

Using the Discussion Format in Large Classes

Ken Battle, Graduate Teacher Program

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This article is based on a Graduate Teacher Program workshop and an interview held by Ken Battle of the Graduate Teacher Program with Professor John Powelson, Department of Economics.

Professor Jack Powelson, after many years of teaching experience, recently began using a discussion format in lieu of the traditional lecture method of teaching, despite the argument for "convenience" offered by his colleagues for the lecture format with large classes. His goal is to encourage students to engage in and challenge the subject-matter. As Professor Powelson says, he wants students to "exercise their imagination," "go out on a limb," "grapple with the situation." In brief, in discussion sessions, Professor Powelson expects students to take a stand on the question under investigation.

Believing that the learning process for students in large and small classes can be significantly enhanced by teaching through discussion, Professor Powelson experimented with this strategy in two "Economic History of the United States" courses.

Before implementing his teaching through discussion method, Professor Powelson anticipated and resolved certain structural problems inherent in this way of teaching. The first problem, classroom setting, was the easiest to resolve. He simply asked students to arrange the desks in a circle before the start of each class and to return the desks to their original positions at the end of the period. It is known that such a seating arrangement promotes student-to-instructor as well as student-to-student interactions.

The next problem was a matter of budgeting time so that more time could be spent on some topics, less on others. Professor Powelson resolved this time management issue by assigning the class an entire chapter or article for reading. The reading would then provide the context for those topics or issues discussed extensively during class. Consequently, he could better maintain the schedule outlined in the syllabus.

The most challenging problem, however, was to ensure that students read the material on time and thus were prepared for classroom discussion. The magnitude of the problem loomed large before Professor Powelson when--two days before the end of a semester--a student approached him saying, "The book you assigned for reading is not on reserve at the library."

Realizing that teaching through discussion can be a superior method of instruction only when students read their assignments, Powelson created a strategy to resolve the problem. At the beginning of class, he would draw a student's name from a stack of 3 x 5 index cards (i.e., the class roster) and then

proceed to question the student on the reading assignment for that class session. Because the classes were conducted more like oral examinations rather than discussion periods, this method was not very successful for facilitating a true discussion.

As his experience with class discussion evolved, he started assigning the class general questions to prepare for forthcoming discussion periods. Subsequently, when Professor Powelson called on students at the beginning of class, he would pose such general questions as: "Is this article analytic or descriptive?" "If it's an analytic piece, what are the tools of analysis the author uses?" "What is the theme of the article?" "What supporting evidence is there for it?" In addition he required each student to prepare for class an abstract of the article or chapter assigned for reading and discussion. Professor Powelson found that this structure set up a more favorable atmosphere for question and discussion.

When the groundwork for the classroom discussion had been established, Professor Powelson fostered the discussion with questions prepared in advance. At this point, he put away the 3 x 5 cards and asked for volunteers to respond to more specific questions such as: "Does this article make sense to you?" "How could the author have treated the issue differently?" "What would another author say about the same matter?" (Professor Powelson often uses authors who have opposing views on a given issue.) This approach has evolved into a successful format for using discussion techniques in large and small classes.

Professor Powelson has also established procedures to ensure that students, especially those in large classes, keep up with their reading assignments. In general, he notes that once students are expected to do the readings on a timely basis, they comply. If, however, a student is not prepared for discussion, "I will subtract points off (his or her) final grade." That could mean the difference, for example, between a B- and a C+ or a C- and a D+. Powelson requires only that students demonstrate that they have done the reading; they are never penalized for anything said in the discussion period. To be precise, students' grades are not lowered as a result of their classroom discussion; rather, grades are based primarily on their performance on examinations. On the other hand, a superior performance by a student in classroom discussion will lead to his or her final grade being raised above the examination average.

Professor Powelson has identified three procedural problems and their management when using the teaching through discussion method. In all cases, the instructor's attitude in managing these recurring problems will either maintain and enhance or thwart the quality of classroom discussions. At the outset of the class, the instructor must make it clear that the insights and discourse of, perhaps, brighter students will be greatly appreciated, but such students will not be permitted to dominate the discussion periods; everyone must have an opportunity to contribute.

The second problem concerns digressions from the issue under investigation. Instructors like to see students establish relations of primary materials with secondary data, issues, and events, however near or remote they may be. The articulation of such relations, however, has limits during a discussion period. For example, the class begins discussing A, someone thinks of B, i.e. related material to A, someone else in turn thinks of C which is related to B, and so on. At this juncture, the instructor must intervene and reemphasize that the issue is A. At the same time, the instructor should acknowledge the value of the perceived relations already pursued to the point. In this way, a favorable environment is maintained for conducting the class discussion.

The third recurring concern deals with the instructor's response to students' errors. The instructor should, first, acknowledge whatever worth an incorrect answer has. He or she should question the student in such a way that the latter will gain an awareness of the error in question. Ideally, such questioning will steer the student toward a more appropriate answer. The point is that the instructor should not rudely contradict the student; it is embarrassing and demoralizing.

In summary, Professor Powelson's decision to experiment with the teaching through discussion format has proven to be fruitful. That is to say, the quality of his teaching--which is inseparable from the quality of the learning process for students--has significantly improved.