

# GET STUDENTS TALKING!

A Teaching Resource from the Walker Center for Teaching and Learning



## CLASS DISCUSSIONS LACKING ENERGY?

Getting students talking is more an art than a science.

UTC Faculty share their tips for making discussions more interactive, engaging, memorable, and just more fun.

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# **I. SET THE STAGE**

# SET THE STAGE

## ESTABLISH DISCUSSIONS FROM THE START

In my course on "The History of the English Language," I cover a lot of contentious material (war, religion, race, gender roles, colonialism...), and many of my students are challenged by the authentic texts from certain periods, because the texts make them uncomfortable. Therefore, I take some time at the start of the semester by discussing how to lead a good discussion.

The first day of classes, I usually do something goofy, like asking the students a thing they like, and have them check their pulse after their reply ("See, it didn't kill you"). Also, I explain why participation will help them in the long run (better grades, professors more willing to accommodate needs...), and that they should join discussions out of sheer pragmatism.

The next class session is an extended conversation about how to lead a discussion: First, we explore the very popular misconception that opinions equal facts and what opinions are. Then, we discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the models of "The Marketplace of Ideas and Restricted Speech." Third, we discuss ways to establish a respectful environment for difficult discussions (how to establish rules of decorum, how to find common ground, how to respectfully disagree) in this time of constant screaming and yelling. Also, I allow all views in my class, as long as they are not polemical.

These two sessions establish conversation as part of the class, and I do not have to introduce the idea of discussions later. So far, taking time at the start of the semester to front-load discussions has proven quite effective.



### Meet the Faculty



**Dominik Heinrici**

**English**

# SET THE STAGE

## NEVER SAYING A WORD

Trying to encourage participation isn't always an easy thing, especially bigger introductory courses. I have a section on my syllabus that says, "Don't like to talk up in class, no problem! Ask me how you can still earn your participation points by never saying a word." When I go over this part in class on the first day, I tell students that they can send me an email/Canvas message on a reflection or comment about what was discussed in class. It is actually pretty useful because when they do message, I have the ability to start a dialogue. It allows me the option to connect with students one-on-one too, which I enjoy.

### Meet the Faculty



**R.J. Groh**

**Political Science  
and Public Service**

## THE ANSWER CANNOT BE WRONG

### Meet the Faculty



**Lynette Carlson**

**Health & Human  
Performance**

In my classroom I give clear expectations that we will have discussions, therefore, speaking and listening are required as participation. I even phrase my course objectives to include "discuss." I feel that communicating is a requirement for many professions, so we accomplish that daily in class. Beyond expectations, I also allow students to talk about what they know, instead of quizzing them. For example, I may ask, "what does this topic make you think about?" Anyone can answer that question and the answer cannot be wrong, because they're talking about their experiences. I find student confidence increases through this process and we have some great discussions!

## **II. TIME TO THINK**

# TIME TO THINK

## BODIES AS WELL AS BRAINS

I discovered a great site — The Big List of Class Discussion Strategies — several years ago when teaching in an urban community college setting with students who were largely immigrants and refugees (who often would disclose that they spoke 3-4 languages). I needed to rethink how we discussed things in class in a way that would give them time to think before I asked them to speak. My favorites — across my composition, literature, and creative writing classes — include the Concentric Circles (Speed Dating) and Snowball discussions. With these modes, one voice cannot dominate the conversation, and the physical movement within the classroom gets their bodies engaged in the discussion as well as their brains.

### Meet the Faculty



**Karen Babine**  
English

## CULTIVATE THE MOOD

### Meet the Faculty



**David Court**  
Art

I use a lot of the same strategies that have already been mentioned, such as giving students time to warm up to discussion with personal reflection on discussion prompts and/or small group conversations, followed by larger group conversation.

I often plan to start a class in this manner to cultivate a mood of more active engagement from the outset.

For a larger class, in particular, I will also often follow up in-class discussion with the same or similar prompt online, to create more space for student responses and reflections. I also encourage students to share responses and ideas about a class with me directly.

# TIME TO THINK

## GRADUAL INCREMENTS

I have found that students often need time to digest material and "get warmed up" before they are ready to speak in front of the entire class. So I break the discussion up into gradual increments:



**First**, I'll write the discussion question on the board and have the students write down their initial thoughts in response to the question.

**Then**, I have them share the thoughts they jotted down with one or two people sitting by them.



**Finally**, I open up the discussion to the whole group.



In this way, students have time to formulate their ideas and try them out on a couple of classmates before they are asked to speak in front of the entire class. I find that this helps them gain confidence to offer up their thoughts in a large group. Also, if students are still being shy, by the time we get to the large group discussion I don't feel as bad just calling on someone because I know that they have something prepared. Plus, I will have overheard what students have been saying in their smaller groups, which can lead me to ask certain students to contribute who I already know have interesting ideas.

### Meet the Faculty



**Lucy Schultz**  
Philosophy

# **III. DISCUSSION STRATEGIES**

# DISCUSSION STRATEGIES

## THE FINAL WORD

In an effort to support understanding for a text read during or prior to class, I enjoy using a discussion protocol called The Final Word. Students are divided into small groups of 3-5. Each participant identifies one of the most significant ideas from the text(s).

The first person or presenter begins by reading what struck him/her most from the text. This person points out where the quote is in the text. In less than 3 minutes, this person describes why that quote struck him/her.

Next, each person in the group responds to that quote and what the presenter said in less than 1 minute. The first person is listening — note taking ONLY. The purpose of the response is to expand on the presenter's thinking about the issues, to provide a different look at the issue, to clarify thinking about the issues, and to question the presenter's assumptions about the issues.

After the entire group has responded, the first person has the "Final Word." In no more than one minute, the presenter responds to what has been said: How have the group's ideas impacted his/her thinking? What is his/her reaction to what was said? This process continues until everyone has had the opportunity to have the "Final Word." The group debriefs at the end.

This structured discussion provides each student an opportunity to have their ideas, understandings, and perspectives enhanced by hearing from others. This activity provides me an opportunity to "listen in" and evaluate student understanding of the assigned text.

### Meet the Faculty



**Julie Legg**

School of Education

# DISCUSSION STRATEGIES

## MAGNETS AND STATORS

I guess in the Engineering and Math fields you would rarely encounter situations where students need to engage in discussions to earn points. Mostly, they would need to answer questions (such as explaining how a machine works) or engage in solving math problems. I like to ask many questions that have short answers, such as " what type of motors has a permanent magnet in its stator?" or "does a magnet have a positive and a negative terminal?" ...etc.

### Meet the Faculty



**Khalid Tantawi**

**Engineering  
Technology and  
Management**

## SOCIOLOGY AT THE MOVIES

If I am being honest, this is something I struggle with greatly. I do have a couple of exercises I use to get the conversation moving forward. The one I use most often is to ask students if they have ever seen a movie or TV show that is like the concept/ theory/idea we are discussing. Surprisingly, it usually works. Students will compare the course material to a show or movie (most of which I have never seen) and it sparks interest from the others.

### Meet the Faculty



**Jared Rosenberger**

**SCJS**

Over the years, I have taken note of the programs they discuss and now I use them in the lecture, asking students to make connections between the video and our material. In my intro to sociology course, many of my lectures now start with a video clip and proceed from there.

# DISCUSSION STRATEGIES

## MAKE THE STUDENTS THE TEACHERS

Since I typically only meet face-to-face with a class once or twice a semester, it can sometimes be hard to get students talking and participating. One of my favorite ways to do this is to make the students the teachers. I do this different ways depending on the class, but I like to use small-group activities to do this.

I've seen the biggest changes and best results from freshman composition classes. In these classes, I would usually review how to find resources and evaluate them, and for years saw students really struggle with the evaluation part.

Instead of telling them what to look for in a source, I adapt an activity from the article "Teaching Web Evaluation: A Cognitive Development Approach" by Candice Benjes-Small and other librarians at Radford University. In my version, I give the students a website and tell them it is unreliable (I usually would use something such as the "Rice Experiment" that claims to prove the power of positive thinking).

In their groups, they have to come up with at least five reasons the website is unreliable and post them on a Padlet for the class. We, then, discuss the things that showed the site was unreliable and use these observations to come up with factors that suggest reliability.

### Meet the Faculty



**Sarah Kantor**  
Library

Students across the board really respond this type of activity, partly because it shows them that they already know some of this stuff. When I taught evaluation using more traditional methods, I would really struggle to draw the students out and get them to participate. By flipping the roles and putting them in charge, I am able to get even quiet students to participate. It also has given me the opportunity to learn everyone's name (something that doesn't always happen), so that if people weren't participating, I can fall back on the tried-and-true method of calling on someone by name.

# DISCUSSION STRATEGIES

## SMALLER GROUPS HELP BUILD CONFIDENCE

I find that breaking into smaller groups helps build confidence and promotes sharing. While many may not want to share in a larger classroom setting, they would be more open to talking when in smaller groups of four—depending on the size of the classroom.



### Meet the Faculty



**Leslie Moro**

**Nursing**

## THERE IS NO STUPID QUESTION

### Meet the Faculty



**Amir Alakaam**

**Health & Human  
Performance**

My goal in every lecture is to make students ask questions. I encourage them frequently to ask and ask and ask again. By asking questions, we actually improve our own and other students' intelligence and knowledge. I pause every 7-10 minutes and ask students if they have question. I also frequently end my PowerPoint slides with this phrase: "There is no stupid question."

# DISCUSSION STRATEGIES

## LET'S TALK ABOUT CURRENT EVENTS!

What I normally do in my classroom is take up a current events topic related to my classroom teaching and start talking about it with students.

### Meet the Faculty



**Nilesh Sah**

**Finance &  
Economics**

Generally, I pick topics with which most students are familiar (or have heard of). That way, students start talking and eventually it allows them to be comfortable with me and their classmates. I typically steer their discussion without taking sides, which further allows for a healthy discussion.

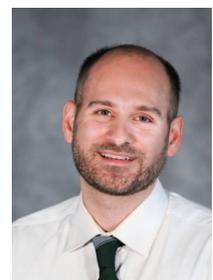
All this enables my students to be comfortable in approaching me and asking me curriculum related or even unrelated questions. Talking with each other also helps students perform better in group activities (which are a part of their grade).

## AVOIDING THE CRICKET CLASSROOM

I never seem to have a problem with fomenting discussion or at least avoiding the dreaded "cricket classroom." Eventually, somebody talks. However, I have a problem getting multiple students speaking on a topic or avoiding the dominant talkers. Although dominant talkers tend to be the most prepared students, they have a tendency to take the lion's share of the discussion time and incentivize laziness or disconnection from other students. Thus, other shy (potentially bright) students are left out or zone out or resent the dominant talker.

I'm sure this is a common challenge for most instructors. There are many ways to deal with it. One way that I handle this issue is by creating peer-share groups before discussing. I put them in pairs and then provide 2-3 minutes to discuss. Then, I ask students to address their peer's thoughts on that discussion. This way students are able to laud their partner if their ideas were clear and help to get the introverts talking.

### Meet the Faculty



**Zach Simoni**  
**Sociology**

# DISCUSSION STRATEGIES

## INVERT THE CLASSROOM DYNAMICS

One of the activities that I've had success with is a jigsaw activity. This is definitely harder to do in a bigger class (though I'm attempting it today in my survey), but the idea is that I split the class into groups such that there are roughly the same number of groups as there are people in each group (so 5 groups of 5 people, say).

Each group is assigned a topic related to the day's reading, and they have 15ish minutes to discuss among themselves and take notes. They are encouraged to become "experts" in that topic — finding all references and analyses related to that topic from the reading.

After 15 minutes, I rearrange the groups, so that (at least) 1 person from each group is put together with 1 person from every other group (this is a little hard to describe in writing, but basically, 1 person each from Groups 1-5 form a new group). The students then have another 15 minutes in which each member of the new group has to present on whatever topic their first group was supposed to become "experts" in.

This is one of my favorite ways to invert the classroom dynamics and not have me lecture too much. It puts the responsibility for learning in the hands of the students and makes them accountable to their classmates (if they're not paying attention during the first half, they find themselves having difficulties in the second half).

Further, because the class is rearranged into relatively small groups and no one student has to speak in front of the entire class, I've found that students are often more willing to participate actively than they would be if everyone was watching them. The format allows them to speak up without quite as much pressure.

### Meet the Faculty



**Edward Brudney**

**History**

# **THE WALKER CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING AT UTC**

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