

Summary of the CETL discussion on facilitating class discussion December 4, 2008

In addition to the handout I provided that lists several pointers to think about, we had a very lively, thoughtful discussion where everyone shared ideas, questions, possible solutions, etc. All of us share the same issues with getting students to talk, so here are a few recurring themes that arose (I'm sure I've forgotten a few):

1. One of the main themes was finding ways to get students prepared ahead of time so they have something to say. An example was giving them assignments so they are forced to read and think through the material, but this method has many different approaches. Some provide questions ahead of time that students must be prepared to answer in class (and perhaps submit). Others have students write their own questions and submit to the instructor either before or at the beginning of class. If the instructor has a collection of thoughts from the students, they shuffle through and pick some (with no names) to foster discussion. This also has the added benefit of giving the "chosen student" a morale boost. One caution was to have them type these before submission so they cannot merely scribble something down on paper out in the hallway.
2. Another theme was to develop an atmosphere where discussion is part of the norm, comfortable, non-threatening. You cannot throw students into discussion requirements where they don't feel relaxed to talk. Many ideas for this – review the handout.
3. Should you grade participation? This is difficult as participation really should not be a matter of how many questions they answered in class. Very subjective, and so if you have a participation requirement, clearly define this up front in the syllabus and in class, but again, don't make it a checklist to be completed. Participation can occur in a wide variety of forms – not only just raising a hand in class. Offer a range of activities so that you're more likely to provide something that each different individual can be comfortable doing.
4. Some faculty offer alternatives for students who simply do not feel like they can talk in class, give presentations, etc. Be sensitive to this, and yet you can build confidence over time with carefully designed scenarios where they gradually become comfortable talking with others. This is related to the previous point on participation where you should design a variety of activities that encourage their active engagement, which is the main point anyhow.
5. A question arose about how to deal with the "wrong answer". First, keep in mind that discussion based on right and wrong answers is not appropriate all the time. However, when there clearly is a final conclusion you're looking for and the offered solution is inaccurate, take advantage of the moment and have them step through how they derived at that conclusion. This is an excellent learning opportunity for everyone – it helps identify where the error was made for that student, and it also reinforces correct steps and methods for the entire class. This is easily done without embarrassing the student.
6. How to handle the chatterbox who just cannot shut up. Several solutions, of course always being sensitive so you don't hurt their feelings. Call on others, even if that individual's hand is up. You can even state out loud that you'd like to hear

- from the others, or perhaps get a different point of view, etc. If necessary, you can briefly visit with them outside of class and explain that you'll be calling on a variety of individuals to contribute to the discussion.
7. The shy student – don't force them. This goes to creating an environment that is comfortable and encouraging.
 8. Related to this is the fact that students who don't know each other are far less prone to talk in front of the class. Find ways to break them down into small teams and gradually get to know each other. This is best done in-class, and it can be as simple as think-pair-share where you have them work together in groups of 2 or 3 to discuss something, then share this with a larger group or the entire class. Lots of ways to foster this atmosphere.
 9. Your personality plays a major part in how students respond in class. A good idea is to videorecord a class session or two and then watch yourself (quite painful, really). Another option is to invite a trusted colleague to sit in and give you feedback.
 10. Finally, my main point is that people will talk about stuff when they are interested. Period. Lots of ways to do this. Some faculty start with a controversial topic, or at least something that promotes strong points of view. Find some way to connect the topic with real life, remembering that students' real life is quite different from yours. You read the news, they watch Colbert – you get the idea. No one, including you, is interested in discussing something that they see no value in. Make it worth their while, meaningful, interesting, and they'll respond.