

How to Learn More from Unstructured Class Discussions

The goals, expectations and formats of class discussions vary significantly. Some discussions are highly structured interactions in which there may be:

- an explicit learning goal
- a task for students to work on
- guidelines for participation
- a specific timeframe and a required product such as a summary or solution to an exercise

In contrast, informal discussions are less well structured. There may be no explicit learning goal or task to work on. Teachers may prompt informal discussion by posing a question to the class, asking for comments about a situation or issue, or inviting students to react to a question raised by a student in class. Instructors may not tell students how to interact with one another, and they may not moderate, guide or control the discussion. Informal discussions may be short, lasting only a minute or two, or more extended episodes. Instead of required participation, students may contribute voluntarily whenever and however they want.

Learning from unstructured, informal discussions.

Students often perceive informal, open-ended discussions as ambiguous learning situations and are uncertain about how to participate and what they should “get” out of the experience.

What can you learn or “get” from these types of discussions?

To make the most out of open-ended discussions, you may approach them as opportunities to

- formulate and articulate your own ideas on topics you may not have thought about previously
- hear multiple points of view from classmates
- examine your own assumptions, beliefs and ideas
- compare your ideas to those of others
- explore diverse perspectives, beliefs, and ideas

To get more out of open-ended discussions, try these strategies:

- Listen to other students. Try to understand students’ comments and why they might believe them. Recognize that listening during a discussion is challenging for several reasons. First, if the views are unfamiliar and very different from your own, it may take time to make sense of them, more time than you have in class. Second, discussions lack coherence when students offer comments unrelated to the topic. It is difficult to follow ideas that bounce from topic to topic. Third, when you are trying to formulate your own comments during a discussion, you may not be able to listen to others at the same time.
- Try to identify similarities and differences among comments. Relate or link the comment just made to another comment made by a student, the teacher, or idea from course material. Connecting ideas helps you build better understanding of the topic. Otherwise a discussion can seem like a list of unrelated ideas and opinions.

- Think about how the comments are consistent or inconsistent with your own ideas and why. Thinking about “why” helps develop self-understanding.
- Use “evidence” to support your ideas. Usually discussions involve exploring the course content whether that means developing a better understanding of a topic, taking a position on an issue, or arriving at an answer to a specific problem. Students are expected to use “evidence” from the course material to support their views and answers. If you are uncertain, ask your instructor about what kinds of evidence or support are expected in the class.
- Think of examples that illustrate ideas being discussed. Examples can come from content covered in class, from the reading, or from experience. Thinking of an example involves elaborating on ideas, which supports deeper understanding.
- Try to make your comments relevant to the topic at hand and something that builds or expands on what has already been said.
- Withhold unrelated comments. Discussions become disjointed and confusing when each student says something unrelated to other comments. If you think of an important, but unrelated idea, write it down. Contribute it later when it is relevant.
- If asked to clarify your ideas, simply do your best to explain what you think and why. *Trying to explain an idea* is a potent way to develop your understanding of it even when you can’t produce a well-developed explanation.
- Jot down notes during the discussion. If the discussion has a designated organization, use it to structure your notes. For example, if the purpose of the discussion is to compare and contrast two perspectives, then use a matrix to list similarities, differences as well as ideas that do not seem to be related to the topic. If there is no designated organization, look for a way to organize the comments, e.g., by topic, perspectives, opinions.
- At the end of the discussion, take a minute to try to remember the ideas that stand out as most relevant, important or insightful. Write these down as you think of them.
- Follow up questions. A common outcome of brief, informal discussions is uncertainty about the topic or issue you discussed. You may leave a discussion with unanswered questions or with greater uncertainty about the topic. If you need more information, ask your instructor, consult the course readings, ask a classmate, or do an Internet search to fill in missing information or to help resolve ambiguity.
- Tolerance for ambiguity. Not every discussion will lead to clear conclusions and closure. In exploring complex topics and issues, it helps to recognize that ambiguity is normal and that understanding the complexity of a topic is just as important as coming to a definitive conclusion.

Learning from structured discussions.

Structured discussions have specific goals, ground rules, guidelines, and norms for how to participate. They may be prompted by an assignment or exercise that can be done as a whole class or in small groups. They often require individual or group accountability such as a group summary or answers to specific questions or problems.

Teachers may use their own format for structured discussions or follow one of many instructional strategies that involve structured discussions including, peer learning, peer instruction, peer review, collaborative learning, cooperative learning, peer-led team learning, structured controversy, team-based learning, problem-based learning, and more.

Of course, you need to follow the instructor's guidelines. However, even when the discussion, task, and expectations are well defined, there are some cognitive processes that support learning from discussion and interaction in group situations. These include:

1. Retrieval practice. In group discussions it is easy to forget ideas. Retrieval practice (or practice testing) is an important strategy to retain and recall new information. You can test yourself by writing short summaries or bullet point summaries of a discussion without referring to your notes. The act of recalling information from memory helps you make more connections with the subject matter and consolidate your memory of it. You will be better able to recall it in the future (See [Practice Testing Tip Sheet](#)).
2. Elaboration and explanation. By elaborating on an idea and trying to explain it to others, you identify how ideas are connected to one another. As a result, you develop your understanding of the topic. In addition, you also discover which ideas are missing from your explanation or which do not sense to you. This is important so that you can fill in the knowledge gaps and further clarify the murky points.
3. Error-correction. When students discuss a topic, they can also focus on error detection and correction. By discussing a topic with others, students may be better able find and fix errors in their ideas.

References

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