Leading Effective Discussions - Humanities and Social Sciences
September 19, 2014

How can I encourage students to see the value of section?
- Make sure students know how section fits in with the course and complements lecture.
- Point out the purpose of specific activities (i.e. “This will help you review for the exam”).
- Ensure that your learning objectives are clear and communicate them explicitly to your students.

How can I make sure that my students participate in section?
- Help students prepare for discussion in advance by sending an email with discussion questions or asking them to come with discussion questions; consider having them do some low-impact writing to prepare (this also encourages them to do the reading!)
- Set a comfortable, respectful tone by learning students’ names and helping them learn each other’s, setting basic rules about discussion section etiquette, and acknowledging student contributions to discussion (“Good thought,” “Nice comment,” etc.)

How can I manage conversation effectively?
- Feel free to call on students who are not volunteering or ask to hear from students who haven’t already spoken.
- Plan a variety of activities, such as group work or Think-Pair-Share, to encourage quieter students to participate.
- Take time to paraphrase students’ remarks or ask other students to do so, perhaps in language more appropriate to the course. Link students’ remarks to each other, to the reading, to the lecture, or to broader course themes.
- Ask students to respond to each other’s comments.
- Don’t be afraid of silence! Give students time to think.
- If a student is dominating discussion in every section, it might be necessary to speak to them privately.

What kinds of questions should I ask to promote discussion?
- Prepare questions and examples ranging from easy (i.e. drawing from personal experience or popular media) to complex (i.e. applying known principles to a new area or challenging a theory or idea).
- Ask open-ended questions to promote discussion and close-ended questions to check what students remember from lecture or reading.
- Ask questions that have many possible answers rather than one range of acceptable answers.
- Revise your questions if they don’t seem to foster discussion rather than “giving up” on them. Zero in on a specific point or try rephrasing.

What kinds of activities should I use in section?
- Try to put together sections that involve both large and small group activities.
■ Bring in materials that relate to students’ experiences such as anecdotes and film clips.
■ Stage debates or game shows.
■ Throw out controversial claims and have students play devil’s advocate.
■ Have students facilitate parts of the discussion or be responsible for parts of section.