they're going to learn more when they're talking. They're going to develop their critical skills when they're talking. So how do we get a greater percentage of students talking in the classroom. So there are things like, simple classroom assessment techniques like Think-Pair-Share. You ask a question, you give students 60 seconds to write in response to that question, you pair them up with another student in the classroom. Every student in the classroom has to share with a classmate. So suddenly you have 100% of the students in the class participating in discussion. But it's dyads rather than whole-class discussion. But that's okay. It doesn't have to be whole-class discussion. The key is getting students engaged, and when they're engaged and discussing, they're more likely to be learning.

Narrator [00:05:39] Finally, be clear about what you want the discussion to accomplish, what key ideas you want to explore and emphasize. By considering your objectives for the day, you can design a set of thought-provoking questions that will move students toward your goal. Some of these questions will, by necessity be closed-ended. But be sure to also prepare open-ended questions and follow-up questions that push students to support their ideas with reasons and evidence.

Jay R. Howard, PhD [00:06:06] The problem with a closed-ended yes or no discussion question is yes or no might be all you're going to get.

Narrator [00:06:15] Empower students to be involved in planning class discussion by asking them to submit their own questions that you can review ahead of time and use to spur discussion. A short just-in-time quiz, assigned a few hours before class and administered online, can motivate students to complete their work and prepare for discussion. You can also fold their answers into your discussion plan.

Jay R. Howard, PhD [00:06:39] How are we going to get students to, to actually do the reading? Well, one of the ways of doing that is to tie the questions for discussion to those readings. And I suggest giving students those questions ahead of time, giving them to them before they're supposed to do the reading, because then it helps them figure out, okay, I've got a 35-page chapter that is written in a rather encyclopedic version. I can't master everything that is in these 35 pages of terms and concepts and illustrations and little application boxes. What's important here? To the student it all looks the same. It's all equally important. By utilizing discussion questions that you provide to students, you can help guide their reading. What really matters to you as the faculty member in this chapter? What's the most important stuff that you really want them to master and understand? So if you write discussion questions that are tied to the readings, students are more likely to do the reading. The discussion questions can guide their understanding, so they're more likely to be able to process and understand and make sense of those readings. And if students know, that in class, you're going to ask those questions and you're not going to answer them, they have to answer them, then they are much more likely to come to class having completed the reading and actually thought about it a little bit and, and be prepared to engage in a substantive discussion.

Narrator [00:08:13] In the classroom, when your discussion comes together, it might look deceptively effortless. But you'll know that your great discussion didn't just happen, you made it happen.