

Learning to Discuss: Strategies for Improving the Quality of Class Discussion

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# LEARNING TO DISCUSS: STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF CLASS DISCUSSION\*

*This paper describes a strategy for improving the quality of class discussions. I argue that discussions are often unsatisfying for two reasons. First, students and teachers tend to emphasize individual contributions rather than the collective process of discussing. Second, teachers tend to emphasize discussion performance rather than the development of discussion skills. I describe a multi-part exercise that addresses both of these issues and illustrates its effectiveness with excerpts from student self-evaluations. Students often write that this exercise helps them develop their speaking and listening skills and improves the overall quality of class discussion.*

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AS A STUDENT, I was a discussion-oriented teacher's nightmare. I sat near the back of every classroom, took copious notes, and kept my mouth shut. Like the other quiet students, I watched while a handful of students dominated discussion—or worse, while the teacher struggled to drag comments from reluctant students. Even when class participation was a significant part of the course grade, I chose to stay silent. In part this was due to a fear of public speaking, but in addition it was sometimes difficult to see the value of contributing, since many comments were essentially ignored as other students strove to make their voices heard.

As a teacher, I have worked to overcome these same discussion problems in my own classrooms. I have used a variety of strategies to encourage quieter students to con-

tribute to discussion. For example, assigning writing exercises prior to discussion allows students to compose their thoughts before being required to speak. Small group discussions may be more comfortable for shyer students, encouraging them to speak more freely. And grading students on their class discussion provides a material incentive for participation that may be meaningful to some students.

Despite using these tactics for several years, however, I remained unsatisfied with the quantity and especially the quality of discussion in my classes. Many students participated, but many others did not or did so only sporadically. To my frustration and that of other students, a small group of students still tended to dominate discussions. Most troubling, I felt that the quality of discussions was low. Rather than a conversation in which students built on each other's comments to move toward collective insight, discussions often felt repetitive and shallow. Students seemed more focused on making their own thoughts heard than on really listening to and responding to the comments of others.

My frustrations with these problems led me to develop a set of strategies for improving the quality of class discussions. In the body of this paper, I describe these strate-

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gies, illustrate their effectiveness through student comments, and conclude by noting how these strategies help to solve the problems I have identified here. First, however, I review how the pedagogical literature has (and has not) addressed the issue of discussion and identify two patterns in our thinking about discussion that contribute to the kinds of problems I have described above.

### WHAT DOES THE TEACHING LITERATURE SAY ABOUT DISCUSSION?

#### *Discussion and Student Learning*

There is considerable consensus that discussion increases student learning. According to research on learning strategies (and based on research in cognitive psychology), when students have the opportunity to engage with the class material—question it, explain it, and think about it in relation to their own lives or the “real world”—it is more likely to be understood and retained (Eble 1976; Goldsmid and Wilson 1980; McKeachie 1999). Discussion and other interactive teaching strategies encourage “deep” rather than “surface” learning and result in greater student enthusiasm (Hedley 1994; Kember and Gow 1994). According to Frederick (1994), “the fundamental value of discussions is that through them students develop a sense of ownership and responsibility for their own learning” (1994:100). Discussions force students to search for their own answers, give students practice in expressing their own ideas, increase their appreciation for complexity and diversity, and develop their listening, cognitive, and critical skills. In addition, discussions increase students’ self-confidence and thus their motivation, giving them feedback on how well they understand course material (Frederick 1994; Smith 1977).

#### *Strategies for Leading Discussions*

Despite these many virtues, the teaching literature also acknowledges that fostering good discussions is not easy. Considerable literature exists on how to structure and lead successful discussions. Most authors focus

on the instructor: how to ask good questions, respond to student answers, and deal with students who talk too much or too little. Frederick (1981), for example, offers ten ways to start the “dreaded discussion,” including concrete images, illustrative quotations, and debates. Welty (1989), in his article titled “Discussion Method Teaching: How To Make It Work,” similarly focuses on teacher skills, only peripherally mentioning student contributions to discussion. Hall and Sandler (1982) place the responsibility for students’ participation largely on the instructor’s behaviors: whom the instructor calls on, how she or he responds to student comments, and so on.

All of these approaches put the instructor at the center of the classroom, implying that his or her abilities determine whether a discussion succeeds or fails. While it is certainly true that a poor discussion leader can doom a discussion, simply asking good questions does not ensure an effective discussion. Discussions depend on students as well as teachers; without student listening, thinking, and speaking, there would be no discussion. This point has been raised before in the teaching literature. Finkel and Monk, for example, decry the tendency for teachers to adopt the “Atlas complex,” which they describe as “a state of mind that keeps teachers fixed in the center of the classroom, supporting the entire burden of responsibility for the course on their own shoulders” (1983:96). Yet this insight has scarcely reached the literature on discussion. In one of the few articles that attends to the joint role of students and professors in the college classroom, Fassinger (1995) argues that “faculty members may play less than a central role in shaping classroom interaction” (1995:26). Her analysis of classroom participation finds that “peers significantly shape classroom dynamics” (p. 29), for example through interaction norms that discourage the airing of controversial positions or pressure students to appear confident at all times. She concludes that “in the final analysis, faculty members may help form their classes’ environments, but it

seems that students play a fundamental role in creating classroom climates...college classes are complex arenas of faculty *and* student control” (p. 33).

### *Problems of Individual Students*

When the literature does focus on students, it is usually in the context of particular types of problematic students. What are we to do with students who talk too much? With those who talk too little? With those who are antagonistic? These are generally framed as problems of *individual* students, requiring individual solutions. Common solutions for students who dominate discussion, for example, include taking the student aside for a private chat or assigning the dominator to observe class dynamics with the aim of sensitizing that student to participation problems (McKeachie 1999:58).

Students who talk too little are another frequent focus of attention. McKeachie notes that there are many reasons why a student may choose not to participate, including “boredom, lack of knowledge, general habits of passivity, cultural norms—but most compelling is a fear of being embarrassed” (1999:54). Consequently, most strategies for encouraging discussion focus on overcoming fear: providing students the opportunity to become acquainted with others in the class, using writing exercises prior to beginning a discussion, calling on students by name, avoiding sarcasm or ridicule, and rewarding infrequent participators with a smile or positive comment (Auster and MacRone 1994; Billson 1986; McKeachie 1999). Some authors suggest rewarding students who contribute with higher grades. For example, Hedley (1994) opens an article on increasing class participation with this paragraph:

It’s so simple! Why didn’t I think of it before? What do “they” want? Marks and high grades. What do “we” want? Active learning through class participation. The solution? Points for participation. (1994:337)

Similarly, Smith (1992) proposes keeping careful track of how many times students

participate in each class session and awarding credit for each contribution. He finds that this system results in participation by nearly two-thirds of the class. He does not comment, however, on the quality of this participation.

### GAPS IN THE LITERATURE ON DISCUSSION

In sum, the teaching literature on discussion focuses on three issues: its role in promoting student learning, teacher strategies for leading effective discussions, and the problems of individual students. While each of these topics is important, I argue that the existing literature generally fails to address—and sometimes exacerbates—two gaps in our thinking that keep us from having satisfying classroom discussions.

First, we tend to view class discussion as an individual rather than a collective enterprise. We focus on individual students’ class participation: Did Student A talk too much? Not enough? Were Student B’s comments insightful? What strategies can we use to encourage Student A to talk more or Student B to listen more? When we grade students’ participation individually, we imply that discussion depends on the separable contributions of individual students.<sup>1</sup> I suggest instead that in order to have satisfying class discussions, we (and here I mean students as well as teachers) must see discussion as a collective process, something that is based on individual contributions but that goes beyond them. Discussion is accomplished by groups, not individuals.

Central to a good discussion is not simply individual contributions but the connections among them. When the contribution of Student B amplifies, builds on, contradicts, takes issue with, or in some other way responds to the contribution of Student A, we have a discussion. Asking students to speak in class will not necessarily result in this kind of interaction. Indeed, it may produce

<sup>1</sup>Of course, this approach fits well with the individualistic, competitive educational system within which our classes take place.

exactly the opposite effect. When students feel they are being evaluated on their individual contributions, they will focus on composing and producing such contributions rather than on listening to and thinking about the substance of the discussion. I remember the feeling well: frantically thinking, "I have to say something. What can I say?" while ignoring the contributions of other students. When we grade students on their individual class participation, we encourage speaking rather than engaging and monologue (or at best, dialogue) rather than (as one of my graduate school colleagues put it) polylogue.

Brookfield and Preskill (1999) are among the few authors who recognize that the typical reward structure of the classroom encourages quantity at the cost of quality:

When teachers tell students that part of their course grade will be based on class participation, students interpret this to mean that they should speak as much as possible. Whether their speech is part of an evolving conversation or whether it asks others to consider new and challenging perspectives is secondary. The task is to say something, anything, to get noticed. (Brookfield and Preskill 1999:175)

While grading on participation does signal to the students that discussion is important and valued (Brookfield and Preskill 1999), it may actually exacerbate the problems it aims to solve. This type of grading may encourage students to talk, but it does not necessarily encourage them to listen or think. Moreover, it may reward the most naturally loquacious students, who are not necessarily the most insightful or prepared students. These students' over-participation allows other students to remain silent and unengaged in class discussion (Karp and Yoels 1976). Such systems may also encourage students to compete against each other for points (Hedley 1994)—precisely the opposite of the collaborative classroom most of us hope to achieve. In sum, "the sheer quantity of participation does not guarantee the desired outcomes in the qual-

ity of thinking and communicating" (Auster and MacRone 1994:296). No wonder class discussions are frequently disjointed, repetitive, and superficial; it is these qualities that we often encourage through our focus on participation. We elicit quantity (sometimes) but neglect quality.

The second reason why discussion frequently fails to live up to our expectations is that teachers tend to focus on discussion performance, not on the development of discussion skills. The focus on problem students takes our attention away from the fact that most students do not have the skills to effectively participate in discussion (Gimenez 1989). When we entreat students to contribute or give them rewards for participation, we evaluate them on the basis of performance. Yet few students have received any formal or informal training in how to be an effective discussion participant. Some students—generally the extroverted ones—seem to have natural talents in this regard (although what passes as good discussion skills is frequently simply a willingness to speak publicly, not an ability to listen or respond). Many others, however, have no such skills. This is not necessarily due to a lack of motivation; as I know from my own experience, some students do not even know how to begin to participate. Although they want to excel, they do not have the necessary skills to do so.

Very little of the literature on discussion method teaching deals with the basic skills of discussion: listening, thinking, and contributing effectively. For example, Hinrichs (1990) argues that college teachers have a responsibility to help students develop their communication skills. However, while he notes that "communication can be analyzed on two levels: as a social process and as an individual skill" (1990:36), he focuses only on the development of individual skills. Billson (1986) describes the classroom as a small group, and suggests that an understanding of small group processes and dynamics will aid teaching. However, her suggestions too seem to focus either on instructors or on individual students.

Our focus on discussion performance, while perhaps encouraging some students to talk, does little to help all students to become more effective discussion participants. Discussion is a skill that can and should be learned, not an innate talent or ability. If we expect students to engage in productive discussions, we must give them the tools they need to succeed at such a task. Simply exhorting them to participate or assigning them points for participation is not enough.

In order to improve the quality of class discussions, we must focus on two issues. First, how can we foster truly collective discussion rather than simply individual participation? And second, how can we help students develop the skills they need to be effective contributors to this polylogue?

### STRATEGIES FOR ENCOURAGING GOOD DISCUSSIONS

My approach to improving class discussion focuses directly on these two issues. First, I publicly address the collective nature of class discussion and encourage the students to notice the quality of and mutually work on improving not simply their own contributions but the overall discussion. Second, I focus on the development of discussion skills in order to provide students with the tools they need to be effective participants. I address both of these issues during the first week of the class, returning to them at mid-term and at the end of the term.

#### *Shifting the Focus to the Collective*

As part of my opening comments for a course, I set the stage for the term's attention to developing good discussion. I begin by saying that a large part of the course will involve class discussion. I also note that I have observed in past classes that discussion is often unsatisfying because students fail to participate, because a few students dominate discussions, and/or because discussion is superficial (at this point a few students begin nodding their heads in assent). Rather than being content with this state of affairs, I suggest we should think about how to im-

prove class discussion. Their first assignment for the class, therefore, is to write a brief paper that analyzes what factors contribute to a good discussion (see Assignment #1 in Appendix A for the text of this assignment).<sup>2</sup>

On the day this assignment is due, I focus the first part of the class period (about 30 minutes) on these papers. I begin by asking students to describe what makes a *bad* class discussion. Elements of bad discussions generally come easily to mind, and include:

- people talk just to hear themselves
- people interrupt each other
- a few people dominate discussion
- too much sharing of personal lives
- intimidation of other participants
- professor calls on students randomly
- minority viewpoints are shut down
- no structure for the discussion
- distractions, side conversations
- irrelevant comments
- personal attacks
- people do not listen
- argumentative people
- repetition of ideas
- judgmental comments
- fear of disagreement
- lack of preparation
- people do not pay attention

I then ask the students to refer to their papers and share with their classmates what factors contribute to good discussions. This list is generally quite long, and includes comments like:

- stimulating, engaging topic that raises questions the participants had not considered
- multiple perspectives or viewpoints; disagreement is expected and accepted
- participants are respectful of others and their ideas; no insults or judgments
- many people participate; no one dominates
- real world examples or problems are used

<sup>2</sup>This assignment and the two that follow are not graded, although they must be completed satisfactorily for students to receive credit in the class. I do give written feedback on each assignment, supporting the student's goals and making suggestions for how to achieve them.

- participants are prepared
- honest, trustworthy participants
- friendly, relaxed atmosphere
- good facilitation—a directed, in-depth discussion that stays on topic
- participants practice good listening skills
- there are no “wrong” or “stupid” answers
- confidentiality is maintained
- opinions are backed up with relevant facts or analysis
- participants are supportive of each other
- clear and concise contributions
- safe and open atmosphere—everyone feels comfortable, all viewpoints may speak, no fear of ridicule

As the students speak, I write these factors on the board. I also type them up and distribute them during the next class period for future reference. There is generally considerable consensus on what makes a good discussion, and I point out to the students that we have developed a shared collective vision of what a discussion should be like. Moreover, this vision is not something that can be accomplished by the instructor alone, nor by individual students. Rather, it requires the simultaneous efforts of the entire class. In addition, I emphasize that the vision we have developed cannot be achieved if each student focuses only on expressing her or his own ideas. Instead, students must listen to each other and think about each other’s contributions, as well as sharing their individual thoughts.

### *Developing Discussion Skills*

The second and equally important part of this approach involves a focus on skill development. To be good participants, students need to learn how to listen to others and add their own thoughts to discussion, and then practice these skills. During the first week of class, I talk about these skills and how to learn them. I begin by using myself as an example, describing my own struggles to speak in discussion classes and my later evolution as both participant and facilitator.<sup>3</sup> This provides concrete evidence that discussion skills can be learned. I then ask the students to think about their own histories *vis à vis* discussion and write a

self-evaluation describing their perceived strengths and weaknesses (see Assignment #2 in Appendix A). In addition, I ask them to set one or more specific discussion goals for themselves for the term. These goals must be both concrete and practically attainable in one term, and are necessarily unique to an individual. For example, a very shy student who has never spoken in class might set a goal of speaking once during the term, speaking regularly during small group discussions, or simply coming to each class with a prepared comment or question, even if she or he does not share it out loud. A more naturally verbal student, in contrast, might set a goal of *not* dominating the discussion by speaking only a few times per class period, becoming a more careful listener, or drawing out other students during discussion. I emphasize that these goals should emerge from the students’ self-evaluations and stress the development of skills, not simply performance. I connect these skills to the class’s collective discussion goals, stressing that good discussion participation involves not only speaking but also listening and thinking, and I encourage students to think about goals in each of these areas.

In class sessions, I occasionally use exercises to help students develop particular discussion skills such as listening or responding (Brookfield and Preskill’s excellent book *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* [1999] has several such examples). If students listen to each other, they are better able to respond to each other’s comments, rather than simply stating their own views. This both builds a more coherent discussion and motivates further involvement: “Inseparable from participation is the notion of efficacy—the sense that one’s participation matters, that it is having an impact on

<sup>3</sup>Other instructors may have different stories about their development as discussion participants. These stories may also be effective at making the same point. For example, teachers could share their struggles to keep from dominating discussion, to listen more carefully, or to encourage others to participate.

others...The incentive to participate diminishes when what one says or contributes is ignored or leaves no discernible impact" (Brookfield and Preskill 1999:10). I also encourage students to meet with me outside of class to discuss their discussion skills, and make available various materials on discussion and discussion participation for those who wish to read more.

Setting goals is a good first step toward improving discussion. However, I have found that periodic self-evaluation is useful, both for me and for the students. Therefore, I ask students to evaluate themselves (as individuals and as a group) at mid-term and again at the end of the term. The mid-term evaluation is informal; at the end of a class period, I ask students to respond in writing to the following questions, which I put up on an overhead:

1. In your opinion, what is going well with class discussion?
2. What could be improved?
3. What progress are you making toward your discussion goals?

I respond to individual mid-term evaluations in writing, but share comments about the group's progress with the class as a whole in order to give the students a sense of their classmates' feelings. This also allows me to share my own evaluation of the class's progress and provide some suggestions for how discussion might be improved. At the end of the term, I ask students to formally evaluate their own progress (Have they met the goals they set? Why or why not?) and set goals for the future. While not graded, these assignments must be completed in order to receive credit for the class (see Assignment #3 in Appendix A). The students' analyses of their own performance informs my evaluation of their participation. I emphasize to the students that this evaluation is based on the quality of their contributions to the collective discussion and that contributing involves not simply expressing their own views but also listening carefully to others' ideas, asking useful questions, and

engaging others in discussion. I also note that developing discussion skills is a long-term process and that what matters most is their positive progress toward their goals, not just their final competence.

## RESULTS

I have used these strategies in seven classes to date, including undergraduate classes of 25 to 45 students and graduate seminars of 5 to 10 students. The classes have focused on a variety of topics, including gender, violence, and families. I have found this approach to be quite successful on both group and individual levels. Students frequently comment that class discussions seem more useful than average. In particular, they comment that discussion participation is more evenly distributed, focused, and respectful than they have been accustomed to in other classes. For example:

I have honestly been surprised at how well discussions have gone this term...I was consistently impressed with the large number of classmates that contributed to discussion, and especially impressed with classmates who intentionally limited themselves to give others the chance to participate. I think that forcing each of us to set discussion goals in the beginning of the term made us aware of how we participate in discussions and how we could make class discussions better for both ourselves and our classmates. This awareness really made us respect each other.

I feel that the entire class was respectful of others when issues were raised that caused some debate. Everyone had respect for others' feelings, and expressed alternative opinions in constructive and mature ways.

I was very surprised that our class had no individuals who felt it necessary to relate all topics to their personal lives. This seems to be a common problem in many of my sociology classes. The insights and personal connections that were made were not random but helpful in relating issues to everyone.

After the big discussion we had about what everyone thought would make a good discus-

sion, the people who always spoke toned down a little, letting others who are more shy have a chance at speaking.

Even more gratifying are students' comments about their own progress. Each term, students write that to their surprise, they have exceeded their own goals. Quieter students often write that they have participated more than they expected:

I was anticipating not being an active part of discussions, but instead, I found myself dominating discussion at times....This term, I also discovered a love of participation in class discussions, and while I did not participate in every large group discussion, I am certain that I reached my personal goal of participating at least five times over the course of the term....Overall, I am proud of my participation in class discussions, and I definitely participated more than I anticipated at the beginning of the term when I set my goals. In the future, I think I would set bolder discussion goals for myself because I think my shyness has disappeared.

I felt that through my active participation in discussions I have achieved all goals. I forced myself to participate in the large group discussion periodically even though this is not always comfortable for me to do because I understand that it is important to step out of my comfort zone...This class has provided each one of us with an opportunity to put into practice listening and speaking skills which will be helpful in every aspect of life.

The one area that I still need improvement is speaking in the larger discussion. I feel confident in voicing my views in the smaller groups, but not in the larger discussion. I did raise my hands a few times, and that is a few times more than any other class, which to me is an improvement.

At the start of the term, I barely said anything at all. You would be lucky to get two sentences a week out of me. My goal was just to be able to talk once a week in class. After the first few weeks I progressed into participating in nearly every discussion that I was present for. I think that because I was able to do that, the class time became more valuable for me.

By participating I got more out of the class than I would have if I just sat there.

Equally important, many students write that their listening skills have improved:

The discussions during this course helped to improve my communication skills. My ability to listen, rather than ignoring a speaker, developed. I made a conscious effort to think about what was said.

I feel that I was able to meet the majority of my goals. I spent a lot of time making sure that I was paying attention and not formulating my own personal opinions. This was my biggest goal, and I think that for the most part I was able to meet this goal.

Some students, of course, do not make such progress, but the majority say they are pleased with both their own skill development and the group discussions as a whole. The only potential pitfall I have discovered is that if students feel they are being graded on their progress, they may artificially inflate their self-evaluations. Since being alerted to this problem by a student, I have stopped using these self-evaluations as the basis for a grade.

Of course, the institutional context affects both the skills the students bring to my classroom and their reactions to this exercise. I have used these assignments in sociology classes at two large state universities in the Pacific Northwest. This means that the student body is largely white or Asian American and middle class. At both universities, class sizes tend to be large, so students may not have had much experience in discussion-based classes. Some of their enthusiasm for these strategies may therefore be due to the novelty of engaging in class discussion at all, and instructors who use these techniques in different institutional contexts may encounter different responses. However, my experiences suggest that this is not the only reason for students' enthusiasm. Students often compare the classroom atmosphere to that of other classes of similar size and format, and explicitly attribute

this atmosphere and their own progress to the discussion strategies I have described here:

By having written the goal down and knowing we would have to evaluate our progress at the end of the quarter, I thought about my goal and tried to work towards it.

I learned that if you actually set goals for yourself, when you are in the situation that one of the goals addresses, you think about those goals and performance increases. I plan to use these skills in other class discussions throughout the rest of my schooling. Setting goals, and periodically revising them and keeping myself accountable for them, is something I plan to continue into the future.

I would also like to encourage other professors and students to employ this type of teaching, especially with such sensitive topics as we have discussed throughout the term.

Another possibility is that these effects are fostered by some other element of my teaching style or the topics of the classes I teach. However, my observation of the difference between classes in which I use these techniques and those in which I do not argues against this hypothesis. In addition, other teachers who have used these techniques in their own classes have reported similar results. These classes have ranged from a 100-student, required undergraduate theory class, to a 40-student criminology class, to a 7-student graduate theory class.

### CONCLUSIONS

My own perceptions of the effectiveness of these strategies mirror those of the students quoted above. When I have used these strategies, class discussions have seemed more focused and less superficial. Because participation is more evenly distributed, I spend less time worrying about how to keep particular students from dominating the discussion and how to encourage other students to enter it, and more time thinking about the content of discussion. The focus on discussion as a collective process seems

to foster a greater sense of community, with more interaction and respect among students.

Of course, these results are anecdotal, and should be tested by future research.<sup>4</sup> But I suggest these strategies are likely to be effective because they address the two issues I identified at the beginning of this paper: the collective nature of discussion and individual skill development. Without a clear understanding that discussion is a collective enterprise, students (long accustomed to individual, performance-oriented class participation) are likely to focus on their own contributions and the instructor's reactions to them. If only the quantity of one's own utterances matter, listening and thinking become relatively unimportant and discussion participation is a problem only for the quiet students, rather than a group activity at which everyone can improve. If discussion is a collective process, however, then all students share collective responsibility for the quality of the discussion; if discussion is unsatisfactory, all students are implicated.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, without attention to discussion skills development, discussions will always be lopsided and few students will become better participants as a result of their class experiences. Performance, not skill development, will remain the focus of attention.

In order to overcome these difficulties, it is necessary to focus explicitly on goals and skill development at both the individual and group levels, and to do so explicitly. The strategies I have outlined here serve two purposes. First, they help our students'

<sup>4</sup>For example, an experimental design could be used to compare this strategy to Hedley's (1993) "points for participation" method. Such an experiment could examine the effects of the two strategies on multiple outcomes, including the quality of class discussion, student learning, class attendance, and teacher evaluations.

<sup>5</sup>Indeed, this line of thought suggests that grading the class as a whole on the quality of their discussions might produce more effective discussions than grading individual students. While I have not experimented with this type of incentive, it could prove productive.

communication skills, which will serve them well both inside and outside the classroom. Second, they help make classes more satisfying, for us and for our students. Although they require only a small investment of time and energy, I have found that these strategies make the work of discussion facilitation much easier and more pleasurable. Rather than having the instructor struggle to motivate students to participate, we all work together to produce richer and more satisfying discussions.

### APPENDIX A. DISCUSSION ASSIGNMENT INSTRUCTIONS

#### *About Discussion*

Discussion is the heart of this class. Although you will spend considerable time outside of class reading and writing, the majority of our time in class will be devoted to discussion. Through discussion, we will work to understand and critically evaluate course readings and each other's ideas. Discussion skills are therefore essential to the success of this class. However, my experience has shown that many students (as well as many instructors) have not had the opportunity to develop good discussion skills, and as a result class discussions can be boring, intimidating, unhelpful, or otherwise frustrating. In this class, we will attempt to avoid some of these problems by focusing explicitly on developing discussion skills.

#### *Assignment #1: What is a Good Discussion?*

As a starting point for thinking about discussion, please write a brief (1–2 page) paper in which you address two issues:

1. What makes a good discussion? What kind of discussion do you find most stimulating, most thought-provoking, or most helpful for understanding new ideas?
2. What makes someone a good discussion participant? What kinds of participation do you find most helpful in other students? What kinds of participation are most frustrating?

Please come to class prepared to discuss your ideas.

#### *Assignment #2: Discussion Goals*

In this second brief (1–2 page) paper, please think about yourself in relation to the ideas about discussion from your first paper and our in-class discussion:

1. Assess your own discussion abilities at this point. What do you do well? What would you like to do better? Be sure to think about the full range of discussion skills: listening, speaking, asking questions, responding, etc.
2. Write a list of goals for your own discussion participation this term. You should include both general goals and concrete, specific steps you will take toward those goals. Be sure that your goals are realistic: think about what you can actually accomplish in a term. Developing discussion skills is a long-term process; your aim for this term should be to make positive progress toward your long-term goals.

#### *Assignment #3: Discussion Evaluation*

You have now spent a term working toward your discussion goals. For this final paper, please write a brief (1–2 page) self-evaluation of your progress. Where were you at the beginning of the term, and how have your skills developed since then?

Did you meet the goals you set for yourself? If not, did you move toward them? What did you do to achieve this progress? What factors helped (or hindered) this progress? Finally, what are your goals for the future, and what steps do you plan to take to achieve them? Your evaluation, together with your original discussion goals, is due on the last day of class.

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