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ADVICE

How to Build a Better Class Discussion

You mean I can do something to spark discussion other than just ask good questions?



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By James M. Lang | JULY 20, 2015

My research on teaching and learning in higher education began when I was hired as a graduate assistant at the Searle Center for Teaching Excellence, at Northwestern University, back in the late 1990s. The center had a large library room with tall bookcases lining one wall and deep filing cabinets against another. Within those cabinets the director, Ken Bain, had collected countless articles to peruse and photocopy about teaching and learning.

I had been teaching for a few years as a graduate student at that point, muddling my way through those early semesters without much guidance, as many of us did back then. The biggest challenge I faced as an instructor was shepherding great classroom discussions — I had loved them as an undergraduate, and I wanted to provide the same invigorating experience to my students. But as a teacher, I couldn't make it work consistently. Sometimes my classes had good discussions, and sometimes not, and in either case I couldn't figure out why.

When I arrived at the center (now called the Searle Center for Advanced Learning & Teaching), then, I went immediately in search of articles on teaching via class discussion. The one that caught my eye — and first sparked my interest in the literature on teaching and learning in academe — was "The Dreaded Discussion: Ten Ways to Start," a short and practical essay by a historian, Peter Frederick.

You mean, I practically exclaimed in amazement, I can do something to spark discussion other than just walk in and ask really interesting questions?

I hold a soft spot in my heart still for Frederick's article, which inspired me to read dozens of subsequent articles over the past 20 years on how to host an excellent discussion in a college classroom. Most of them, much like Frederick's, offer concrete suggestions for how to start discussions, how to keep them going, and how to handle common problems. I still enjoy reading those articles, hoping to pick up new tips whenever I can.

It was with just that expectation that I approached Jay R. Howard's new book, *Discussion in the College Classroom: Getting Your Students Engaged and Participating in Person and Online*. But what I found was something new, illuminating, and provocative: a research-based approach to understanding the classroom as a social space, and an awareness of how the norms of that social space can help or inhibit classroom discussion. Howard's book should be essential reading for any faculty member who wants to hear students speak up in the classroom, real or virtual.

In our conversations for this column, Howard described himself as "a sociologist who has been doing research in the scholarship of teaching and learning for over 20 years, primarily focusing on student participation in college-classroom discussion." Although he now serves as dean of liberal arts at Butler University, he told me that he still conceives of himself as a "faculty member at heart" and continues to teach. He calls teaching his "sanity break" from administrative duties.

In the book, he draws upon his sociology training to analyze the classroom as a space where certain social norms operate, and he considers how those norms shape our efforts to spark discussions. Social norms in general have a powerful influence on behavior, he argues. Consider, for example, our behavior in elevators. Nobody has ever told us how to behave in an elevator, but we all mostly do the same things: We face the doors, we maintain a certain distance from one another, and we either do not speak or we exchange polite greetings and then ride in silence. Few of us break those norms.

Likewise, he argues, students come into our courses having internalized certain norms about how to behave in a classroom. Too often, those internalized norms trump faculty expectations for student participation — a problem that is exacerbated when we don't explicitly articulate our expectations or explain why discussion matters and how it should work.

Much of the research cited in *Discussion in the College Classroom* has been conducted by Howard and his colleagues. His ideas on classroom norms are grounded in his own experience, his observations of the classrooms of others, and his many published articles. Drawing upon all of that material, Howard points to three primary issues that faculty members must deal with if they want to create great discussions.

1. "Civil attention." Citing research that dates back to the 1970s, Howard writes that "in the vast majority of college classrooms, we expect college students to pay civil attention. Actually paying attention is optional." Students pay "civil attention" when they face the front of the room, eyes open, taking notes and occasionally making eye contact with us. But we all know — from our own experiences in boring faculty meetings or conference talks — that looking like you're paying attention doesn't mean you are.

Howard suggests that many students think civil attention is enough. They can get away with it in most of their courses, for three reasons:

- Too many faculty members rely too frequently on lectures, and hence never challenge the norm of civil attention.
- Most of us are unwilling to call on students and instead rely on those who volunteer to answer questions.
- Students increasingly see themselves as customers who can choose whether or not they want to contribute to a class discussion, since they are paying to be there (a notion that has been sufficiently critiqued, in my opinion, by smart critics like Rebecca Schuman).

If we want good discussions in the classroom, we have to establish a new norm, one that goes beyond civil attention.

2. "Consolidation of responsibility." At every faculty workshop I have ever given on this topic, the same question arises: What do I do when the same two or three students dominate class discussions?

Excellent question, and Howard suggests that more of us should be asking it. His research shows that faculty members often think discussions are more participatory than they really are. In fact, he argues, "in the typical college or university classroom, a small number of students (five to eight) will account for 75 to 95 percent of all student verbal contributions to discussion regardless of class size."

That happens, he explains, because of a sociological phenomenon called the "consolidation of responsibility," in which social groups delegate responsibility to small numbers of people who do most of the work. "The consolidation of responsibility," Howard says, "tends to be the default setting in the college classroom, regardless of class size, unless the instructor takes intentional steps to create a new norm."

His findings on which students are most likely to assume the role of dominant talkers surprised me in several respects. For example, contrary to some research suggesting the presence of a "chilly climate" for women in the classroom, Howard and his colleagues have found that men and women participate in class at roughly equal rates. Their research likewise found no significant differences in student contributions by race.

3. Differing definitions of participation. How we define participation will also have an impact on whether we believe that students are contributing enough in class discussions. I suspect that most faculty members, like me, would define it as students' making substantive oral comments in class. A discussion doesn't happen without people speaking.

But students may be perceiving the notion of participation differently. Howard points to one study in which some students defined participation in broad terms: "For quieter students, participation included things like attendance, paying attention, active listening, and doing homework. So in their view, they could be actively 'participating' in class without ever speaking — a point of view the instructor may not share."

Hence, when professors emphasize on their syllabi the importance of class participation, and then — frustrated by anemic discussions — remind students about it throughout the semester, they may be talking right past their students. *e are participating, the students might be thinking.* We're sitting here, paying civil attention, doing the homework. What more do you want from us?

I've focused on the challenges of fostering robust discussion. But the good news is, according to Howard, those challenges can be overcome.

"Social norms are always in a state of negotiation," he writes. "Because they are social they are not etched in stone. We can take steps that will change the classroom norms both in our face-to-face classrooms and in online courses (or in online discussion forums associated with face-to-face classes), which will increase the percentage of students who participate."

Moreover, "when we thoughtfully scaffold discussions through careful planning," he adds, "an overwhelming body of research in the scholarship of teaching and learning tells us that students will learn more content and develop higher-order thinking skills."

For Howard's prescriptions on how to achieve all of that — in both face-to-face and online formats — you can consult *Discussion in the College Classroom* or one of his many shorter works on the topic. (He does offer plenty of teaching tips in the book.) You will come away from the book not only with a better understanding of how to get students talking but also with a clearer vision of the classroom as a complex space in which social norms can either enhance or interfere with learning. Most important, you will have a sharper understanding of how to shape those norms for the benefit of your students.

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