

Discussion can be an effective way for students to engage with core concepts, apply them and to enhance their problem-solving skills. It's good for promoting teamwork, for eliciting higher-order thinking, and is especially applicable when a subject is complex and/or open-ended.

Communication skills develop as students express themselves, state their ideas in a clear manner, and listen to the views of others. Students can generate their own ideas, contributing explicitly to their own and others' learning. A discussion will draw out multiple explanations, enabling students to ask questions they may not have asked if they were working individually, deepening their understanding.

Whole-group discussions can last for a whole lesson, or form part of a lesson. Either way, care needs to be taken to ensure that the strategy delivers your intended outcomes.

SETTING UP THE DISCUSSION

Decide on the purpose of the discussion

- Start with clearly devising learning outcomes to be achieved through the discussion. Ensure these are aligned with course outcomes and take into account the generic skills, threshold learning outcomes and graduate attributes associated with the course.
- Build the discussion around an appropriate over-arching question. Ensure that the 'answer' to the question is something that requires an elaborate response.
- Develop a few subsidiary questions or thought-provoking statements that will help the discussion on its way. Think ahead to issues or topics that should be raised if the answer is to be thorough.

Research the background information

Even though you will not be directly delivering information to students (that is the purpose of having the discussion), as the facilitator, you still need to know the topic area thoroughly.

- What are the boundaries between the relevant and irrelevant information?
- Anticipate questions that may be raised, and be prepared to answer all of them.

Help the learners prepare for the discussion

Consider your students' prior learning and decide what they need to know before being able to take part in a discussion. The more students know about the topic, the deeper their discussion is likely to be. If students don't have enough knowledge about the topic, the session may end up being a teacher-led exposition.

- Set the students a mini-research project before the discussion, ask them to read some stimulus material (a journal or newspaper article), or watch a video. They can have their notes with them so they can refer to their notes throughout the discussion..
- Ensure students are not coming into the discussion with just facts, and they understand that their learning is for the purpose of discussion.
- Clearly explain the intended learning outcomes for the discussion, so that students are aware of its purpose. They will then be more likely to stay focused on the key skills and knowledge, and how to apply them.

Prepare the discussion plan

Your plan should contain:

1	2	3	4	5	6
Learning Outcomes	Discussion opening	Discussion questions	Supplementary questions	Discussion closure	Follow up

Plan ways to encourage participation if students are reluctant, and for reining the discussion in should it go off-track.

Give thought to the length of time needed to carry out the discussion, and indicate on your lesson plan some key time markers.

Prepare the discussion environment

Ensure students are prepared for the discussion, not only in terms of the topic they will discuss, but also in terms of their expected involvement.

If you are using Collaborate or another technology- based platform, students will need to know how to use it. Consider a short 'mock' discussion to iron out any difficulties and familiarise students with the technology.

If this is an in-class discussion, make sure that the room is set up so that participants can see each other.

Set up some ground rules for discussion. If possible, devote some time prior to the discussion to talk them through so that you know all students have understood.

It is very important that the environment is positive and inclusive. To enhance the quality of the discussion, encourage students to:

- Articulate their points concisely – keep it short!
- Listen attentively
- Remain objective (attack the argument, not the person)
- Ensure their contributions are relevant
- Be reflective and monitor the direction of the discussion constantly

RUNNING THE DISCUSSION

Opening the discussion

Remind the students of the purpose of the discussion, and any ground rules you would like them to follow. Make the learning outcomes clear, and relate them to the overall course learning outcomes. To start the actual discussion you can:

- ask an important, open-ended question, to set the focus
- ask a student to contribute one main point from the material you have given them
- make a controversial statement related to the topic.

There are plenty of ways to start the discussion. Avoid a question that does not focus and motivate the students, who may have a shallow or irrelevant response.

Keeping the discussion going

Listening carefully to the students' responses will help you decide when to elicit further information or steer the conversation in a given direction. This could be to maintain focus, to engage students, or to offer corrections and/or elaborations the discussion is not drawing out.

Focus:

- Ask for clarification, or provide clarification (for example, by paraphrasing)
- Remind students of the question, or prompt with another
- Draw students' attention back to the material
- Re-state any important points

Talking to each other:

- Have students ask you or each other questions (allowing for other students to respond before you do)
- Ask students to elaborate on another's response
- Draw reluctant students into the conversation

Higher-order thinking:

- Get students to provide examples and/or evidence to illustrate their points
- Tactfully draw on contrasting responses

Questioning dos and don'ts

Do	Don't
✓ Ask clear questions	× Ask overly general questions
✓ Make links between the previous conversation and the next question	× Ask questions without an answer, or with an obvious answer
✓ Wait for a response, gauge understanding, and paraphrase if need be	× Don't ask "Do you understand"
✓ Ask one question at a time	× Ask questions for which the direction is too unclear
✓ Focus on eliciting higher-order thinking	× Answer your own question
	× Ask questions which have clear "yes" or "no" answers (unless this is necessary)
	× Ask double-barreled questions

Getting students to engage with different levels of thinking

As you prepare questions for the discussion, consider the different types or levels of thinking you want the students to engage in. It is based on Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001):

- **Remembering:** recalling knowledge of subject matter relevant to the discussion
- **Understanding:** demonstrating understanding by constructing meaning from information
- **Applying:** applying knowledge and understanding to a particular task or problem
- **Analysing:** examining different concepts and make distinctions between them
- **Evaluating:** making judgements about concepts or ideas
- **Creating:** develop new ideas from what they know and understand

Closing the discussion

To make the discussion valuable for students, it is essential to spend some time providing feedback on the issues raised and the way students maintained the discussion throughout the lesson.

This feedback should be aligned to:

- Course outcomes
- Generic skills
- Task requirements (if appropriate)

You may wish to develop a feedback sheet for you and your students to complete, including opportunities for students to reflect on their developing communication, analysis and problem-solving skills as a result of completing the activity.

Common issues

As with all teaching situations, your plans may be affected by the following:

- Ill-prepared students
- Dominating student/s
- Controversial issues may be raised unintentionally
- Going off-topic
- Reluctant students
- Students not relating the discussion to their learning.

This guide has been adapted from Killen, R. (2007). Using discussion as a teaching strategy. In *Effective teaching strategies: Lessons from research and practice* (5th ed.), (pp. 146-185). South Melbourne, Vic.: Cengage.