

*Classroom discussions sharpen thinking skills and increase the students' ability to express their thoughts orally. This issue of CDTL Brief on **Discussion in the Classroom** presents strategies and tips on how to get the students to talk.*

## Keep Talking!

**Marie-Véronique Clément, Assistant Professor**  
Department of Biochemistry

“Discussion...occurs when information is freely exchanged between three or more participants<sup>1</sup>...”

Research has shown that students build better knowledge and understanding through discussion. Classroom discussion can help students clarify issues and relate new knowledge to prior knowledge. Discussion also elicits higher levels of thinking than the traditional lecture approach and helps students to retain knowledge. Finally, discussion may even help to inspire active learning.

Having taught in NUS for over three years now, I have to admit that the most challenging part of lecturing both a small group and a larger setting is to make sure that students stay engaged during the exercise. One of the ways in which I make my lectures more interactive is to alternate classical lecturing with brief intervals of mini-discussion for the students to reflect on what I said. By doing so, I hope to sustain the students' interest for the topic, make them feel that sitting through the lectures is not a waste of their time and selfishly be reassured that I am not wasting my time.

### **How to integrate discussion during the lecture?**

It is not always easy to successfully punctuate classical lecturing with mini-discussions. Facilitating such lectures also requires a lot more energy than conducting a non-interactive lecture. To set the stage for such interactive lectures, it is important to be physically close to the students. The setting of the University's recently renovated lecture theatres, though state-of-the-art, does not bring the lecturers physically closer to the students. Hence, I usually lecture in front of the stage, where I can be near to the students. My loud voice helps keep everybody, especially the sleeping students attentive and awake.

Although I sometimes have to wait for a lecture or two and/or challenge the students a few times before I finally get any answers to my questions, patience invariably pays. I believe this is because students need time to know their teacher to feel confident that they can talk without 'loosing face'. When the students begin to realise that I am approachable and trust that I will never put them down, they will start to open up.

In addition, it is important to be adaptable. I adapt my delivery style to suit the response of the class. For example, I tend to encourage dialogues for a very responsive class but with a quieter class, I adopt a more directive approach by indulging in question-answer sessions with the students. Therefore, I do not think that I can deliver exactly the same lecture twice. The content may be similar but how engaging the lecture will be will depend on class participation and on my own energy level.

### **Does the discussion always have to take place in the presence of the lecturer?**

The most important step in trying to deliver an engaging lecture is to promote discussion. However, the best discussion may not necessarily take place between the lecturer and the students. Hence, an alternative is to promote peer-discussion through appropriate exercises. During Term II of Academic Year 2002/2003, I gave students taking a 4th year level module a home assignment that they enjoyed immensely. The task required the students to interpret scientific data to draw the model of a particular cell death pathway, which contradicted the dogma they learnt during the lectures. My aim in giving this assignment was to teach students how to interpret data and to be open-minded to accept results that may not exactly fit what they had learnt in class. I had told them that they could do the assignment in groups. However, I warned them that I wanted everybody to write their reports in their own words. The response to this exercise was very good and it really promoted discussion as indicated in the following comment I received from one of the students:

1. Caughlan, Samantha. (2001). 'Classroom Discussion: Teachers' Perspectives on Obstacles and Strategies'. English Update, a newsletter of The National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement, operated by the University at Albany, State University of New York in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Fall 2001 issue, pp. 4-5. <http://cela.albany.edu/newslet/fall01/caughlin.htm>. (Last accessed: 29 September 2003).

“The course was tremendously exciting. I’m sure many of my peers feel the same as we often discuss the latest lectures over lunch. As for the assignment, it was a nice change to be able to apply what we have learnt instead of repeating facts. As you suggested, we did have group discussions (but no copying!) and this proved to be very rewarding in terms of brainstorming and bonding with fellow classmates.”

I was happy that in addition to helping students learn, the exercise was able to stimulate interaction among students. In addition, it demonstrated that an appropriate exercise triggered constructive discussion among the students without requiring the presence of a lecturer.

Another valuable tool to stimulate discussion is the use of the Internet. Whenever I feel dissatisfied with the level of student participation during a lecture, I would encourage the students to email their questions to me following the lecture. Suddenly, with the anonymity of the computer, I find my students very talkative. Since answering individual emails requires considerable time commitment, my strategy is to collect all the questions that I have received during the week and answer them collectively before the beginning of the next lecture. This strategy works quite well. Indeed, going

through the queries with the whole group usually sets up a lively discussion that does not end until the students are satisfied with the explanations.

In conclusion, I would like to stress the need to make our students discuss. Not only is discussion critical to learning, it teaches self-confidence as well. Group discussion can be triggered in many ways and may not necessarily require the presence of the lecturer. In the United States where classroom lectures are often supplemented by classroom discussions, students are expected to contribute to the discussion in the classroom. Questioning or challenging the teacher is viewed as a healthy sign of interest, attention and independent thinking. On the contrary, if you sit in silence, it is likely to be assumed that you are not interested in what is said in the class or that you do not understand the content. I do not think the same conclusion can be drawn of the NUS students. Some factors inherent to Singapore may be the reason why students are not always comfortable to discuss freely in front of a class. However, from my experience if the teacher is patient, understanding and uses innovative teaching techniques, NUS students can be as involved in the learning exercise as students elsewhere in the world. One of the key things is to help students to trust the teacher; teachers have to convince our students that our goal is to help and not to judge them. ■

# Classroom Discussions: Some Practical Hints

**Kevin S. Carlson, Ph.D., Former Educational Development Specialist**  
CDTL

Leading discussions can be a complex teaching activity. It is certainly more open, challenging and demands more attention from the teacher than many lecture techniques. However, such efforts can be rewarded with more active students who come to understand the material in deeper and more intricate ways. Yet, these potentialities are sometimes not realised as the mere activity of talking often obfuscates the real pedagogical reasons for doing such an activity. Because of this risk, a professor must keep the larger aims and discussion-learning processes in mind when guiding discussion. While a complete discussion of such aims and processes is well beyond the scope of this small article, I will explore a few practical ways to (1) get the students talking and (2) allow the students to gain educationally from discussions.

To contextualise this article, I have used all the techniques discussed in this article successfully in classes with up to 40 students. I have also tried a few of these techniques in classes with up to 60 students. In all of these cases, I have found these techniques to be very helpful in getting the students to talk both in the United States and Singapore. I mention this

point, as I fear that some well-meaning teachers sometimes hold the counter-productive attitude that ‘Asian students won’t talk in class’. This attitude unfortunately can lead to negative results when a well-intended professor asks the students to talk in class, but no one volunteers. When this happens, it is common to attribute it to being Asian—a stable and internal attribution, which is very dangerous as it will be seen as unchangeable. As a result, the professor becomes less engaging with the students, thus leading to even less chances of student participation. From my experience, the unsuccessful attempt to initiate discussion probably would have also failed in the West, as the techniques used may not be sufficient to draw students out. In this way, the environment of the classroom (which is largely, albeit not fully, in the control of the professor) is much more influential in promoting (or curtailing) discussion than any ‘cultural’ considerations.

## **To Get Them Talking**

*Have each student talk within the first 15 minutes of the course.* It is important to set the classroom atmosphere very

early in the class. I believe that if students are not talking in the first 15 minutes of a class, then it will be considerably more difficult to get them talking later. Given that you are asking students to talk so early, I recommend taking the pressure off them by having them talk about something non-academic. The intent at this point is just to let the students know that their role is to be active and talk; what they talk about at the first experience is irrelevant. Merely giving each student 20 seconds to say their name and briefly describe a favourite hobby, place, etc is all that is needed to get them started. These brief introductions also give the professor many opportunities to ask a follow-up question or two. Such questions can set the expectation that the flow of the class will be a give-and-take dialogue. These questions also allow the professor opportunities to joke with students and demonstrate at least at some level, your interests in them as individuals. These interactions set a class atmosphere that is very conducive to discussion and establish almost immediately a sense of approachability that students see as a prime quality of a good teacher (see <http://www.cdtl.nus.edu.sg/brief/V6n5/sec2.htm>).

*Get it loud!* When I start covering the actual content of a course, I prefer to get the students talking to each other before actually dealing with it in a more organised way. A simple technique is to provide a simple reading (or a simple stimulus at the beginning of class if students are not reading) to provoke some thought and discussion. A broad instruction like “what do you think is going on here” or “why is this interesting” can be quite effective in letting students explore some ideas with a partner. Simply taking two or three minutes to do this at the beginning of class can be very effective. The most important outcome is that it gets the class very loud. The students therefore get the message that ‘this is not a quiet place for you to passively sit, but you have to talk and be loud’. Given such a license, students are quite willing to talk.

*Increasing the educational effect.* The benefit of discussions is that it allows the students to process multiple perspectives ideally in a way that utilises both the criteria for judging the validity/reasonableness of various arguments and also eventually allows for integration of such perspectives into a fuller and more refined understanding of the material being studied. Given that these are the desirable qualities of an educational discussion, the challenge for the professor is to guide and structure the discussion enough so that students do not feel like they are swimming in an abyss of disconnected statements and ideas. The following three simple measures can help increase the students’ ability to process all the information that comes up in a discussion:

- Take notes. It is virtually impossible for a professor to remember all of what goes on in a discussion. I have

personally found that taking brief notes very beneficial as I try to piece together the discussion. Taking notes serve some simple functions. First, when you take notes (or pretending to if appropriate), it forces students to talk to each other rather than just to you as the teacher. While I definitely would not recommend looking down all the time, looking down and writing can help re-direct students’ eyes off you as the centre and force them to discuss amongst each other. Second, taking notes allows you to quickly note who said what and to name a student who said a nice comment. This goes a long way in terms of establishing an environment supportive of discussion. Lastly, taking notes allow the next two actions.

- Connect students’ comments together. It is important to connect students’ comments together (preferably as soon as possible after the comments are made) DURING the discussion. While students will gradually develop these integrative skills, they are often unable to see the connections (or the depths) without some guidance. Students need such structuring while the discussion is happening to be able to process the information in an organised manner.
- Summarise the discussion. As you can imagine, students can be quite frustrated walking away from a discussion without knowing which points were the ‘important stuff’. It is also very hard for a student to remember much of the discussion without some larger organisation to fit the material into. While it is challenging, the note-taking allows one to quickly summarise some major themes. Don’t be afraid to take a couple of minutes to organise the notes. Students would appreciate the effort and that time allows them to take out their notebooks (I would encourage keeping notebooks off the desks before that point). While summarising the themes and the main points, I make an effort to connect it with the specific comments that students made. In general, my experience is that when I summarise the discussion in this way I notice that the same content was covered in the discussion as I would have covered in a lecture. The difference is that the students understand it much more broadly (e.g. connections with previous course topics) and deeply than if I were to ‘tell them’ in a lecture.

In summary, this article has outlined a few practical steps to get the students talking and to better structure the discussion material in order to increase the actual educational benefit of discussions. We must keep these educational benefits in mind as we guide discussion, or else we risk lots of talking that may be merely ‘a sharing of ignorance’. ■

# Class Discussions: Its Benefits

**Ma. Socorro C. Bacay, Senior Instructor**

School of Management and Information Technology  
College Registrar, De La Salle University, College of St. Benilde, Philippines

In terms of encouraging students to take a more active role in their learning, few strategies outweigh the benefits of class discussions. When one focuses on the potential rewards of effective class discussions, one will in all likelihood, see the great potential looming behind a well-planned class discussion and reap the corresponding rewards that come with it—a group of students learning from each other in ways that extend beyond the social and academic.

When students participate in an ideally open-minded class discussion, they learn to express their ideas and listen to their classmates' ideas as well, thus enriching their learning experiences through this exchange. Not only do such discussions serve as an avenue for students to express criticism without being offensive, but they also train the students to accept criticism without being offended.

Classroom discussions that allow students to discuss their lessons with their peers help the students understand and apply what they have learned. Classroom discussions also provide feedback that may prove valuable to the teacher. By encouraging students to ask questions and give their comments or responses, the teacher can gauge from the responses, whether the students have understood the lesson, how they have understood it, and if necessary, what kind of clarifications or corrections need to be made to rectify any miscommunications in the lesson.

## **Guiding a class towards discussion**

The teacher would do best to set the tone at the start of the course, to set guidance and direction. On the first day of class, the teacher makes it clear to the students that they are expected to play an active role in their learning, and one such way would be to actively participate in class discussions, thus implying that attention to the lesson and preparation for classroom discussions is necessary.

It may be difficult at first to engage students in class discussions. The fear of social evaluation is inherent in most of us. Many students may refuse to ask questions for fear of being thought 'stupid' or slow. In a diverse class, some students fear ridicule for their accents. The teacher, therefore, must create a 'safe' environment, with the understanding that each person is respected for his/her uniqueness. The teacher, as a good role model, is responsible for creating an atmosphere of unconditional acceptance of each person in the class. As the course progresses, the students become

more confident of themselves and less anxious of social evaluation.

Being aware that the teacher expects students to actively participate in class discussions makes the student pay close attention to what is being discussed. To help ensure that students come to class prepared (i.e. they have read about the topic for discussion), it is helpful to ask each student to turn in one essay question to be answered in class. The question may require further explanation of a topic or how a topic may be practically applied. Oftentimes, the teacher may find some of the students' questions very interesting for group discussions and some questions might even qualify as an exam question.

The physical set up of the classroom may pose a challenge to class discussions when everyone is facing the teacher who is standing on the platform upfront. Some teachers might find it helpful to move around the classroom, as it gives the teacher a chance to be sensitive and attentive to all students regardless of their seat location. Furthermore, by moving around, students would follow the teachers' movements with their eyes and anyone who asks a question, argues a point or gives an example to a particular issue, makes his/her statement to the whole class and not just to the teacher.

To better facilitate the exchange of ideas among students and to break the monotony, it is also helpful to schedule a group discussion within the class period. Students may be allowed to choose their groups or be assigned to groups. The group composition could range from two to five, depending on the preference of the teacher. To ensure each member's active participation, it is advisable for the teachers to assign in each group, a facilitator, a reporter and a recorder. These positions may be rotated among the members of the group.

The teacher spends the first 20–30 minutes of the class presenting the lesson material. The next 20–30 minutes may be allotted to a group discussion where each member is expected to air his/her view of the lesson and argue for or against a topic presented by the teacher. In the closing minutes of the period, the class listens to the summary reports of the reporters from each group and the teacher synthesises the reports and brings the topic to a conclusion.

A class session that allows for class discussions naturally takes longer than a class in which the teacher simply delivers

the lectures and tests students' knowledge periodically. For this reason, class discussions are sometimes curtailed due to time constraints, or simply sacrificed for expediency. A teacher has a syllabus to cover in a specified term or semester period. Unfortunately, by not allotting time for class discussions, the teaching-learning process may suffer.

### The benefits of online discussions

Thanks to technology, class discussions can now be done online—beyond the confines of the traditional classroom. One argument for such a medium of discussions is that students, who may have been diffident in class, will have the chance and opportunity to participate in a 'less threatening' environment. Online discussions, therefore allow less assertive or aggressive students an equal opportunity to participate. This is also a good medium for students who are not verbal or who prefer to put their ideas in writing, having completely ruminated on their ideas. In an online discussion, the teacher may pose a probing question that students will need to think about or read about in preparation for the next class meeting.

Clearly, whether the discussion is conducted in the classroom or via an extension of the classroom, the teacher plays a central role in the effective conveyance of the discussions. The teacher needs to be comfortably cognizant of his/her field so that s/he does not feel intimidated when students ask questions, give comments or responses. Reasonable preparations should also be made so that questions or issues for discussion are clearly understood by students. In addition, the teacher must be a good facilitator, ensuring that the

discussions are not confined to a few students. By creating an atmosphere where students feel safe in sharing their views, by allocating time within a class session for group discussions, by moving around the classroom and calling on different students to participate, by asking students to provide a discussion questions for the next meeting, or by providing a mode of discussion outside the classroom, the teacher creates an environment where teaching-learning interactions are enhanced, where students take an active role in their learning, and where the teacher's teaching experience continues to be enriched.

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# Guidelines for Conducting Classroom Discussions

Winston Lee Piak Nam, Human Resource Management Specialist  
Human Resource Management Unit

People of all ages love discussions. We discuss various subjects of interest with our family members, friends, colleagues and schoolmates everyday. This ability to communicate with one another is a gift from God. Imagine how dull life would be if we were to keep our opinions and thoughts to ourselves without the ability to share them with one another. Even animals have some form of communication among themselves.

In the context of education, most students would remember (perhaps with mixed feelings) being engaged in discussions either in the classroom or in discussion groups they belonged to. As students meet together in groups to discuss topics and issues related to the lecture or topic, the process of exchanging ideas and information fosters camaraderie. Thus, discussion groups are cherished because they appeal

to our basic need for a sense of belonging and affiliation. As a teaching/learning method, classroom discussions (unlike the lecture mode where the spotlight is often on the lecturer alone) are participative in nature. The absence of discussions does not only imply that the course is taught through a monologue with the lecturer as the sole performer, but also that student interaction—another value of engaging students in discussions—is hindered.

Hence, classroom discussions, if planned and used carefully devised for our lessons, could achieve the following objectives:

- promoting active student enquiry,
- stimulating students' interest in the subject, and

- enabling students to share their knowledge with others through active exchanges of viewpoints.

However, conducting classroom discussion does not mean turning the class into a chat room. In order to maximise the time allocated for lectures and other classroom activities, it is important to plan carefully, how and when to conduct the discussion in each lesson. Being clear about the intended purpose or objective of the discussion (e.g. is it used as an ice-breaker at the beginning of a class, as a follow-up to a case study or reflective exercise?) will help the lecturer to plan the type of questions, topics and format. With proper planning, the lecturer can avoid creating an impression that discussions are mere ‘fillers’ used to fill the extra pockets of time (in a lecture or tutorial), which may be more productive if used for other learning activities instead.

In addition to preparing the materials and questions for discussion, it is important to brief student leaders on how to facilitate the discussions. The Socratic method of encouraging and stimulating the expression of thoughts and ideas through probing questions and scenarios is a useful method.

Time management is another important factor in discussions. Discussion sessions should start and end punctually and not eat into the time allocated for lectures or other learning activities. There must be adequate time for the group to summarise and present their discussions via the leader or a representative, using visual materials like flip charts or transparencies. In addition, the lecturer must do a quick debrief of each group’s presentations accruing from the discussions. It would also be worthwhile to commend the discussion leaders and the group for their efforts and enthusiasm because this could motivate the students to participate in future discussions.

I see discussion as a useful tool to develop the facilitators’ leadership especially in meetings and other group activities. At the workplace, those who can confidently lead discussions have attributed this ability to their active participation in various discussion groups in school.

Though the discussion method is a highly participative tutorial activity, it can cause conflicts if it spins out of control. Thus, when discussing a sensitive topic which may provoke heat (e.g. arguments and controversies), the lecturer should be ready to intervene if the discussions go off-tangent. The challenge is to know how to encourage every individual in the discussion group to participate actively. Dominant or passive members in the group could also cause problems: the lecturer would therefore have to play the role of a gatekeeper to hold-off those who are too aggressive in putting forth their ideas and encourage especially the quieter ones to speak up.

Notwithstanding some of the problems, discussion as a form of tutorial activity generally promotes goodwill and friendship among students. I normally get my students to seat themselves differently for each class, and to form pairs or groups with their neighbours for discussions. Students enjoy sharing and learning from one another. The discussion groups and activities are foundations to spur and encourage active communication between students. Such communication skills could be assets to future teamwork and group project work. Thus classroom discussions, though challenging to implement, complement the other learning activities in the classroom. ■



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**contributors**

Marie-Véronique Clément  
Kevin S. Carlson  
Ma. Socorro C. Bacay  
Winston Lee Piak Nam

**advisor**

Daphne Pan

**editor**

Teo Siok Tuan

**layout**

Ma Lin Lin

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Comments, suggestions and contributions should be addressed to:

The Editor, *CDTL Brief*  
Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning  
Central Library Annexe, Level 6  
National University of Singapore  
10 Kent Ridge Crescent  
Singapore 119260

Tel: (65) 6874-3052  
Fax: (65) 6777-0342  
Email: [cdtpost@nus.edu.sg](mailto:cdtpost@nus.edu.sg)  
<http://www.cdtl.nus.edu.sg>