Managing Effective Class Discussion

What are the challenges?

A class discussion is one of the most direct ways for students to exchange ideas and challenge each other to think more deeply and consider new perspectives. Unfortunately, it can be difficult to run an edifying class discussion where everyone has an opportunity to listen, be heard, and feel comfortable interacting with their classmates. Challenges include:

- Shy students might be comfortable speaking in front of the class.
- Talkative students might dominate the discussion if permitted.
- Cultural diversity can lead to differences in students' expectations for communication.
- A disagreement could escalate into an argument.
- Students might come to class unprepared for the discussion.
- The discussion could veer off topic and lose its value.

Why should I use discussions?

There are several benefits of using class discussions, a few of which are given here. First, discussions give students an opportunity to practice professional communication skills—both speaking and listening—when working with topics related to their discipline. Being able to articulate and defend ideas at the speed of conversation, build mutual understanding, and distinguish between differences in understanding and differences of opinion are important workplace communication skills that must be practiced. Second, discussions have the capacity to break down the learning barriers presented by the teacher/student dichotomy because they move away from the knowledge-transmission model of teaching toward a shared knowledge-building model. Finally, discussions are an excellent method of conducting informal assessment: as students engage in the discussion, their understanding of the discussed concepts and ideas is revealed. Misconceptions shared by many students might surface, and areas of strength might be revealed. That information can then be used to plan future instruction.

How do make class discussions more effective?

- Let students know of upcoming discussions in advance and stress the importance of completing any assigned readings or activities.
- Establish "ground rules" for discussions that clarify expectations for how students will interact (e.g., use respectful language, don't interrupt, no side conversations, etc.).

- Set up the classroom to facilitate discussion. Discussions work best when students can see each other; if everyone is facing the front of the room, natural conversation will not flow.
- Pay attention to the dynamics of the discussion and intervene when needed.

For this…	Try this…	For example
One or two students are dominating the discussion	Use redirections	*"Let's hear from someone we haven't heard from yet today."*
A student says something potentially offensive	Use gentle reminders about being respectful	*"Not everyone that belongs to a group has the same views or experiences, so we should try to not make generalizations about groups of people."*
Two or more students' disagreement escalates	Intervene to diffuse the situation	*"It is good to talk through differences in our viewpoints, but we need to remember that we are all hear to learn and better understand the ways people think about these issues."*
The discussion beings to stray from the topic	Refocus the class on the intended topic	*"This conversation is very interesting, but we need to return to the focus of our discussion."*

- If participation in discussions is to be graded, consider including types of participation other than speaking in the grading system. For example, participation can include:
  - Students' attentiveness during the discussion
  - Submitting written discussion questions at the start of class
  - Taking notes about the discussion to be shared in the Canvas classroom

Additional readings
- Nicol, D. J., & Boyle, J. T. (2003). Peer instruction versus class-wide discussion in large classes: A comparison of two interaction methods in the wired classroom. Studies in higher education, 28(4), 457-473.
- Freguia, S. (2017). Webcasts promote in-class active participation and learning in an engineering elective course. European Journal of Engineering Education, 42(5), 482-492.