

Teaching Tip Tuesday

Effective Discussion

Whether face-to-face or online, group discussions can be an important tool for student learning. Discussions allow students to integrate concepts covered in different lessons, outline reasoning, practice articulating their knowledge, and apply conceptual information to novel cases. Done correctly, discussions are spun gold. Done incorrectly, they are frustrating to students and instructors alike. Here are some tips to making group discussions in your course more effective for student learning.

1 Prepare students to discuss

Preparation prior to discussion allows students time to consider material and formulate ideas before having to speak. Good preparation reduced reticence to participate. Strategies include:

- Assigning readings or case studies to be completed prior to the discussion to provide common knowledge among students.
- Assigning a set of questions to help focus thought prior to the discussion. These questions may be factual, relate to interpretation, compare different theories or interpretations, relate to value judgements, or prompt critical assessment of premises and conclusions. It is helpful to collect these for credit to ensure better preparation.
- Assigning a readiness assessment or quiz to encourage completion of preparatory material.

2 Effectively moderate the discussion

Organization and moderation are key to good discussions. Strategies include:

- Beginning with specific prompts or questions to ensure a smooth start.
- Using small groups to increase participation and minimize passivity.
- Providing students with a worksheet to monitor the flow of discussion, map arguments, document contributions of group members, and help keep students engaged.
- Making clear the ground-rules for how to move the discussion forward and appropriate discussion behavior by providing n/etiquette guidelines to reduce conflicts, monopolization, and ensure productive commenting.

3 Provide an opportunity for individual reflection

A post discussion assignment that allows metacognitive reflection on what students learned as a result of the discussion will help students solidify their understanding, and will increase both their valuation of and participation in the discussion.