

Practical Tips for Effective Discussions

The Connors Family Learning Center, Boston College

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Practical Tips for Effective Discussions

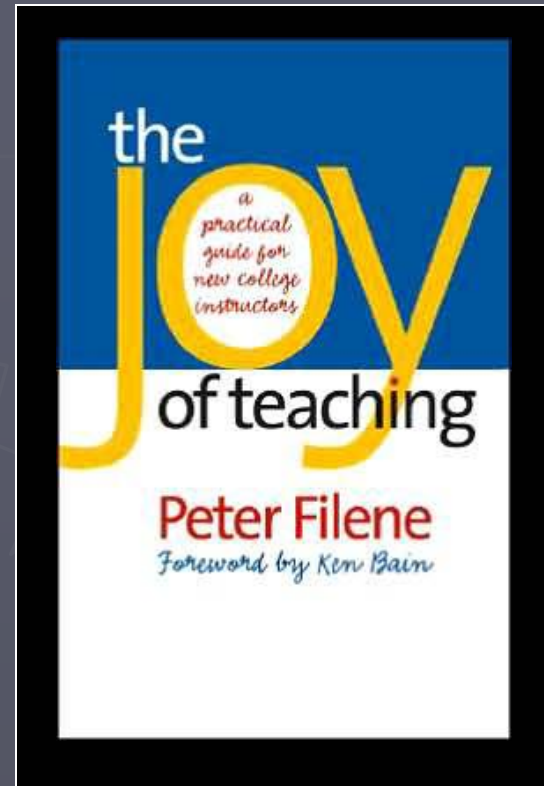
- Classroom discussions can be among the most rewarding teaching experiences, but also among the most complicated and challenging.
- Today's focus: concrete steps and tactics that can make any discussion better.

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- Other graduate students and faculty members—peers—a great resource for sharing ideas and suggestions.
- Also look at some of the excellent published sources...

Suggested resource:

Peter Filene, *The Joy of Teaching: a practical guide for new college instructors* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2005).



Practical Tips for Effective Discussions

1. Preparing

2. Facilitating

3. Improving

Practical Tips for Effective Discussions

1. Preparing

- Set goals
- Tweak material
- Student preparation
- Why it matters
- Signal main points

Practical Tips for Effective Discussions

1. Preparing

- Set goals

In order for the class to be a success, you need to be clear what you are trying to accomplish.

For example, are you trying to convey core facts or simply start a conversation?

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1. Preparing

- Tweak material

Is there too much material to be covered in the course reading? Is it too vague? Can you narrow it down, or make it more relevant?

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1. Preparing

- Student preparation

Can you email the students in advance to point them towards key points for the discussion, or perhaps signal some of the questions you will use?

This can be especially helpful for shy students or those who like to think over their thoughts before volunteering to respond in class.

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1. Preparing

- Why it matters

Explain why the discussion is an important part of the course. Be clear on how it figures into the grading scheme and what role material covered in discussion will play in exams and assignments.

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1. Preparing

- Signal main points

At some point in the discussion, flag the key elements. This is helpful in showing students what material is more important, and provides a framework in what can be a wide-ranging discussion with many different opinions.

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1. Preparing

- Set goals
- Tweak material
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- Why it matters
- Signal main points

Practical Tips for Effective Discussions

2. Facilitating

- Rules and expectations
- Classroom dynamics
- Questions
- Start big
- Interesting parallels

Practical Tips for Effective Discussions

2. Facilitating

- Rules and expectations

Tell the class what you are trying to accomplish in the class. Honesty can be a real asset. You are in this together with your students; everyone wants the discussion to be worthwhile and enjoyable.

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2. Facilitating

- Classroom dynamics

Learn names to foster a good atmosphere and create a sense of community. Variables like seating arrangements can make a difference.

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2. Facilitating

- Questions

Think about your phrasing. Try to start with open-ended questions that allow everyone to get involved with an opinion or something they noticed in the reading.

Save the harder, more specific questions until the ice is broken.

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2. Facilitating

- Start big

Setting out the areas you will cover in the class—use the board, or an overhead—will allow you to let the discussion move freely without falling into what can appear to be chaos.

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2. Facilitating

- Interesting parallels

Can you find ways to make the material seem topical and relevant? Any kind of related material—newspapers, web sites—can make a link that while exploring the same issues seems more “interesting” than the assigned reading.

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2. Facilitating

- Rules and expectations
- Classroom dynamics
- Questions
- Start big
- Interesting parallels

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3. Improving

- Feedback
- Small groups
- Switch things up

Practical Tips for Effective Discussions

3. Improving

- Feedback

Have students give their thoughts on the class and provide suggestions. This can be individual and anonymous, or perhaps in small groups where they discuss the class and report back to the larger group.

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3. Improving

- Small groups

Change the dynamic in the classroom by breaking up into small groups. Perhaps provide written topics or questions to focus conversation, while you float around the room.

Groups can discuss the same issues, or different ones and report back.

Use a short session at the end of the class to tie up the main points.

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3. Improving

- Switch things up

There is almost no limit to the different ideas and strategies you can employ in a discussion. Debates can bring an issue alive; or, stage the trial of a controversial figure, where students play the roles of judge, lawyers, jury, etc.

Instead of a written description, an image or sound clip might be more effective, and trigger new directions in a discussion.



A painting can spark discussion on village life

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