



Three Questions to Help Facilitate Effective Classroom Discussions



Learning should be interactive and reflective. When classroom silence and intellectual apathy become the norm, learning lacks critical thinking and the role of discourse is no longer learning. In an effort to change the norm, I began implementing a strategy that prompted students to be prepared for leading robust discussions based on the academic content being studied. This strategy has challenged them to look for links and connections between the content and their own experiences.

On day one, I explain that this strategy will help guide the instructional flow followed for each class. This expectation has required each student to read all assignments with intention, while the thinking prompts have led to increased student participation and peer-to-peer interaction. More importantly, this reading accountability has enhanced student preparedness and engagement before and during class. The following template is provided to each student and utilized with every reading assignment:

**Please be prepared to lead and/or co-lead a robust classroom discussion.*

After reading, I did not realize...

1. _____

What were the most important concepts to YOU? Explain why?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What are two possible exam questions?

1. _____
2. _____

After reading, I did not realize...

This question is included because I want students to read with the purpose of acquiring new knowledge. This helps eliminate passive reading without any meaning or engagement. While monitoring their comprehension, it also provides students with an opportunity to link new knowledge with existing knowledge. The ultimate goal is always to get students to think as they read. From prior experience, asking college students to read before class is wishful thinking. If you give them a purpose for reading—ask them to record it and require preparedness—classroom discussions will be more meaningful and interesting. Whenever students are given an opportunity to lead and take ownership, the learning is viewed as necessary and less mandatory.

What were the most important concepts to YOU? Explain why?

Concepts help students focus on what is important within the content that I am teaching. It is unrealistic to believe that students will be able to retain the vast breadth of academic content within one semester. This particular prompt is given because learning with understanding is facilitated with new and existing knowledge that is structured around major concepts. Incorporating classroom discussions has allowed my teaching of the content to be more relevant. This classroom approach is used to help students logically sort information and make crucial connections across ideas for a more cohesive understanding. These structured discussions ultimately move the learning of content from short-term memory to long-term memory.

What are two possible exam questions?

During our classroom discussions, this question requires all heads to be up and all pens to be down. Student alertness becomes deafening and this gives me an opportunity to informally assess their understanding. The exchange of possible exam questions across the classroom is similar to watching a tennis ball going back-and-forth during a tennis match. Sometimes, as the instructor, I have to interject to ensure that everyone gets an opportunity to contribute. I have observed that students really give some great examples of higher-order thinking questions—I contribute that to students focusing more on concepts versus content.

In conclusion, students learn more when they actively participate in their learning rather than passively listen. Vygotsky understood the importance of peer-to-peer dialogue, where knowledge could be shared and misconceptions could be clarified through dialogue (Vygotsky, 1962). Rich and robust classroom discussions have strengthened my students’ ability to lead, critically think, and assess their own learning.

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