DISCUSSION-BASED LEARNING

PURPOSE
Discussion-based learning provides deeply engaging learning experiences, particularly when outcomes are complex, and require application and synthesis.

DESCRIPTION
Discussion-based learning enables student involvement through instructor-directed questions and student participation. This requires that students contribute and learn from each other in an environment that is directed by prepared instructors. Consider these ideas:

Plan
Unfortunately, many instructors assume that leading a discussion requires simply showing up to class. Such a view minimizes the power of preparation. Consider the following questions in your planning:

- What are the learning outcomes?
- What questions open, transition, and close class?
- How will I manage the time?
- What preparation do the participants need?
- How can I assess perspectives before discussion?
- Are there specific individuals I should include?
- Are these ideas captured in a teaching plan?

Create a Participatory Environment
Discussion-based learning requires student participation—both by contributing comments and by listening to others. Find ways to involve everyone in the discussion, foster a safe learning environment, and encourage accountability.

Manage “Pastures” of Learning
The analogy of a pasture can be a useful way to think about leading a discussion. Herdsman allow their flocks to graze on fertile pastures. The flocks do not wander aimlessly.

- Choose the pasture. Usually, but not always, the pasture should be defined by you. The choice of pasture should be informed by the learning outcomes for the course and lesson.
- Fence in the pasture. Do not allow a discussion to drift or become erratic. Deepen the discussion within a given topic. When comments drift, redirect and deepen the conversation.
- Allow freedom within a pasture. Avoid over-management. Within a given discussion, allow students opportunities to explore areas that reflect their own preparation and engagement.

Ask Effective Questions
An effective question encourages students to engage in self-thinking and self-discovery. Consider questions that require not only knowledge but application and synthesis. Be thoughtful in preparing questions.

Deepen the Discussion
- Allow students time to think. Once you have asked an effective question, wait for a response. Do not be so anxious to get a response that you call of the first hand raised.
- Listen. Don’t be so anxious to move forward that you forget to listen and learn with your students. Practice restating comments. React based on what you hear.
- Ask deepening questions. Do not settle for cursory responses. Use follow-up questions that deepen discussion and set expectations: “Why do you feel that way?” or “How did you reach that conclusion?” Expand questions to the rest of class: “How would you respond to David’s position?” or “What else should we consider?”
- Make connections. Help the class make important connections to previous lessons or to ideas within the discussion itself. And while you may articulate these directly, it is often more effective do this through questions: “How does this relate to what David said earlier?” or “How is the American Revolution different than Pakistani independence?”

Reflection and Synthesis.
Many discussion-based strategies encourage divergent discussion before convergence occurs. Some approaches specifically advocate cognitive dissonance, leaving students unsettled on conclusions. Regardless, it is important to allow reflection and synthesis. This might occur through in-class questions or through outside reflection activities.

Employ Multiple Methods of Exploration

http://www.byui.edu/learning-and-teaching/instructional-tools

©Copyright 2016 BYU–Idaho

08/18/16
There are many teaching strategies that can be brought into a discussion to deepen the learning. Consider:

- **Enriching content.** Consider incorporating additional media, quotes, visual aids, videos, or other teaching materials to support a discussion.
- **Effective problems.** Invite students to take a position, defend an answer, vote, or take action. Consider effective problems, such as concept tests and case studies to focus your discussion.
- **Other forms of engagement.** Incorporate complementary teaching strategies. Consider using paired-learning strategies, group work, and other Teach One Another strategies.

**EXAMPLES**

**American Foundations**

- **Pre-class planning.** Professor Jones prepares for tomorrow’s discussion on Colonial attitudes in pre-Revolution America. To initially assess his learning outcomes he uses a pre-class poll. He includes a question on whether students would have been Loyalist or Revolutionary. Reviewing the poll data, he realizes that over 90% of the class vote Revolutionary. He then uses this information to revise his teaching plan. He notes he hasn’t heard from David in class, whose poll response was Revolutionary. He also notes that Jill, a consistently sharp student, was in the 10% that voted Loyalist. Jones decides to draw on a quote from John Adams in the class discussion.
- **Classroom Discussion.** Professor Jones opens the discussion: “David, why do you say you would have been a Revolutionary?” David responds: “Because England was imposing on my rights?” Professor Jones engages with follow-up questions before asking the class what other reasons they would have for being Revolutionaries. He encourages them to bring in information from the pre-class reading. Jones then begins to push back by asking questions. He then calls on Jill and asks her: “Why would so many people have remained Loyalists?” Jones designs a role play between Jill and David. He then introduces the quote from John Adams that appears to defend England. A discussion ensues.
- **Reflection and Synthesis.** Toward the end of discussion, Professor Jones asks the class: “Why is it important to understand the tension we have discussed?” He pairs students and asks them to discuss, “How will understanding the reasons to remain a Loyalist affect other decisions leading-up to the Revolution?” Jones then asks the class to think about what they learned in that day. A similar question is included in the weekly quiz.

**TIPS**

- **Focus on learning outcomes.** Too often, discussions can drift from key learning outcomes. Be flexible and adaptive, but ensure the discussion support your learning outcomes.
- **Teaching plan.** Prepare for the discussion by writing a teaching plan with key questions, estimated time allocations, and key materials.
- **Practice writing questions.** Outline opening and transition questions. Anticipate follow-up questions and practice writing them separately.

**PITFALLS**

- **Erratic Discussion.** When a discussion shifts erratically from one topic to another, it is difficult for students to engage and participate. Shifting too rapidly also prevents deep discussion.
- **Inflexibility.** It is important to have a plan and meet learning objectives, but an instructor should not be so inflexible that he or she does not respond to student energy or to the impressions of the Spirit.

**KEY ARTICLES**
