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Discussion Method Teaching
How to Make It Work

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Teachers interested in discussion method teaching are probably convinced that improving their interactive skills in the classroom will improve their teaching. There is a good deal of research, primarily from cognitive psychologists, suggesting that active, experimental learning is the most effective. Beyond that, our common sense as thinking, feeling human beings tells us that finding ways to involve students actively in what they are supposed to be learning is a worthwhile undertaking.

Most faculty in American colleges teach what they were taught in the limited ways they were taught. They value content and theory, and they feel the most efficient way to communicate that is by content-laden, theoretically based lectures. Even when they feel uneasy about students who “aren’t getting it,” there seems no other way. Attempts at discussions degenerate into directionless bull sessions or meaningless debates in which the facts are all wrong and the logic nonexistent. Ideally, we’d all love to teach graduate seminars but face a daily reality of mixed classes of many dozens of “average” undergraduates. So we lecture. What’s the alternative?

There is a way to energize your classrooms, to excite a much higher percentage of your students, and to add more value to their education. You can get out from behind your lectern and still communicate content and theory—do so better, in fact. But to do this you will have to pay far more attention then you have in the past to teaching process questions, to the teaching methods you are using.

Most faculty don’t know how to begin this activity. What follows here will help you understand discussion based teaching and, perhaps, get you started doing it.

I came to understand the discussion teaching process through use of the case method in my work as a faculty member in graduate school of business. Much of what I have to say derives from the work of others, decades of work to perfect the case method of teaching. It is my premise that the case study method used successfully in business schools can work for discussion teaching in the arts and sciences, and that teaching methods that make for successful discussion classes can be learned by interested faculty members. While the “case” may be a Yeats poem or an eighteenth-century census or a Reagan speech, the discussion process is similar and works by the same rules.

I do not, of course, contend that discussion teaching is the only, or even the best, pedagogical method available to college teachers. Successful college teaching demands that the teacher have available a number of techniques to use at the proper time and in the proper situation to maximize learning. One of those techniques—underused because most faculty do not understand its dynamics—is the discussion.

The particular technique described here is really a first step away from the lecture method of teaching. It is a method for leading a discussion in which a good deal of authority and control remains in the hands of the faculty member and in which a good deal of content and theory is still imparted by him or her as discussion leader.

The authority issue is an important one. Many advocates of discussion method teaching argue that for true learning to take place, the faculty member must relinquish authority and control and seek to empower students so that they are able on a continuing basis to learn for themselves. I do not dispute that goal as an ultimate one, but for the new convert, the approach must provide an orderly transition from the lecture method. Once the process becomes second nature, he or she may then be willing to consider methods that relinquish greater authority to students. This authority issue is an important one—keep it in mind as you grapple with the suggestions that follow.

Preparation Before Class

When I demonstrate discussion method teaching to colleagues, the questions they most often ask is how I prepare for a class. Let’s begin, then, by taking a look at the process, keeping in mind that preparation for a discussion class needs to marry process and content—we are looking for ways to communicate, to enliven, to bring home the content; we want to find ways to help students internalize the theory.

- Read the assigned material—It goes without saying that the teacher must be very familiar with the reading assigned for discussion. She must be ready for almost any nuance to be discovered, for almost any connection to be
made. The more thinking and reading she does about the assigned material, the better prepared she will be for the discussion about it. Most faculty do this as a matter of course, but as you gain experience with the discussion process you will find that assignments that were once familiar to you take on new meanings and new connections with other parts of the world as a whole host of different, and now inquiring, minds grapple with it.

- **Decide important concepts and outline**
  
  Once you are sure that you have a good grasp of the assigned material and its many nuances (be especially alert to any relationship, no matter how obscure, to popular music!), decide what important concepts you want to be sure are understood by every student in your class. Ask yourself, "Why did I assign this material?" Important concepts usually have somewhat important subconcepts, and before long we content-theoretical types are several layers deep in important concepts. Such thoughts usually lead to an outline, and soon there emerges a logical pattern that we can hope the discussion will take. Such an outline should make you more comfortable, but be sure the outline reflects in layers or levels what is most important and what is less, and in the heat of a good discussion you will have to discard getting at some of the less important concepts for the sake of making sure the more important ones are really understood.

  At this point you should, as well, make notes about specific facts—important people and their relationships, chronology, sets of figures, any particulars that bear on the matters you feel are important. Nothing destroys the attempt to communicate the necessity of reasoning from the facts more than if the discussion leader can’t keep the details straight. It is important to communicate this message to your students early in the discussion process, for the euphoria of the free-wheeling exchange of ideas is sometimes so overwhelming that even the best students forget to deal with the concrete aspects of the material.

- **A question outline**
  
  Once you are sure of your grasp of the facts, prepare a question outline to match your concept outline. It is important at this stage that you carefully think out questions that will promote discussion, not answers, about the concepts you want understood. If you are having trouble promoting discussion in your classes now, examine the kinds of questions you are asking. Do they signal that you know the answer and are asking to see if the students do? Such questions are the kind that promote participation from only those students anxious to show they know exactly what the teacher is looking for. The idea of a discussion is to encourage contributions that aren’t necessarily the “right” answer, but that can be used to work toward a better understanding of the topic discussed. Most students are programmed to think that there is only one right answer, that the teacher knows it, and that he or she will reward those who know it and punish those who do not. Such thinking spells doom for a discussion class. Serious discussion teachers must work at overcoming this mindset; they must encourage creative and critical thinking, not memorization. Careful, well thought-out questioning is the first step in this process.

  Build your question outline at least as many layers deep as your concept outline—one group of very general questions that covers the whole assignment and serves as a macro-outline for the class, then groups of more specific questions about different aspects of the outline that will serve to expose important points. Try to anticipate possible responses to the questions and think through what can be done with them—how they can be used positively—to move the class toward more understanding. Ask smaller questions, action questions, first; work up slowly to more global, thought-provoking questions.

With a general as well as a specific outline of questions to guide your discussion, you must think carefully about the really important questions—beginning, transition, conclusion—and highlight them in your outline. You should know exactly what question, word for word, you are going to use at these important times, and perhaps even who you are going to ask. Thinking ahead in such careful detail allows the leader more control over the discussion, something the beginning discussion teacher will welcome.

Ask questions, make more questions, and still more questions. If you hear yourself making too many declarative statements, the discussion is not going well. In class, instead of talking, you should be listening and formulating your next question. Think of your lecture as a series of interrogative statements.

- **A board outline**
  
  A good discussion leader should make use of the blackboard to help organize the discussion, which at times will seem to be going off in all directions. The board, in fact, is another very powerful control mechanism for the discussion leader. You choose what to write on the board and where to write it. Want to pump up a shy student’s self-confidence? Write his contribution on the board. Even more? Underline it! Want to calm an overly aggressive contributor? Don’t bother to inscribe his comments. What is written on the board takes on a huge importance. Early in the semester, when you are still working to build your class’s collective confidence in the discussion process, filling the board with a well organized analysis of the material will do miracles. "My gosh, look what we did!" students will say as they admire the board at the end of the class period. "And I didn’t think I understood a thing Plato said!"

  Whatever you write on the board—it can’t include everything said in a discussion class—you must think ahead of time just how you want the board to look at various times in the class. Therefore, make a board outline to help guide just what to write down and where. The blackboard, that ancient teacher’s aide, is a powerful tool for the discussion teacher—more powerful even than Mark Hopkins’ log. Don’t use it casually or without thinking through its impact.

- **Knowing your students**
  
  You lead a discussion because you want students to learn something—they are the important ones in the process. To maximize that learning, you must know each of them as more than a number on your roster. Each learns individually and responds differently to the various stimuli of the discussion class. What are their strengths and weaknesses? What kind of participation will build on their strengths or improve their weaknesses? Think about who to ask certain questions, who to turn to during certain times in the discussion; for that, you need to know what to expect in response. A number of faculty I know were greatly impressed with the performance of the various discussion leaders, including the man who is now president of Yale, who led the seminars on the PBS television series "The Constitution: That Delicate Balance" a few years ago. One of the keys to the success of those discussions was how much each discussion leader knew about the participants, each of whom was a public figure. To move the discussion one way or another, the leader knew almost exactly who to ask.

  Before every class, look over your roster and update your knowledge of each student and what you hope to get from them in the class you are planning—perhaps even set objectives for each class. You won’t meet all your objectives, but it is an important obligation to try. You have a responsibility to help every one of your students learn—not just the smart ones or the ones who give you positive feedback, but every one of them. Design questions that poorer students can begin to answer successfully, so that you help them build confidence in what they can contribute. Again, thinking
about all this ahead of time will improve your success during class.

- **Looking at the whole semester and the whole institution**—Any single class outline cannot stand alone; it must fit with the plan for the entire semester. Part of this plan must be not only what content to cover, but how the discussion process can be enhanced as the semester progresses. Most of the institutions in which we teach encourage students to be passive in class, and students have been conditioned to model this behavior. Therefore, in planning the semester, remember that you are probably struggling with an institutional culture that discourages active participation. Work up to it slowly and schedule topics and discussions that keep in mind you are reorienting behavior patterns and that this will take more than one class. If you seek to encourage true discussion, you cannot do it by having discussion here and a discussion there—it has to be a regular and substantial part of the course.

I would suggest a syllabus for a discussion course that ever the side of complexity and length. I prefer a class-by-class outline that includes several study questions and background readings for each reading assignment to be discussed. The better prepared the participants are the better the discussion; if the course outline helps this, you have sent the right message.

**Physical setting**

All the trouble that you have taken in preparing for the discussion class will be for naught if you are trapped in a physical setting that impairs the discussion process. The best-laid plans for the board will be useless if you find a room with flip charts and marking pens. Nailed down tablet-arm chairs in a lecture hall would tax the abilities of Harvard's finest case instructor.

I would strongly advise getting on the friendliest of terms with your institution's space coordinator, making him aware of your special mission and its environmental requirements. Whatever your room assignment, never let the space in which you are scheduled to teach surprise you. Know ahead of time what will be there and what you need to do to improve it.

- **The ideal**—Let's describe the ideal room for a discussion course: tables and executive-type swivel chairs for the students, arranged in a U-shape; a small table in the front for the instructor; board space on at least two walls; room enough for the instructor to roam around the room.

The U-shape is the single most important environmental factor for the discussion class. It allows all the participants to see each other and promote interchange; it provides space for the leader to use, thus enhancing his authority and control in a situation where many instructors feel powerless. Tables provide the students with a natural protection against the terror of the discussion process (protecting their ideas and their knees from uncomfortable analysis); they can lean forward without threatening others. Discussion leaders welcome tables as well—there is terror on both sides in the discussion process, and the leader can confront and challenge a participant without physical threat. Swivel chairs obviously increase the freedom with which all parts of the room can be used and promote participant interchange. The discussion leader needs enough space to move about the room in order to energize the discussion when it needs it—ideally, enough room to be able to contact physically every student in the room. The discussion leader must also be able to get to the board whenever he wants without stumbling over students and interfering with the discussion flow. If you are going to bring the outline and notes on which you worked so diligently, you need a place to put them, along with a watch, rosters, and handouts; a small table in the front, not enclosing the U (and certainly not to hide behind), serves the purpose. Psychologically, it's nice to have it there, to know your notes are there, even if you don't refer to them. I would add to this utopia a name card for each student (tent cards made out of oaktag) so that you can refer to each student by name. For ten cents a student, it does wonders for group cohesion and mutual respect.

**Usual situation**—I'll wager that 90 percent of American college classrooms were designed and furnished by the same architectural firm that designed and furnished those in which I teach. They are square or rectangular shaped boxes with no windows, with one always-dirty blackboard (green, if it is a new building), tile floors, fluorescent lighting, tablet-arm chairs set in rows, the regularity of which is reinforced by the same custodial staff that never cleans the blackboard. Such physical surroundings do not encourage education and make it hard to make a discussion class work.

A discussion class cannot work in a room in which the students are seated in rows all facing an instructor who is barricaded behind a lectern. The participants must be able to see and to talk to each other; the leader must be able to move quickly to any part of the room and to any student. In a traditional classroom, all discussion comes at the instructor; you want to encourage straight-line communication from student to student.

If you are confronted with the typical physical environment, come early and move the furniture to approach the ideal described above. If you can't come close to the ideal, be ready to compromise in other ways. If you get stuck in a room with fixed seating, get the room changed someway—the end will justify the means.

Some discussion teachers prefer to arrange the classroom in a circle or request a "seminar" room with one large table and seats all around it. I do not like the circle shape in either of these variations for several reasons. Most importantly, it inhibits the control that the leader can comfortably exercise. With all seats in a circle or around a table, the leader must sit down; hence, using the board to shape discussion becomes a clumsy interruption as does any attempt to move around from student to student. To me, the center of the circle, or most of the large oak table, is best, a symbolic power vacuum; at worst, wasted space in an environment in which space is a scarce resource. Furthermore, outlines and notes of any detail are all but impossible to spread on the surface of a tablet-arm chair and risk being relied on too heavily if they are in front of you on the seminar table. Finally, either setting severely limits the number of students who can participate in the class.

Moving to a discussion mode of teaching won't in every case make you the enemy of the administration. Class size need not be limited to the usual "seminar" size. If you have the proper space, classes of thirty to forty can proceed comfortably. If your institution is a Harvard Business School clone with physical facilities built especially to accommodate case discussion, eighty can be an effective class size. Perhaps your vice president for environmental design would be amenable to a deal: better discussion-class facilities in exchange for a larger class size.

**The Class**

If you have followed the procedures suggested so far, you have already spent the good part of your time preparing for a single class and exhausted yourself physically moving furniture. But, as in any endeavor, the better job you do in preparation, the better the actual class should go. Once the discussion begins, so many things will be flying through your mind as you try to keep it on track that you don't want to have to worry about details that could have been worried about
before. Arrive early enough to get yourself organized in the classroom—chairs moved, boards erased, lecterns moved out of the way, and notes spread on your table.

- **Beginning the class**—Thoughts differ on this, but I prefer easing my way into the day's discussion by talking informally with the class about housekeeping matters, events of the week that might relate in some way to the course, and responding to questions. This loosens the tension, both mine and theirs, before we get to the business of the day—discussing the assignment. As a transition into the discussion, a short introduction by the instructor—essentially where the assignment fits in with the overall scheme of the course and some general opening remarks about it—is usually in order; but the shorter, the better.

Presumably, you have thought through carefully in your preparation just exactly what question you are going to ask. Your choice at this point is an important process question. Do you want to ask for volunteers or do you want to call on someone? If you decide on calling, you have yet another choice—giving the student some time to think about the question or requiring an answer immediately—cool calls or cold calls, as the jargon goes.

The choice of volunteering versus calling is an important one for the mood of the class. I prefer to stay with volunteers, hoping to play down the sort of recitation syndrome that you get when you have set up a cold or cool call environment. All things being equal, I would want to think that those students who participated wanted to do so because they had something to contribute at the time of the participation, not because I wanted them to participate.

You have to work hard to make the volunteering environment one in which a large number actually do volunteer. Usually the same hands shoot up in response to your first question. In an environment in which everybody expects to be called on, it is easier to encourage the shy and those who need more help in verbalizing their ideas. Also, the larger the class, the more likely you are going to have to force participation, and the earlier you start this in the semester, the easier it is for all concerned.

Cool calling at the beginning of class, therefore, seems a good compromise. Before you do anything else, state your first question, ask a particular student to think about an answer, and ask another student to serve as a backstop. Then go on to your introductory business, and when you get to the discussion, the student has had five or so minutes to think about an answer.

Early in the semester, I begin the class with a question that has accompanied the assignment in the syllabus. As students gain experience in the discussion method, I like to ask a different question, one they haven't specifically thought about in their preparation. The discussion proceeds differently, depending on which of these choices you make.

- **Questioning, listening, responding**—Now begins the guts of the discussion class. The student, however, got recognized, is talking, and she isn't answering the question in any of the many ways you so painstakingly thought out the night before. How do you respond? Do you write on the board? Do you try to silence her? Do you correct her? There are no sure answers; expect to feel existential uncertainty.

The key skills at this point are listening skills, a set of behaviors that college faculty probably haven't practiced since graduate school. You will get plenty of practice if you stick with discussion teaching. Make sure at the first level that you are hearing exactly what the speaker is saying. In order to test your hearing, you need to give the speaker some feedback—writing what she says on the board or repeating what she said. Beyond that, one needs to listen to the subtext of the student's words—what she means by what she is saying, what it reveals about what is important to her.

Discussion teachers can learn much from the counseling profession, especially when it comes to active listening. In that process, you as teacher must communicate back to the speaker that you understand what was said—text and subtext. But beyond that you must communicate what is important to you, the teacher, so that the student and the teacher can work together to take some action—to learn, in this context. The tricky part in the discussion classroom is that you have forty other people who have to be listened to and communicated with, and who must learn as well to practice active listening skills. The better you listen and the better you get all your students to listen, the better the square of that your discussion will go.

What goes on in the discussion class is a very involved, complex process in which you use questioning, listening, and response activities to shape the discussion toward ends you have chosen. You must intervene at times with a question or a summary or a bridge from an earlier remark to help move the discussion toward your goals. At other times, you must allow discussion to take place without any obvious control on your part. In this sense, this questioning, listening, responding process is your ultimate source of power in the discussion classroom. More important than blackboards, U-shapes, tables, and room to roam. Like a double-edged sword, the power here cuts both ways; it can frighten you enough to make you long for the lectern. But resist temptation! You have thought lots of questions out ahead of time. You have an outline and a board outline on the table near you. You have a good idea where you want the discussion to go and the questions to get it there.

As you use questions and active listening to move the class toward the goal you have set, you have some other objectives to meet as well—which students are understanding, which are not; who needs to be helped, who needs some stroking, who some quieting. In addition, in the concern for keeping the discussion on track, don't force the outline so much that you discourage the free flow of ideas. A good discussion leader in this sense encourages a kind of "controlled spontaneity"—maintaining the right balance between free-wheeling discussion and control. I like to think of the discussion process as a set of concepts that the discussion circles around, gets an understanding of from one angle, moves away from for a while, and then returns to from another angle—certainly not a linear process.

The objective, as much as covering your outline, is to engage true discussion, getting the students to talk to each other in a meaningful way. When that begins to happen, back away and let it go: You've created an important moment for learning.

In the final analysis, you've made whatever happens happen, by your use of the questioning, listening, and responding skills. These skills are not going to come overnight. They take practice, in the classroom and out. Find a trusted colleague who will watch you teach and give you some honest feedback. Better yet, have your class videotaped and review it with that trusted colleague.

- **Body language**—To teach successfully by the discussion method, especially in the physical environment I have suggested, you must learn to make yourself aware of the message your body is communicating. Not only do you have to make it clear to students the boredom and irrelevance of education than a lecturer leaning on his lectern. On the other hand, the successful discussion class is led by a person constantly in motion. With the right space, the discussion leader moves toward a speaker or away; places himself between disagreeing parties or behind one party or the other; rushes to the board
write a telling comment; roams the aisles in search of new participants, or to stir excitement among the alienated, or to see how the board looks from the point of view of the back row. The leader can turn up the intensity by excited movement or calm a class into serious reflection by sitting and letting discussion proceed by itself.

Keep in mind, though, that each movement—each stance you take, where you put your hands, how your face reacts—in short, everything your body does—communicates something to your audience. You must be aware at all times (like an actor on the stage) of what your body is saying.

A serious issue relevant here is that of touching a student. Nothing communicates more quickly how much you think of a student's comments than a touch. Nothing wakes a sleeping student more quickly than a flying eraser. Conversely, nothing will cause a misunderstanding or a lawsuit more quickly. Use touch with care and discretion.

**The board—** As I have suggested, the blackboard is helpful to the discussion process in a number of ways. It can serve to bring order into what seems a disordered discussion. It can be used to reward meaningful contributions. It is an effective summary of the discussion. It forces the leader to move to use it.

You need to have a very good idea before the class just how you want to lead to look at various times during the discussion. Do not write on the board haphazardly. Do not make "chicken tracks" on the board. Consider carefully what you want on it before you grab the chalk.

Some examples: you might wish to use the board to symbolize the logic of the discussion by writing things in neat columns from left to right, drawing vertical lines to indicate when to move on to a new topic. Or you might want to take comments on many different ideas early in the discussion, using several boards to record them, allowing more reflective thought later in the discussion to highlight relationships. You might even want the board to communicate disorder. (In a discussion I have done on the 1981 Reagan economic plan, the class through discussion builds an econometric model that is recorded on the board. By the end of discussion about the feedback relationships of the various inputs, and with the use of several pieces of colored chalk, the board looks something like a Jackson Pollock painting, and provides its own comment on economic reality.) Or, if you want to build a group's confidence that it can understand a difficult subject, fill the board with well-organized detail.

**Sense of time—** One of the most difficult things to control in a discussion is time—nothing seems to disappear so quickly in a good discussion and to last so long in a poor one.

Every discussion plan should have a beginning, a middle, and an end, with time targets for each thought out ahead of time. You have a given amount of time at your disposal. How much will you spend on each major part of your outline?

A few great teachers, like great athletes, seem to have an internal clock that tells them just how much time is left in the game. But most of us need an external clock. If a wall clock isn't on hand, try using a pocket watch with a large dial placed on the front table. Easy to see at a glance, you can check the time without constantly looking at a wristwatch, body language that says to the speaker: "Hurry up and finish, we're running out of time."

If the period allotted is more than two hours, think seriously of planning a break, keeping in mind that unless planned for, a break often destroys a discussion, making it very difficult to pick up again. If you have a long period scheduled for one topic, think about a group activity as a more natural kind of break.

**Group work—** There is a natural hierarchy in discussion classes, from individual preparation, to small group, to class. At each stage, insights are added that were not apparent at the earlier stage. Class discussions improve if preceded by leaderless small-group sessions. Scheduling those is a problem, but if the subject matter or particular issue seems to lend itself, it is often worth the trouble. If students are having trouble with the discussion format, organize smaller study-group discussions before class. Small groups are a place where strong students can help weak students and shy students can more comfortably contribute—behaviors you want to encourage.

**Ending the class—** Discussion classes generally require that the leader formally end the class by summing up the discussion and stating its larger meaning, in terms of theory and relationship to the rest of the course. Sometimes, however, you might want the discussion to end without this, sending the participants away frustrated or with a sense of confusion, hoping that out of that might spring some independent work to clear up the confusion.

Like other aspects of discussion pedagogy, the end-of-class summary has costs and benefits. You want to give some direction to the discussion, but not so much as to drive out individual creativity and risk taking. You want to convey some theory, but not so much as to suggest that every question has a right answer that can be derived from that theory. Our classes should be rich and full of excitement and content learning, but in the final analysis we want to empower our students to learn on a continuous basis, and much of that activity has to be self-directed. Therefore, think carefully ahead of time whether you want to sum up and how you want to do it.

If you decide on a mini-lecture, make it a good one. If you decide the topic lends itself to more reading, this is the time for suggested bibliography. In business cases, students always want to know "what happened?" Sensing long ago that they were really searching for the "right answer," I usually resist revealing it, suggesting instead that they go to the sources and find out, and allowing for time to be reserved at the beginning of the next class if any want to report their findings. There are usually several reports. You need also to allow yourself time at the end of class to say a few things about the next discussion assignment. Perhaps it needs emphasis on a certain preparation or hints as to where to go for help in making sense out of it. Certainly, words need to be said as to how the class just ending will relate to the next.

After Class

The after-class press of students looking for individual help, and our rush to get to another class or meeting, sometimes prevents the very important debriefing activity necessary for every discussion class. Before you get out of the room, take a good look at the board to see what the final result looks like and how it compares to your outline. Ask yourself what was covered well, what not so well, and what was missed. What questions worked and which ones failed? Make notes for yourself as to how you might revise the next time.

Shortly after the class ends, too, you need to go over each of the students in class and note how they did in the discussion. This needs to be done for several reasons—to help in your judgment of them, to help get to know them better, and, most importantly, to help you think about strategies that will help them get more out of future classes.

Grading classroom participation is another of those very sticky problems for the discussion teacher. To encourage participation you probably have to do it, but be aware of its cost. Trained as we are to grade written work, most of us have no idea how to judge verbal. Do you reward a student who talks a lot but says little? Do you penalize a student for trying
out new ideas that are badly off-track? What about the student who just won’t or just can’t seem to make any contribution? These are tough issues that go to the heart of the discussion-class dilemma.

I grade participation, but I can’t quantify it very well. I try to reward continuous, informed participation throughout the semester. I try to talk individually with those who do not seem to be participating, either to encourage some participation or to understand why there is none. In the final analysis, grading is one of those issues that needs to be discussed with peers. Unfortunately, faculty don’t like to talk about grading, except to play the role of Rambo-grader. But none of us does it very well. We need to share our concerns and ideas with our colleagues.

How to Start

This article alone is not going to do much to improve your discussion teaching. It is more difficult than that.

In the work I do with faculty, I stress that we all should get help from several different sources. First, watch an experienced discussion teacher teach. Sit in on several of her classes. Be sure you have read the assigned material before you sit in. Talk with her after class, emphasizing the methodological questions. Second, get somebody you trust to sit in on your classes and give you some honest feedback. To enrich this discussion, have the class videotaped so that both of you can see what is happening while you are discussing it. Third, form a discussion group with other interested faculty to share ideas and to talk out the important teaching issues that are highlighted by the discussion method and by your thinking about the process of teaching. I have used a series of cases about teachers in discussion classes to organize this process. Fourth, seek the feedback of your students, either in formal or informal discussion, or with some well-formulated written mechanism. Find out from them whether they think they are really learning more and enjoying it more.

Finally, practice, practice, practice. And become your own best critic.

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