

Leading a Discussion

Leading a discussion should not be an isolated task tacked on as the final five minutes of class. Ideally, students should feel that they are participating in a discussion throughout the class, even when the teacher does most or, at times, all of the talking. A well planned lecture should engage students as actively as a discussion, with students considering how their thoughts mesh with what is being said and thinking about their potential contributions. In reality, though, it is often difficult to gauge the depth of student involvement during lectures, so creating opportunities for participation is an important element in a successful class. Otherwise, students may feel their contributions are unneeded or unwanted, so they sit back and watch the teacher perform a solo act.

One way to cultivate a discussion mindset is to schedule some class time specifically for *student discussion* of an issue or a problem, where the teacher takes a hands-off approach, refusing to step in quickly and answer questions or settle disagreements. This is not to deny any role to the teacher, just to assign a different one. The teacher becomes a facilitator and delegator rather than an expert and information conduit. Temporarily adopting these roles forces students into an active learning posture; they cannot simply listen to the expert and occasionally jot down notes. Rather, they are the initiators and sustainers of the conversation.

Student discussion spawns active learning not only during discussion, but also before and after. Students will begin to listen and study more attentively if they know that the material being presented will help them participate in the upcoming class discussion. Having participated, a student has gained a personal stake in the debate and will thus be looking for ways to relate new material back to the discussion. Further, student discussion can provide neutral ground on which sensitive issues can safely be broached and students can hear the viewpoints of others from different backgrounds and perspectives.

Because some TAs do not feel equipped by coursework and research to lead discussions, they either avoid them or, when

(continued on page 2)

Teachable Moments

How do you deal with diversity issues in the classroom? A few classes focus exclusively on these issues, but, more frequently, when discussions about race and gender arise, they do so unexpectedly, tangentially, and, at times, disturbingly. The manner in which these topics are handled can determine the success or failure of a class.

The Teaching Assistant Project and the School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies are sponsoring a program for all graduate students and faculty, entitled "Teachable Moments: The Role of the TA in Cultivating Civility in the Classroom." The program will address issues of diversity in the classroom and offer some strategies to foster broader awareness and tolerance of these issues. An interdisciplinary panel of graduate students, Tara Jethwani (Sociology), Ronee Schreiber (Political Science), Rebecca Etz (Anthropology), and David Gutterman (Political Science), with Christine Lemesianou (SCILS) as moderator, will present perspectives on a variety of diversity issues. An open discussion will follow the

(continued on page 3)

Leading a Discussion

(continued from page 1)

they decide that a student discussion is appropriate in the classroom, play it by ear. Improvisation sometimes yields great results, but disaster is also possible. Sometimes discussions wander aimlessly or fail to get started; sometimes a few students dominate the conversation, pushing their own agenda while everyone else feels left out, bored, or offended.

When discussion fails, students often hold the teacher responsible. They argue that they pay tuition to learn from an expert, not their fellow undergraduates; these students are simply mistaken about how they learn best, namely in active roles, but they are right insofar as it is the teacher's responsibility to see that discussion is fruitful and fair.

Carefully planning a discussion guarantees consistency, but it also requires work, just as much work as preparing a lecture. TAs must think

carefully about the questions the class should discuss and select significant themes and problems with an eye to stimulating conversation. Students can be assigned to write discussion questions, and if possible, these should be selected. The exercise will start the students thinking actively and allow the teacher to pick questions that at least some students find interesting.

The class make-up must be considered when selecting a format for discussion. A section of 25 students requires a very different structure from a class of 75. Smaller classes are ideal, of course, and allow flexibility. For instance, in small classes, students can be assigned to lead discussions on particular topics. In large classes, this is not as feasible, but discussion is still possible. The class can be split into smaller clusters of five to six students to discuss an issue for five minutes before the classwide discussion. Voicing their opinions and trying out their ideas in a small group will not only give students more confidence to speak up in the large group discussion, but will provoke more thought-out replies.

Having carefully selected questions and settled on a format, TAs must focus on their role as a facilitator. Begin by posing questions, then wait for responses until it

Questions and Concerns

Why should I waste valuable class time having students fill out the university teaching evaluations at the end of the semester?

The university requires evaluations. Formal evaluations provide a tangible measure of your class performance and give you useful information for planning future classes. They also provide an opportunity for students to bring up their own concerns without having to confront the instructor. Evaluations are also an important component of a teaching portfolio; prospective employers often expect some performance measures of teaching experience.

Evaluation packets are sent out at mid-semester by the Teaching Excellence Center, and the deadline for administering and returning them is a few weeks before the semester's end. Waiting until the last class period or final exam day not only exceeds the deadline but often skews the results toward a lower evaluation. TEC can clarify questions about the evaluations or the wording of questions if you are unsure. Space is provided to add questions as well. Results are sent to department chairs. Although it may take a while to get evaluations back from TEC, they are important tools in improving teaching and research skills and should not be ignored.

TapTalk is a monthly newsletter produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School-New Brunswick.

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TapTalk

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(continued on page 4)

Teachable Moments

(continued from page 1)

panel presentations, and a buffet dinner will be served afterwards.

The program will be held on Wednesday, April 16, starting at 4:30 p.m. in the Graduate Student Lounge at the Rutgers Student Center on the College Avenue Campus. Funding has been provided by the University's Multicultural Blueprint Special Grants Program. Please register by April 11th. To register, fill out the registration form that you received in your mailbox and return it to TAP, call (908-932-7034), or respond by e-mail to lschulze@rci.rutgers.edu.

CLARIFICATION Students with Disabilities

In the March *TapTalk*, it was suggested that teachers could expect students with disabilities to provide documentation of their disability. *This documentation, however, must be presented to and evaluated by a campus coordinator only.* Students requesting special accommodations because of a disability should provide their teacher with the name of their campus coordinator, who will possess the appropriate documentation and have the ability to interpret it correctly. The campus coordinator is the person who facilitates accommodations and to whom questions and concerns should be directed. For more information, call Pat Grove, Learning Resource Center, 932-1660.

NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADUATES

Adult Learners

Adult learners are in many ways ideal students—fully aware of the costs of their education, determined to ensure that their investment is worthwhile. Accordingly, most are highly motivated. They often ask more questions than younger students and seek out the teacher outside of class, wanting clear and abundant feedback on their progress. For the most part, they are responsible, punctual, and disciplined. In short, these are students who care deeply about their education and so hold themselves and their teachers to high standards.

Adult learners often have certain disadvantages as well. Unlike undergraduates, they typically juggle career and family duties while going to school. This requires them to plan their schedules carefully from the beginning of the semester. It also means that they may occasionally miss class for a business trip or to stay at home with an ill child.

Adult learners bring to the classroom a unique brand of diversity. To take advantage of their motivation and experience and avoid conflicts, keep the following principles in mind.

Be Organized. Plan your course syllabus carefully and stick to it. Changing the date

of a test or paper could seriously disrupt their schedules.

Be Flexible. Show understanding if adult students must miss a class or a test for business or family reasons. Require them to make up any missed work, but be aware that going to school may not be their primary occupation.

Be Assertive. Because they are often older than their instructors, and given their demanding approach to their education, adult learners can be intimidating to TAs. Although these students may be older and more experienced, you are the expert in your field. Do not treat them differently from younger students. For instance, if you call younger students by their first names, call adult students by their first names as well.

Be Resourceful. If possible, draw on the wealth of life experiences and diverse backgrounds that adult students bring to the classroom. Have younger and older students work together on projects.

Adult students will not only enrich your classroom but will push you to become a better teacher. Especially in the case of adult students, TAs realize that the teaching experience and the learning experience are often one and the same.

Discussion



(continued from page 2)

becomes unbearably awkward. Many students are unaccustomed to active learning, and might not be comfortable at first. If they realize that you will not let them relax and merely listen, someone will start the dialogue—eventually. Once the discussion begins, work on setting and maintaining the proper tone. The most successful discussions are not free-for-alls, but those that encourage spontaneous thought within a definite structure. Concentrate on spreading speaking time around equally and getting everyone involved. No one should remain wholly passive during a discussion: students


should have a sense of engagement regardless of who is talking, even in large lecture-based classes. Set a positive tone by praising students for insightful contributions and rephrasing their comments in the most charitable way. Redirect the discussion if it becomes stalled or follows an irrelevant tangent.

The benefits of a well-run student discussion should not be underestimated. Students who get involved listen and read more actively. More important, they feel a certain responsibility and control over their own education.

April

- 1  Last day to file a diploma application for a May dated degree
- 2  Career Options in the Social Sciences, Douglass Student Center, Traves Hall, Room A
- 6 Daylight Saving Time Begins at 2:00 a.m.
- 15 Federal income tax returns due.
- 16 "Teachable Moments" 4:30 p.m., Graduate Student Lounge
- 22 Passover
- 27 Eastern Orthodox Easter

May

- 1 Deadline for completion of degree requirements for May dated degree.
- 5 Regular classes end.
- 7 Spring exams begin.
- 14 End of spring term
- 22 231st Commencement 

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