



What strategies
can help foster
large-group
discussions?

Generating whole-class discussion

It can be ironic that high-achieving students are sometimes the most quiet in large-group discussions, but many such students fear having their ideas judged publicly by instructors or peers. What can you do to foster large-group discussions? Try these ideas!

1. Move from small to large

A classic active-learning activity is think-pair-share. Assign a particular question to small groups for discussion (the name of the activity includes “pair,” but you can use small groups of 5 or so students). Tell the groups that one person from the group will report back to the whole class after a set amount of minutes. This set-up allows for a multiplicity of points of view to come out during discussion.

This can help for a few reasons: students will have exchanged ideas with several other people, lessening the chance that they will feel that their idea is an outlier from the norm. But it also gives all students a chance to participate in discussion, which is difficult (if not impossible) in many large classes. This will help every student engage with the material. It may also help students feel more comfortable sharing their ideas in your class, which over time can help foster more large-group discussions even when think-pair-share is not employed.

2. Set the tone from the start

Many students need to feel comfortable and respected to find the courage to speak in a large group. Professors can foster a climate of comfort and respect from the start of term in many ways, including:

- **Learning and using students’ names.** This allows you to connect with students and show your interest in and respect for them. If your class is really large, have students make paper name plates for their desks, or bring a printout with their pictures next to their names to help you.

“Teaching Spotlights”
are small but
impactful ways for
professors to keep
consistent
pedagogical
improvement at the
forefront of their
teaching practice.

Additional resources

Bruss, Kristine S.
“Improving Classroom Discussion: A Rhetorical Approach.” *The Journal of General Education* vol. 58, no. 1 (2009): 28-46.

Cooper, James L. and Pamela Robinson. “The Argument for Making Large Classes Seem Small.” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* vol. 81, no. 12.

Strawson, Hannah.
“Chapter 3: Problems Concerning Discussion Groups and Seminars.” In *53 Ways to Deal With Large Classes.* Professional & Higher Partnership, Ltd., 2013.

University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana Center for Teaching and Learning. “Large Classes.”

Wilsman, Adam.
“Teaching Large Classes.” Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. 2013.

- **Giving praise to good answers and ideas** when students mention them in class, and asking students to repeat good ideas to the whole class that you overheard when they were in small groups. Having affirmation that their ideas are valid can help boost confidence.

3. Give them an anchor

Make sure to ask questions or set discussion tasks that focus students' thinking –vague questions like “what did you think of that” or “what are your opinions about this” can leave students feeling lost at sea. If there are readings that you will discuss, try giving discussion questions to students before they read those texts; this can help guide their reading, allowing them to feel more prepared for the class discussion.

One way to present a discussion question is to send it to students digitally so that they can respond anonymously (try Mentimeter, which has a free version, or Free Suggestion Box). The anonymous replies can serve as a starting point for the discussion, allowing you to ask follow up questions or have students defend their stance (or someone else's opinion). This might open the discussion floodgates because it provides a beginning upon which the class can build.

4. Set clear expectations

Professors usually set forth clear criteria for what they expect in written assignments and in what constitutes a passing grade on a test, often using rubrics to make their expectations transparent. So why not do this with discussions, too? The following are descriptions of different levels of discussion performance, but follow the link in the column to the left to Kristine Bruss's article for more on the “Responsible Intellectual Discussion” model:

- **“A” discussion contributions:** reflect exceptional preparation as evidenced by frequent authoritative and/or creative use of textual/material evidence; provides direction for the discussion
- **“B” discussion contributions:** reflect thorough preparation as evidenced by competent and occasionally authoritative and/or creative reference to textual/material evidence; sometimes provides direction for the discussion
- **“C” discussion contributions:** reflect satisfactory preparation as evidenced by at least some acquaintance with textual/material evidence; useful, but seldom offer new direction for discussion
- **“D-F” discussion contributions:** reflect inadequate preparation; never provide constructive direction for discussion