

Practical Suggestions for Leading a Discussion

A good discussion should enable students to actively and collectively engage with the course material and to acquire valuable cognitive and social skills. All too easily, however, discussions can devolve into story-telling sessions, where a series of students relate opinions or experiences that remain unchallenged and unconnected. This can be frustrating, both for the instructor and for the students.

Facilitating a good discussion takes both preparation and skill, but luckily, these skills can be learned. Below are some practical tips for leading a successful discussion.

At the beginning of the semester, it is important to **set the proper tone**, and to establish rapport with the class. Get the students talking and engaged right away. Learn and use their names, and encourage them to get to know each other. Explain the ground rules for participation: students should understand that they can be critical of ideas without being critical of people. Establish and maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Prepare. It should go without saying that you should know the material you are teaching very well. Additionally, you should have specific goals for every class session. Envision the evolution of the discussion ahead of time, and plan for questions that take you where you want to go.

Prepare your students. Students come into your class distracted, and they will need a refresher on the day's reading or homework assignment (or simply a few moments of quiet reflection) before delving in to the topic at hand. These are a few ways you might prepare the class for a fruitful discussion. 1) Start with a small group exercise, or break them into pairs. Have them answer a set of questions, identify and compare their interpretations of the author's main thesis, or generate a set of their own discussion questions. 2) Have them review previously distributed study questions. 3) Ask them to find the two or three most illustrative quotations in the day's text, and be ready to explain their choice. 4) In the first five to ten minutes of class, ask

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Tax Workshop for Graduate Students

Learn timely tax information and where to look for tax savings. This workshop is especially important for graduate students holding fellowships and assistantships.

Tax issues for **United States Citizens and Permanent Residents** will be addressed.

Brian Levine, MBA, CPA

**Monday, February 10th
6:30 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.**

**Graduate Student Lounge
College Avenue Campus**
Refreshments will be provided.

If you have any questions, you may contact Alex Bachmann at
732-932-7747 or
abachman@rci.rutgers.edu.

Reservations are not necessary.

International Students:
The center for International Faculty and Student Services will be offering free access to an online nonresident tax-filing program. Information on this will be posted on the Center's website soon, no later than February 1, 2003.

Leading Discussions...

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the students to write a summary, in their own words, of the author's main argument. Exercises like these serve to warm up the brain for the tasks ahead.

Give the students a sense of order. Before beginning the discussion, write an outline of the day's topic or a set of goals for the discussion on the board. Or, write down the day's guiding or central questions. (At the end of the discussion, come back and see what you've accomplished.)

Ask good questions. This is perhaps the most difficult aspect of leading a discussion. Knowing how to ask the right questions takes time and practice, but many seasoned teachers suggest the following: 1) Ask focused questions, and ask only one question at a time. 2) Ask genuine, open-ended questions with more than one acceptable answer. Avoid questions which can be answered "yes" or "no." 3) Avoid playing "guess what's on my mind." If you ask leading questions, students will feel like you are fishing for the "correct" answer, and will quickly become frus-

trated at being quizzed.

4) Ask facilitating questions that allow students to build upon the work of the previous discussants, effectively taking yourself out of the center of the discussion. "Sarah, do you agree with Robert's conclusion?" "If Robert is correct, what else follows?" It may help to avoid looking steadily at the student who is speaking in order to encourage students to talk to each other. 5) If a discussion is stagnating, try asking specific rather than general questions. "Should universities adopt affirmative action policies?" If it is getting too heated, ask abstract questions. "What factors affect the debate around affirmative action?"


After asking a question, **wait quietly for a response**; don't be afraid of silence, and resist calling on the first person to raise her hand. Watch for non-verbal cues that a student may have something to say, and make space for the quiet and more reluctant students.

Do ask follow-up questions. It is not enough that students merely speak; you should expect thoughtful participation, especially as the semester progresses. To foster critical thinking, ask students to specify, clarify, elaborate, or provide evidence for their statements: "Can you show me a place in the text that supports your interpretation?" "What does your solution assume about human behavior?" Encour-

age them (or their fellow students) to think of counter-arguments. "Can you think of any possible objections to your position?" Finally, if it seems as though students have agreed too quickly, actively challenge the consensus. Students often have much more to say, but are afraid of going against the tide. You might ask, "Are you sure we have examined all the possibilities?" or, "It seems to me there are many more ways to look at this problem."

Do praise students for genuinely good contributions, but be aware that many students will stop thinking about a question once the teacher has indicated that the "correct" response has been given.

Always remember to **summarize at the end of the discussion**; students appreciate a feeling of closure, as well as a sense that something has been accomplished. You can do this yourself—remind the students of where you started and how the discussion progressed, and state any conclusions. Or, assign a student to the task.

Finally, remember that sometimes, for reasons totally beyond your control, a lively and productive discussion just isn't going to happen. Don't take this as a sign that you should resign yourself to lecturing for the rest of your days. It takes time, patience, and persistence to become a good discussion leader—but it is a skill you can acquire. In the end, it will be well worth the effort. 

TapTalk is produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School—New Brunswick.
Editor: Jennifer Einspahr
Letters, submissions, calendar items, and suggestions for articles should be directed to the Editor.

TapTalk
25 Bishop Place
New Brunswick, N.J. 08901
(732) 932-7747
tapweb@rci.rutgers.edu

Critical Thinking Series, Part I: What is Critical Thinking?

“Critical thinking” is a popular catchphrase in higher education. Everyone professes to want to teach it, but rarely do we talk about what it means, why exactly we want more of it from our students, and how we can go about teaching it. This issue marks the beginning of a three-part series on critical thinking. We’ll start at the beginning by defining the central question—What is critical thinking?

Critical thinking can be defined as the ability to: ascertain the difference between reliable and unreliable evidence; identify one’s own assumptions and biases and those of others; make inferences and assumptions carefully; form reasoned opinions while remaining open to other possibilities; and identify arguments and make sound arguments of one’s own. Does this characterize your students’ abilities? It is easy to despair at a lack of these skills. It is much more difficult to recognize the skills that our students do have, and to build on them in a fruitful way.

In teaching critical thinking, then, the first step is to understand that it is not an innate ability, but rather a set of learned cognitive skills. Bloom’s familiar *Taxonomy of Higher Thinking* (1956) is helpful here. He breaks down various types of cognitive activities in this way:

To know something means to

have a fact or bit of information at your disposal. One can “know” something without understanding it or being able to put it into a higher context. For example, we might “know” that Darwin propounded a theory of evolution without really knowing what evolution is.

To comprehend a fact or piece of information is to understand what it means.

We might understand that “evolution” refers to a set of biological processes, etc.

To apply information means to find some practical use for it. To what use can we put Darwin’s theory of evolution? What else does it help us to understand?

To analyze means to break information down into the sum of its parts and to see how those parts work together. Returning to Darwin’s theory, we need to understand mutation, natural selection, and so on, to understand how the theory works together as a whole.

To synthesize means to take the knowledge you have and connect it with other knowledge. How does the theory of evolution relate to other theories?

To evaluate means to be able to judge. Is information good or bad? Sound or unsound? Is evolution a “good” theory? On what grounds?

What we come to see is that learning to think critically is a lot like learning how to do

mathematics. We wouldn’t attempt to teach algebra before arithmetic; in the same way, before we can hope to produce critical thinkers capable of analysis, synthesis, or evaluation, we have to make sure that our students have mastered skills such as fact-gathering, inference, and application.

All of this is to suggest that, while it may seem obvious to us, many students are unaware of the differences between observations, facts, assumptions, opinions, arguments, and so on. Explain these distinctions to your students, and show them how the parts fit together. This is one way to begin to help students move through the stages of critical thinking, ultimately changing their cognitive processes.

In the next issue, we will consider *why* we want to teach our students to be critical thinkers; in part three, we will discuss some specific methods for teaching critical thinking. Look for the March issue of *TAPTalk* to continue the discussion!

Get In Touch!

Tap Office:

<http://>

tapproject.rutgers.edu

Graduate School – NB:

<http://gsnb.rutgers.edu>

TA Helpline: 932-11TA

TA
Helpline
Call
932-11TA
Monday-Friday
between
the hours
of
8:30-4:30

TAP Calendar

Monday, Feb. 10	<i>Tax Workshop for Graduate Students</i> (see cover for details)	6:30-8:30 pm	CAC
Tuesday, Feb. 11	<i>CV/Resume Writing</i>	12:00-1:00 pm	BC*
Wednesday, Feb. 12	<i>Career Options for Graduate Students Using "Personality Type"</i>	4:30-6:30 pm	CAC#
Monday, Mar. 3	<i>CV/Resume Writing</i>	12:00-1:00 pm	BC*
Friday, Mar. 7	<i>Behavioral & Case Interview</i>	3:00-4:00 pm	BC*

*Call 732-445-6127 to register

#Call 732-932-7997 to register

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*Interested in Peer Observation
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Teaching Assistant Project

Office of the Dean
Graduate School-New Brunswick
25 Bishop Place
New Brunswick, N.J. 08901-1181
(732) 932-7747