

Some Creative Techniques for Discussion Teaching – Prepared by Professor David Dunne

Buzz Groups: Students form pairs, or groups of four or five, to discuss issues from a reading assignment. Questions may or may not be assigned by the instructor and the groups can be allowed 5-15 minutes depending on the complexity of the issues.

Poster Tour: Groups of students record their discussion on a flip chart or on the chalkboard. At the end of the allotted time, groups tour all posters in the room.

Rotating Stations: Groups discuss an issue for ten minutes and switch positions, leaving their flip chart behind. The discussion then continues, with each group using the flip chart as a new basis for discussion. As an alternative technique, groups can stay in place and trade one or more members.

Snowballing: This technique involves progressively expanding groups. Students prepare a question alone, then discuss it with a partner, then join another pair to form a group of four, then eight, and so on until the whole class has been brought together.

Cocktail Party: The professor assigns a reading or question, and on class day brings in and serves hors d'oeuvres and non-alcoholic drinks. To create the right atmosphere, the professor serves students from a tray carried around the room. The only expectation of the students is that they find interesting and engaging ways to explore the issue; the class is then brought together for whole-class discussion.

Jigsaw: Students become “experts” by researching a topic, and explain it to other students in class. For a class of 25, about 5 topics would be assigned and each student would choose one to research. In class, students who have chosen the same topic gather to raise questions and explore areas of understanding/ misunderstanding. Now groups are formed that include at least one expert on each topic; students take turns to lead discussion in the groups.

Critical Debate: Students are asked to vote, by a show of hands, on a contentious issue. They are then asked to form a debating team favouring the *opposite* side to the one they voted for. Each team elects a spokesperson and the debate ensues. The debrief focuses on what new ways of thinking were opened up, the strengths and weaknesses of their own and others' positions, etc.

Lineup or “Stand Where You Stand”: A line of masking tape is placed on the floor, with each end of the line representing a position on a contentious issue. Students are asked to stand at the point in the line that represents their opinion. To do this, they need to talk to their neighbour about his/her position and develop reasons for their own. In “stand where you stand”, the professor provides a statement of a position and displays four signs around the room, reading STRONGLY AGREE, AGREE, DISAGREE and STRONGLY DISAGREE. Students first write down their views and then choose a position accordingly.

Dramatizing Discussion: Students are invited to report their discussions of an issue through some sort of theatrical offering. This may take the form of a role play of the “right” and “wrong” way to approach an issue, or may personalize an abstract subject (e.g. “Mr. Debit” and Ms. Credit”).

Drawing Discussion: Students are supplied with flip chart sheets, pens, rulers, scissors and tape. They are asked to provide a visual representation of the important themes in their discussion. They are encouraged to be creative and playful while maintaining an underlying seriousness about the ideas they want to communicate.

E-Mail/Online Discussion: Students are asked to comment on a topic online. (The Rotman portal can be used for this). The professor can assign a topic and students have time to reflect and

read about it before commenting. In one approach, the professor explains that each student is expected to make some sort of online contribution each week. Students may initiate a topic or respond to topics raised by others. As the term proceeds, students are expected to play the role of both initiator and respondent.

Your Assignment:

1. Select a technique and reflect on its benefits, shortcomings (for students and for the professor) and in what circumstances it might be used. Would you use it in your classes? Why or why not? How might the technique be adapted or extended?
2. Work with a partner and share your ideas about the technique you have selected.
3. Join another pair and share your ideas.

Some Further Reading:

Brookfield, Stephen D. and Stephen Preskill (1999), *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*, San Francisco: Josey-Bass.

Finkel, Donald L. (2000), *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut*, Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

McEachie, Wilbert J. (1999), *Teaching Tips*, 10th ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin.