**Orchestrating Effective Discussions**

Discussion is appropriate for enabling students to do the following:

* Apply information delivered through instructor-directed means to situations they perceive as relevant.
* Evaluate the validity of their previously held beliefs.
* Analyze the diverse perspectives of other students, within the class--a significant intellectual need among younger students, who (many would say) have largely been conditioned to be self-absorbed.
* Synthesize material delivered from diverse sources--textbook reading, the instructor, and other students from a range of backgrounds.
* Evaluate the evidence and logic provided by others against their own developing knowledge base.
* Gain motivation for pursuit of additional learning.

To achieve an atmosphere in which classroom discussions achieve their fullest potential, employ the following common-sense practices:

* Early in the term, break the class into smaller groups of no more than five students (sometimes called "buzz groups") to discuss a critical question.
* Establish ground rules for discussion groups, including the valuing of all opinions and the expectation of some participation from each student.
* Before discussion begins, have students introduce themselves to each other and select a spokesperson for reporting their collective conclusions.
* Monitor the discussion within groups to ensure that "ground rules" are understood and followed.
* Elicit participation from all students by posing nonthreatening, "opinion" questions.
* Have each group report their finding in an orderly way, encouraging amplification of key points.
* Summarize the overall activity by citing appropriate points you heard within groups and asking for illumination from individuals making those points.
* In subsequent classes, expand group sizes somewhat.
* After an appropriate class culture of tolerance and openness is established, begin posing relatively broad, yet not overly abstract, questions to the entire class, then encourage them to apply course concepts through subsequent questions.
* Pause to allow students ample time to mentally process questions, encouraging their more grounded response which will build confidence and encourage heightened engagement.
* Call on a respondent who has raised a hand or who has through less obvious nonverbal signals indicated a willingness to participate.
* Scan the entire room so that you subsequently call on someone physically distant from the present speaker, creating a more dynamic atmosphere.
* Avoid calling on those whose body language indicates they are not mentally engaged--it will only stifle their future and others' present participation.
* Encourage involvement of nonparticipants out of earshot of other students.
* Provide feedback on the positive components of responses, especially from those who have heretofore been reluctant to participate.
* Be reluctant to directly criticize an "incorrect" response; instead, ask if someone "sees it another way," being sure to clarify the correct information before moving the discussion along.
* When discussion bogs down, summarize appropriate points before posing an additional question.
* Be extremely careful about providing the single, "correct" answer before students have had a chance to formulate their own responses.  Premature explanations from the instructor condition students to wait for such responses in subsequent discussions and stifle their mental engagement.
* Close discussion positively by asking if someone would like "the final word" or by stating how the conclusions apply to the course objectives.

**Source:** Lyons, Kysilka, Pawlas, *The Adjunct Professor's Guide to Success*, Allyn & Bacon, Needham Heights, MA, 1999.