

The Illusion of Good Class Discussions and What to Do About It

facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/illusion-of-good-class-discussions

February 26,
2020



Providing a high-quality education where students have the opportunity to take part in active learning is one of the most important things we can do for our students. Doing so, however, is much more involved than we may think. All of our instructional work functions within a broader teaching and learning ecosystem where intentions interact, for better or worse, with the expectations and assumptions we have for ourselves and our students. Falling into the trap of attempting to engage students in a large class discussion, where random students reluctantly respond or provide additional information, is one of the most common teaching practices applied in the higher education classroom. The problem is, large class discussions can feel like a waste of time as students are unmotivated, unprepared, and therefore unwilling to speak.

This unmotivated behavior where students demonstrate more robotic intellectual habits than the intellectually disciplined behaviors we have come to expect fills university campuses. We regularly observe this roboticism in their ability to read and answer questions when called on, only to return to sleep mode until their name is called again. It's not fully their fault. We share responsibility. We inadvertently allow the same students to dominate class discussions while other students sit passively by. It's the illusion of engagement and we fall victim to it regularly. For example, how often do you hear students

authentically ask a peer a clarifying question? How often have students asked you to elaborate on a statement or concept, to provide an example, to provide a metaphor or visual illustration of an idea or claim made in class? It does not happen often, yet it is essential to students' educational growth. Instead, students are engaged in superficial fact or formula learning rather than a deeply internalized understanding of concepts and practices.

There's hope. We believe a few critical changes to the structure of our classrooms can change the learning experience for all. We also recognize that for many, change is difficult and so we understand that what we are suggesting may come with hesitancy, but we are asking you to change the narrative of the class structure: pass the torch to the students, provide them with opportunities to demonstrate the ability to think critically, and engage in active learning through dialogue and connecting with others in the room. We know that students learn more by talking, listening, evaluating, and analyzing the work of others than by listening to you or two other students talk for the whole class session (Carmichael, 2009, 54-61). For that reason, we have constructed five strategies that we believe can change the class climate and give life back to class discussions.

Five Strategies to Give Life to Class Discussions

1. **Let's start with getting your students engaged in conversations** pertaining to the content on their way to the classroom or before the class begins. Start sending short video clips to your students that spark an interest for the upcoming course topics. Typically, these videos are five minutes or shorter and provide a summary or an engaging message that allows you to place students in small groups right away and get them talking.
2. **Set clear expectations for all of your students.** If we tell students to come to class with questions regarding the reading, for example, it is pretty much like saying, "Do whatever you want." If we want students to develop specific questioning skills, then we have to be clear about what that means. Here are a couple examples.
 - Have students come to class with five questions about the reading: two clarifying questions that the article does not clearly address, two questions that explore connections to related content and/or concepts, principles, axioms, or theories, and one question that explores the implications of the author's reasoning ("If I accept/reject the author's conclusions, what else must I accept/reject?").
 - Have students come prepared with a 3-2-1 activity: Three words that capture the essence of the reading (author's argument), two questions we want to ask the author, and one metaphor, simile, or analogy that expresses the essence of the assigned reading (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison 2011, 86-92). Our expectations mirror the work we have students do; if the work is vague, then our expectations are...well, vague.

3. **Have students engage in regular quick writes and gallery walks** where they can connect what they know and still want to know with the rest of their peers. This will get the class focused on the content for the day and engaged in the process of higher order thinking while also providing immediate feedback for the instructor as to what the current level of understanding is for students (Rodenbaugh 2015, 411-413). Additionally, begin to have students map out important dates and information. We know that students learn best when challenged to engage content in different ways. Constructing visualizations, like concept maps, diagrams, and sketches, are powerful ways for students to create structure, organize information, and illustrate connections (Schwartz, Tsang, & Blair 2016, 277-292).
4. **Interrupt the discussion** and have students spend two minutes writing down what they know now and what they want to know in the future about any dimension of the topic. Have your students map out the information (e.g., timeline) they know. This will allow students to make connections (cause and effect) in small and large groups. From this, students can generate lists of questions and topics that can be explored further and lead to new discussions.
5. **Allow students to begin teaching each other** through shared conversations as you support their learning and fill in missing gaps. Once students realize the objective of the classroom is to learn as a community, where each student has a voice and the ability to think critically, they will begin to self-evaluate and understand the level of group interdependence needed for learning.

Something more than hoping that insight will emerge for students during a class discussion is necessary if we, as educators, want to move toward substantive engagement. We must clarify the type of thinking we wish students to do and design our classrooms to that end. This involves anticipating those bad habits of reading, studying, and questioning (to name a few) that students bring to the classroom, and thinking through how those habits may inform unrealistic expectations and assumptions about what “ought” to happen in the class and what intellectual work actually looks like.

We plan so that we are better prepared to pedagogically pivot when necessary; better prepared to realign actions with expected results. If we fail at this, we run the risk of wasting more time, or worse, perpetuating an illusion that actual intellectual work is being done (Deslauriers, Mccarty, Miller, Callaghan, & Kestin 2019, 19251-9257). Accomplishing this means students will need practice, and we suggest providing students in-class time to re-read specific parts of an article, write questions out prior to a discussion, or complete an assignment after the expectations have been set by the instructor. This will help students understand where the holes are in their own learning and go through the process of comparing, classifying, analyzing, constructing, and developing abstract thinking as they bounce ideas off their peers, which can further strengthen group accountability and a community of learners. As instructors, our job is to attempt to light a fire of interest in our

students, and we cannot do that without providing them consistent interaction opportunities where they can grow as a community of learners through shared dialogue and that magic word of active learning.

David Adams, Ph.D, is an assistant professor of Kinesiology at Humboldt State University (HSU). He teaches classes in physical education teaching and Kinesiology. His research focuses on improving the movement abilities for children with disabilities, as well as improving the learning experience and academic performance of students in higher education.

Enoch Hale, Ph.D., is the director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Humboldt State University. Dr. Hale has 18 years of teaching experience of which 12 of those years are in higher education. His research focuses on faculty development, teaching and learning in higher ed, and embedding critical thinking into curriculum, instruction, and classroom culture.

References:

Carmichael, Jeffrey. "Team-based learning enhances performance in introductory biology." *Journal of College Science Teaching* 38, no. 4 (2009): 54-61.

Deslauriers, Louis, Logan S. Mccarty, Kelly Miller, Kristina Callaghan, and Greg Kestin. "Measuring Actual Learning versus Feeling of Learning in Response to Being Actively Engaged in the Classroom." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. 39 (2019): 19251-9257. doi:10.1073/pnas.1821936116.

Ritchhart, Ron, Mark Church, and Karin Morrison. *Making Thinking Visible: How to Promote Engagement, Understanding, and Independence for All Learners*. Jossey-Bass, 2011.

Rodenbaugh, David W. "Maximize a Team-based Learning Gallery Walk Experience: Herding Cats Is Easier than You Think." *Advances in Physiology Education* 39, no. 4 (2015): 411-13. doi:10.1152/advan.00012.2015.

Schwartz, Daniel L./ Tsang, Jessica M./ Blair, Kristen P. *The Abcs of How We Learn: 26 Scientifically Proven Approaches, How They Work, and When to Use Them*. W W Norton & Co, 2016.