

Help Students Learn More Effectively in Class Discussions

Discussion is a widely used teaching strategy in higher education, but research has shown they are not always productive learning experiences (Kuhn, 2016; Nokes-Malach, Zepeda, Richey, & Gadgil, 2019). The term, discussion, refers to many different types of interactions, ranging from brief, informal episodes to highly structured exchanges. The ground rules for discussion in one class can be very different than in another class. One reason for ineffective discussions is that students do not know the kind of interactive learning you expect them to engage in (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014). They may be uncertain about the purpose and goals of discussion, what they are supposed to learn and how to learn it through discussion.

You can help students participate more effectively with guidelines that define the types of interactions that typify productive and unproductive discussions in your class. Students can use the guidelines to monitor and assess their own behavior and judge the overall quality of the discussion.

Below is an example of discussion guidelines. They specify behavior that supports effective discussions (left column) and derails effective discussion (right column). The guidelines are a rough model of what class discussion should look like, the criteria and standards for class discussion. Students use the guidelines to monitor and assess their behavior during class discussions. Ostensibly, as students internalize the guidelines, they learn to participate effectively in discussions.

Incidence of Productive and Counterproductive Discussion Behavior- Check any you engaged in and circle any you observed in others.	
<input type="checkbox"/> asked for, gave information	<input type="checkbox"/> monopolized discussion
<input type="checkbox"/> asked for, gave reactions	<input type="checkbox"/> called attention to self
<input type="checkbox"/> asked, answered questions	<input type="checkbox"/> chronic interruptions
<input type="checkbox"/> restated ideas/points in articles	<input type="checkbox"/> criticized others (put down)
<input type="checkbox"/> restated ideas/points of discussants	<input type="checkbox"/> changed subject often
<input type="checkbox"/> asked for/gave examples	<input type="checkbox"/> frequent irrelevant comments
<input type="checkbox"/> asked for/gave summary	<input type="checkbox"/> withdrawn, did not participate
<input type="checkbox"/> asked for/gave evidence or support for ideas	<input type="checkbox"/> apologetic
<input type="checkbox"/> redirected group to return to task	<input type="checkbox"/> rude or disrespectful
<input type="checkbox"/> monitored time	<input type="checkbox"/> ignored a group member
<input type="checkbox"/> encouraged, supported other ideas	<input type="checkbox"/> used dismissive gestures (rolled eyes)
<input type="checkbox"/> elaborated on others' ideas	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER- please specify:
<input type="checkbox"/> confronted unhelpful behavior effectively	
<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER-please specify	

Developing discussion guidelines. I recommend co-developing the guidelines with your students. Students have well established ideas about class discussions, especially about behavior that inhibits participation and learning. Moreover, students are more likely to follow guidelines if they have helped create them. As instructor, you can ensure that the guidelines reflect key aspects of disciplinary learning through discussion. For example, students are typically expected to use “evidence” to support their ideas in discussions. Your guidelines can include specific ways to use evidence consistent with your discipline, e.g., explain how research from the assigned readings supports your generalizations.

Use part of a class period at the start of the course to establish discussion guidelines. For example, I explain that the class involves a significant amount of discussion and that explicit guidelines will help them participate and learn effectively in class discussions. Based on their experience, students generate a list of productive and unproductive discussion behavior. As instructor I contribute items to the list. Mine are behaviors that have been shown through research to enhance student learning. In class we compile, organize and edit the list. Some items do not make the final cut, but students can use the “other” category if they want to include these in their evaluations.

Using guidelines to improve students’ participation and learning in discussions. During discussion students use the guidelines to track their own behavior and that of their classmates during the discussion period. At the end of class they answer questions about their experience, such as

- Give an example of a productive contribution you made to the discussion.
- Give an example of a counterproductive contribution you made to the discussion.
- What, if any, aspects of your behavior do you need to change to participate more effectively in discussions?
- What, if any, aspects of your behavior do you need to change to learn more from class discussions?
- What will you do to improve your learning from class discussion?

Ask students to assess the quality of their group or whole class discussion.

- What, if any, aspects of other students' behavior need to change to enhance learning from class discussions?

Ask students to assess your role in the discussion (Optional for instructors who want this feedback)

- What, if anything, did the instructor do that facilitated effective class discussion?
- What, if anything, did the instructor do that inhibited effective class discussion?
- What, if anything, should the instructor do or not do that would improve the quality of class discussion?

Suggestions for instructors.

1. Provide specific examples of good and bad discussion behavior. Even when students use discussion guidelines, they still may not fully understand certain types of behavior, such as analyze, evaluate, and use evidence. You can help by pointing to good examples of these from class discussions.
2. Give feedback. Collect and review students’ discussion forms. Give feedback to the class about any noteworthy patterns, good or bad.
3. Use the guidelines judiciously, as needed. If students are required to use the guidelines too frequently, they may perceive it as busy work and not take it seriously. On the other hand, if they use the guidelines only one or two times during the term, it may have little effect on their understanding and participation in discussion. One strategy is to use the guidelines often during the first few weeks of the term and then less frequently during the remainder of the term. By analyzing students’ responses, you may get a sense of the right dosage for your class.

References

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DISCUSSION EVALUATION FORM (sample)

To Instructors: The purpose of a “Discussion Evaluation Form” is to type to help students learn to monitor and assess their discussion activity. The shaded portion lists characteristics of effective and ineffective class discussion. Students use it during class to monitor how they participate in class discussion. At the end of class, they answer questions about their experience. This self-assessment activity supports metacognition related to learning from discussions. Students compare their behavior to the “model” of effective discussion behavior and reflect on how and what they learn through discussion.

Name (or anonymous):

Date:

Incidence of Productive and Counterproductive Discussion Behavior- Check any you engaged in and circle any you observed in others.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> asked for, gave information | <input type="checkbox"/> monopolized discussion |
| <input type="checkbox"/> asked for, gave reactions | <input type="checkbox"/> called attention to self |
| <input type="checkbox"/> asked, answered questions | <input type="checkbox"/> chronic interruptions |
| <input type="checkbox"/> restated ideas/points in articles | <input type="checkbox"/> criticized others (put down) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> restated ideas/points of discussants | <input type="checkbox"/> changed subject often |
| <input type="checkbox"/> asked for/gave examples | <input type="checkbox"/> frequent irrelevant comments |
| <input type="checkbox"/> asked for/gave summary | <input type="checkbox"/> withdrawn, did not participate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> asked for/gave evidence or support for ideas | <input type="checkbox"/> apologetic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> redirected group to return to task | <input type="checkbox"/> rude or disrespectful |
| <input type="checkbox"/> monitored time | <input type="checkbox"/> ignored a group member |
| <input type="checkbox"/> encouraged, supported other ideas | <input type="checkbox"/> used dismissive gestures (rolled eyes) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> elaborated on others' ideas | <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER- please specify: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> confronted unhelpful behavior effectively | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> OTHER-please specify | |

Answer the questions below at the end of class

1. Give an example of a productive contribution you made to the discussion.
2. Give an example of a counterproductive contribution you made to the discussion.
3. What, if any, aspects of your behavior do you need to change to participate more effectively in discussions?
4. What, if any, aspects of your behavior do you need to change to learn more from class discussions?
5. What will you do to improve your learning from class discussion?
6. What, if any, aspects of other students' behavior need to change to enhance learning from class discussions?
7. Summarize the most important ideas from the discussion.

Optional questions related to the instructor’s role in supporting discussion

1. What, if anything, did the instructor do that facilitated effective class discussion?
2. What, if anything, did the instructor do that inhibited effective class discussion?
3. What, if anything, should the instructor do or not do that would improve the quality of class discussion?

Source: Cerbin, B. (2020, June). Discussion evaluation form, [Taking Learning Seriously](#)