

Facilitating Group Discussions: From the Seminar Room to the Lecture Hall

Winter 2022
4-week seminar
January 10 -31, 2022
Mondays 1:30-3:30 PM
Instructor: Dr Yurgos Politis

Course Description

This seminar considers the purposes and practices of discussion as a mode of teaching. We'll investigate the reasons why we teach by discussion, and the objectives we have for discussion in our courses. Research on discussion-based teaching will help us understand the role that social norms play in the discussion classroom, and invite us to consider how we shape those norms in the discussions we orchestrate for students. We'll also consider how we make discussions as inclusive as possible, and how to hold discussions in different modalities: in classes large and small, in those that meet face-to-face and those that meet online. Doctoral students in the seminar will develop discussion protocols and strategies that they can use in the courses they will teach in their specific contexts and disciplines.

Learning goals

Upon completion of this course, you should be able to:

- Articulate the role that discussion will play in promoting the learning or values of your students
- Establish discussion norms that will foster inclusive participation in your discussion courses
- Know and apply various practical strategies to encourage student participation in both small-group and large-class discussions, including in-class and online activities.
- Develop a plan for the evaluation of discussion in your teaching, both for your students and for yourself.

Course Requirements

The course is offered as a pass-fail, non-degree, 1-credit course, and will run for 4 weeks (one 120-minute session each week). To receive a pass, students should attend all four class sessions and complete all course assignments. For the CTL Certificate Program, this seminar qualifies as one of the Stage 2 Focused Inquiry seminars. There are no prerequisites for this seminar. All course readings and are posted in the course Moodle site, and can be accessed there.

Assignments

Participation: Most importantly, I hope you will be present and attentive to each of our discussion sessions. We will experiment with multiple methods of engaging in discussion throughout our four weeks. At times I will ask everyone to contribute something to our discussion, and at other times will simply invite people to volunteer as they wish. We will use the chat function and breakout rooms. We will test-drive some specific discussion-starting strategies from our readings. In all of these forms I invite you to be as engaged as possible, and to remain as fully present to one another as you are able. The more attention and engagement you give to our discussions, the more we will all learn about how to cultivate an effective discussion. In practical terms, you can miss one of the 3 first sessions, but you would have to attend and actively engage during the 4th session in order to be eligible to complete the course.

Final Assignment: Your final assignment for the course will have two parts.

The first part will be a Role-play of a discussion on a topic you will be assigned to. You will be divided into small groups (3-4) and facilitate the discussion with the rest of your group and devise a grading system for student engagement. Your peers will offer you feedback through the following rubric:

Concept	Criteria	Yes/No	Comments/ Suggestions
Content	Were the questions, prompts, hints used by the facilitator helpful in advancing the discussion?		
Coherence	Did the facilitator use consistently appropriate language?		
Style	Was there a natural flow of ideas and an effective conclusion?		
Level of student engagement	Were the students actively participating in the discussion?		
Quality of student engagement	Was there depth and rigour in the students' contributions?		
Grading system	Was it appropriate for the activity?		

The second part involves a 500-1000 word self-reflective piece on the whole process, i.e., doing the role-play, evaluating the discussions (you can use the following rubric to guide you in the self-reflection), reading the Peer feedback.

	Under-developed	Developing	Skilled
DESCRIBING EXPERIENCE Participant provides a description of the experience, observation, activity, reading, etc. upon which he or she is reflecting	Unclear and vague	Clear but general	Clear and focused on the specific aspects that challenge the student
GENERAL REFLECTION Evidence that the participant has questioned or evaluated their prior perceptions, actions, or beliefs	Minimal reflection limited to description of general opinions and behaviors without reflection on underlying assumptions, habits, or values	Making connection between participant's personal assumptions, habits, or values and the opinions or behaviors upon which the participant is reflecting.	Critical evaluation (questioning, examining more closely) participant's personal assumptions, habits, or values and their connection to the opinions or behaviors upon which the participant is reflecting.
USING INSIGHTS Participant's reflection leads to plans for future action	Participant's reflection is entirely backward looking, with no indication of how the participant will use the insights and skills gained	participant has generalized statements regarding how the reflection will direct future actions or beliefs	Participant provides concrete plans for further action or reflection for a specific purpose such as developing skills, improving self-understanding, or refining belief systems
CONNECTIONS TO READING/RESEARCH Participant uses coursework, reading, or independent research to advance reflection as appropriate	Does not include any reference to outside reading or research to inform reflection	Reflection refers to past readings or research in a descriptive or citation fashion with little indication of motivation to use reading or research to inform reflection	Connects reflection to past readings and research and indicates efforts to re-read to learn more about aspects of the experience. Describes specific insights or extensions of reflection gained from that reading and research
WRITING QUALITY Quality of writing by providing clear topic, using concrete and precise language, organizing thoughts, and proofreading	Unfocused, unorganized, vague, and sloppy	Some focus and organization. Language has some precision. Essay was proofread	Topic(s) are clear and specific, descriptions use concrete and precise language and insights are precise and clear, Organization is apparent and effective. Essay has been proofread

Course Schedule

Week One: The Ends of Discussion

- Introduction and an overview of the course.
- Ice-breaker
- Degrees of Student Engagement
- Why do we use discussion in higher education?
- How Do Students Learn from Participation in Class Discussion?
- Barriers to Discussion

Essential Reading: Brookfield and Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, Chapter Two.

Week Two: The Norms of Discussion

- Introduction
- Deliberative vs communicative model of discussion
- Model Democratic Discourse
- How would you plan for a group discussion?
- How do you ensure an effective discussion?
- Discussion structure
- Preparation for next week: Select discussion strategy(ies) from Peter Frederick reading you have/would adopt

Essential Reading:

Howard, *Discussion in the College Classroom*, Chapter One;

Kelly Hogan and Viji Sathy, "How to Make Your Teaching More Inclusive," *Chronicle of Higher Education*;

Keany, "Waiting for Your Students"

Week Three: The Strategies of Discussion

- Examples of strategies
 - i. Concrete image
 - ii. Forced Debate
 - iii. Engaging questioning (Activity: Very Bad Day)
 - iv. Small groups
 - v. Role-play (Instructions for final assignment)
- Select the discussion strategy from the Peter Frederick reading
- Discussion

Essential Reading: Frederick, "The Dreaded Discussion: Ten Ways to Start";

Lang, "How to Teach a Good First Day of Class."

Week Four: Discussion modalities & evaluation

- Modes of Discussion
- Evaluating Discussions
- How to evaluate the “A very bad day” activity
- Final assignment: Role-Play
- Plenary discussion and reflection
- Wrap-up

Essential Reading:

Darby, “The Secret Weapon of Good Online Teaching: Discussion Forums”;

Bok Center, “Tips for Teachers: Twenty Ways to Make Lectures More Participatory”;

Michael Sandel, “Justice: What’s the Right Thing To Do?” (Watch the first 15-20 minutes of the video);

Howard, *Discussion in the College Classroom*, Chapter Five

Final Assignment Due on February 7th:

You need to submit the discussion plan/protocol, the evaluation process (e.g., rubric or marking criteria or anything else) and the self-reflection piece.