

Expert Insights

Narrator [00:00:00] Great facilitators are artists. They know how to get a conversation going, how to illustrate an idea, how to follow a colorful tangent, and how to bring focus back to the subject. Fortunately, there is some science to the art, with techniques that can be developed. Launch, expand, and balance a masterful discussion, empowering your students to learn from each other. Discussion starters help students focus their thoughts and launch the conversation. One approach is to place a handful of quotes or key ideas from the day's reading assignments on the board. Have students select them at random and ask them to comment on what they selected. These comments become the foundation for further discussion.

Jay R. Howard, PhD, Dean, College of Liberal Arts & Sciences, Butler University [00:00:43] I think the advantage of beginning class with discussion is, for starters, you're signaling to students, you've got to be engaged today, I'm not going to do all the talking. You're going to have to contribute to your own learning. You're going to have to contribute to your classmates' learning. And it's also a good way to hold them accountable for doing the reading before class.

Narrator [00:01:06] Once the conversation gets going, it's important to deepen student thinking and increase participation.

Jay R. Howard, PhD [00:01:12] Simply saying, "What do you think?" is similar to saying "Are there any questions?" Right. It is such a, a generic invitation. Most students are happy to refuse that invitation to, to discussion. Instead, you have to give them something that they can hang their hat on. You know, some, some question that they can chew on for a while in order to begin to develop their, their thinking.

Narrator [00:01:40] Common prompts that expand students' thinking include "Why is that?" "Could you say a little more?" and "What led you to that conclusion?" To draw in other students, ask, "Any reactions?" "Who'd like to build on that point?" And to broaden the discussion, ask, "Does anyone have another perspective?" "Is something missing?" or "Are there any other issues to consider?" There are times when some students hesitate to participate. Perhaps they're unprepared or nervous, or they're an introvert. Providing time for these students to prepare their answer, either by writing it down first or by sharing with a partner, can be helpful.

Jay R. Howard, PhD [00:02:21] You've got to give them the opportunity to collect their thoughts, perhaps write it down, perhaps share their thoughts with one other person before you've created a safe enough environment for them to be able to engage in whole-class discussion.

Narrator [00:02:38] At times, some students tend to dominate and may not even realize it.

Jay . Howard, PhD [00:02:42] So the professor will ask a question. Everybody turns and looks at the dominant talker in the classroom or one of the dominant talkers. "Jacob, tell them what we think about this," right. "You're the, it's your job to do that, we're all going to watch you. You do this." So dominant talkers are in some ways everybody's friend and very helpful. But if they're the only ones doing the talking, then the other students are, are less engaged. And they're typically quite willing to do the talking. So instructors need to find ways to say things like, "All right, I've heard a lot from these five, I want to hear from somebody who hasn't spoken up today" or "I've heard a lot from the front half of the room, I want to hear from the back half of the room" or "I've heard a lot from you guys, what do you guys think about this?"

Narrator [00:03:28] Another way to balance the situation in a lighthearted way is to provide students with a real or imagined credit they get drawn down each time they speak. Dominant talkers learn to self-regulate, and you can call on quieter students who still have credits in the bank.

Narrator [00:03:45] At times we, as the instructor, may feel the need to respond to every comment. It provides expert feedback and ensures accurate information. But it can decrease motivation as students realize that they don't have to listen and respond to each other.

Jay R. Howard, PhD [00:04:00] As faculty members who all have expertise in our field, we hopefully know what we're talking about, our tendency is to want to jump in and say, "Well, let me tell you what about or what if," when in reality, the better way to do it is to turn to other students and say, "Jennifer has raised a great question. She said, 'Well, what if this?' What do the rest of you think?"

Narrator [00:04:24] Empower student-to-student learning, take steps to limit your own speaking, maintain eye contact with the speaker until finished, and then look around the room to encourage responses. If students respond to you, redirect them to the original speaker.

Jay R. Howard, PhD [00:04:40] The ideal role for a faculty member in discussion is to be more of a guide, a facilitator, somebody who is helping the discussion flow, keeping it on track, pulling it back occasionally when you run off on a tangent that is unproductive, although also being willing to wander down the path of those tangents when perhaps those tangents are productive and can lead to higher order thinking.

Narrator [00:05:05] By launching into a topic, expanding views, balancing participation, and empowering students to learn from each other, you too can bring together the forms and colors of a great discussion and facilitate a master class.