

## Some ideas for stimulating discussion in class

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1. Create a culture in the class where discussion is part of the routine. If you suddenly throw them into a discussion situation, they won't be comfortable with what's going on.
2. Related to this idea is the need to establish a classroom environment, from day one, that is relaxing, stimulating, and non-threatening. You need to work at this to show students that you mean business, but in a supportive, meaningful way.
3. Invite people to say something in a way that's not threatening and is inviting to hear what they have to say.
4. Help them feel that their opinion and input is valuable. This is not the same as telling them whatever they say is correct.
5. Many students don't talk because they are uncomfortable expressing ideas in front of their peers (the cool factor, the shy factor, the "I'm not sure" factor).
6. If students do not know each other, they are less likely to speak out. Once they are familiar and comfortable with others in class, it relaxes the atmosphere. Team projects and other methods for having small groups work together can help this a great deal.
7. Help summarize what has been discussed/agreed upon so far from time to time. Otherwise it's difficult for students to see an organized conclusion.
8. Make sure the questions you're asking are accessible to them. Remember, you have been studying this stuff for a long time and have dug deeply into the subject. They are still at the surface, so meet them there and gradually draw them in.
9. Think-Pair-Share
10. Jigsaw method – divide into groups, each individual is assigned a specific topic to research/read so that each topic is represented in each group. All same-topic "experts" collaborate to share notes and draw conclusions, then they bring these results back to their original teams, where the entire project is pulled together and then can be knowledgeably discussed in class.
11. Arrange the seating in a circle so people are facing each other– sitting in rows is not the best layout for trying to talk with each other. Tables are even better – there's a community psychology to sitting at a table with others rather than being isolated in an individual seat.
12. Give them time to think and answer – especially if it's not merely recall of a correct answer. It takes time to think about one's opinions or perspective.
13. Don't focus on a "right answer". This is not what discussion is really for – makes them nervous (scared) trying to figure out the "acceptable answer".
14. Be careful when countering student's opinions – you want to stimulate a back-and-forth, but not crush their participation.
15. Give questions in advance.

16. Give them time to write some ideas before beginning discussion – it takes time to formulate opinions or arguments.
17. Try to connect the discussion topics to something students (and you) can relate to. This makes a huge difference – otherwise they see little connection to the topic. I cannot emphasize this enough – true discussion and engagement will not occur until they see some value in the effort.
18. Don't assume they can read a difficult text, such as a psychology or biology research article. Help them learn to read such materials.
19. Don't begin the discussion by asking "Do you have any questions from the reading?" Develop engaging, meaningful questions, propositions, opinions, etc.
20. Have a game plan before you go in – don't just wing it. However, allow for a variety of lane changes and course reversals along the way.
21. Try to develop situations where students are engaged in taking control of the subject: teamwork, individuals have team-assigned roles to research or work on, then they share results and discuss with the class. Give them something tangible to do with the subject.
22. Encourage students to organize reading groups with (meaningful) assignments to figure out based on the reading before class.
23. If you are available and engaged in talking with students outside of class, this will translate to more comfortable interactions in class because there's more of a personal connection – it's not just an academic requirement.
24. This one is a delicate issue to raise, but an instructor's personality and how they come across to others is highly instrumental in how well the class goes. This is difficult to change, but try to be self-aware of how you are perceived by others. Video-recording a few class sessions might be a good idea, or invite a trusted colleague to sit in a class and provide feedback.

#### Barriers to discussion (from McKeachie's *Teaching Tips*)

1. Student habits of passivity
2. Failure to see the value of discussion
3. Fear of criticism or of looking stupid
4. Push toward agreement or resolution before alternative points of view have been considered
5. Feeling that the task is to find the answer the instructor wants rather than to explore and evaluate possibilities

Web resource on class discussion:

[http://www.northwestern.edu/searle/services\\_and\\_resources/discussionsbiblio.pdf](http://www.northwestern.edu/searle/services_and_resources/discussionsbiblio.pdf)