

Leading Discussions



GO TO <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/discussions/#tools>

Discussion can take place in a variety of contexts and disciplines across the university, from seminars to labs to lectures. Engaging students in discussion deepens their learning and motivation by propelling them to develop their own views and hear their own voices.

Basic Principles

Effective discussion-leading is more than simply asking questions and letting students answer; it involves a nuanced set of roles and skills. This complexity is captured well by C. Roland (“Chris”) Christensen, who pioneered teaching by the case method and taught at the Harvard Business School for 50 years:

[E]ffective preparation for discussion classes takes more time, because instructors must consider not only what they will teach, but also who and how. And the classroom encounter consumes a great deal of energy; simultaneous attention to process (the flow of activities that make up a discussion) and content (the material discussed) requires emotional as well as intellectual engagement. . . . The discussion teacher is planner, host, moderator, devil’s advocate, fellow-student, and judge—a potentially confusing set of roles. Even the most seasoned group leader must be content with uncertainty, because discussion teaching is **the art of managing spontaneity**.

The following are links to resources that offer an overview of the variety of discussion-leading skills mentioned (or implied) by Christensen:

[Teaching Through Discussion](#), from the University of Washington, offers a perceptive and concise overview of four characteristics of good discussions: they are prepared in advance, are purposefully led, are assessed, and lead to more discussions.

Specific Tools and Strategies

Beginning

[Learning Student Names](#)

Knowing and using student names is an oft-overlooked but vital foundation for an effective discussion. This article, published in the National Teaching and Learning Forum, is a compendium of 27 concrete tips from faculty across the country on learning and remembering student names.

[The Dreaded Discussion: Ten Ways to Start](#)

by historian Peter Frederick, points out ten ways to jump-start a discussion, from having students generate concrete images or illustrative quotations from the reading, to engaging in debates or role play. This website summarizes those strategies.

Questioning, Listening, Responding

It is important to think about **what kinds of questions to ask**, of **whom**, at **what point** in the discussion. There are many ways to categorize kinds of questions, as explained in the following resources:

[Bloom's Taxonomy](#) is a summary of Benjamin Bloom's classic six-part scheme (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation), originally published in 1956. The taxonomy outlines intellectual tasks (easily framed as questions) that build in cognitive complexity. For more on Bloom's Taxonomy, see [Major Categories in the Taxonomy of Educational Objectives](#).

Facing Common Challenges

[Six Ways to Discourage Learning](#) is a nice article from the Education Office of the American Astronomical Society discussing six classroom behaviors you should note and avoid, such as insufficient "wait time" for an answer, or fixation at a low-level of questioning.

[Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom](#), from Harvard University, explores teaching situations where "people's feelings — often conflictual — rise to a point that threatens teaching and learning." Such "hot" encounters may center on discussion of particular kinds of issues, or simply arise out of classroom dynamics in any discipline. This document offers helpful suggestions on how teachers might think about the moment, helping the students to think about it, getting the students to do the work, not avoiding the issue, etc.

[The Dog Ate My Homework: Dealing with Unprepared Students](#) concisely describes strategies for encouraging students to be prepared, as well as for dealing with the occasional unprepared class (polls, quotation exercise, etc.).

Models and Case Studies

The [Midpoint Reflection](#) exercise can deepen and invigorate an ongoing discussion by giving a student the opportunity to ask questions that have not yet been addressed. Used from the beginning and over the course of a semester, it usually prompts participation from even the quietest students by shifting the role of facilitation away from the teacher, thus encouraging students to turn to each other as sources of expertise.

The [Capture](#) is an exercise particularly useful for prompting discussion of secondary texts that may be difficult for students initially to grasp. Students distill answers to four key aspects of the text: the author's purpose, central message, validations / applications, and values / assumptions. Instructors then can ask students to share and compare their captures, either in small groups or to the class at large.

Center for Teaching Resources

[Services for Individuals](#): Center staff are available to consult with instructors on any aspect of discussion-leading. Instructors often find that watching a [video](#) of themselves leading a discussion is a particularly useful way to enhance their skills in the classroom. In addition, a [Small Group Analysis \(SGA\)](#) can focus on students' perceptions of their discussion experiences. To arrange for a consultation, call 322-7290.

The Teaching Workshop

Every year, the Center sponsors a workshop series on basic teaching principles and practices, including a session on Effective Discussion-Leading. Check the CFT Workshops & Conferences program schedule.

Center for Teaching Library

The Center's library has dozens of articles, as well as books and videos (available for check-out through ACORN), related to discussion-leading. The following are resources that Vanderbilt faculty and TAs have found particularly useful:

Books:

Brookfield, S. **Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms** (1999). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This insightful volume explores a range of theoretical and pragmatic aspects of discussion-leading, including how discussion helps learning and enlivens classrooms; keeping discussions going through questioning, listening, responding, and creative grouping; and discussion in culturally diverse classrooms.

Christensen, C.R. et. al., eds. **Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership** (1991). Boston, MA: Harvard Business School.

This collection of essays, stemming from a Harvard-based seminar of experienced practitioners, offers the wisdom of practice on a broad range of issues, including: establishing a teaching-learning contract; questioning, listening and response; ethical dilemmas and the discussion process; and the rewards of classroom observation.

Video: Christensen, C.R. **The Art of Discussion-Leading** (1995). Cambridge, MA. : The Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University. [Read a review of this video.](#)