

Tips for Good Discussions

Expertly facilitated large-group discussions can be powerful learning experiences for students. Some guidelines can help you and your students have effective discussions.

Speak as little as possible.

Teachers are rarely aware of how much they speak during discussions, because they are accustomed to speaking whenever and however much they want. (Try recording a discussion or having a colleague use a stopwatch to record how much you talk, to find out how much you dominate a discussion.) If students can count on a teacher to make observations, interpret student comments, and pass judgment on student ideas, they will not treat a discussion as a genuine exchange of ideas.

Choose discussion topics carefully.

Good discussions occur around genuinely perplexing topics that require content knowledge and good judgment. Topics that all students agree on or that are based merely on personal taste or preference do not generate learning discussions.

Consider alternative room arrangements.

A typical classroom arrangement with rows of desks makes it possible for students to hide behind other students and refuse to participate. Consider asking students to move their desks into a circle where students face each other. Moving out of a position of authority in the classroom to a different location can also communicate the message that students are responsible for the discussion.

Mix discussion formats.

Students often participate better in discussions after they have tried out their ideas in smaller groups. Try having small-group conversations before large-group discussions, or stop discussions to allow students to discuss ideas with partners.

Encourage undeveloped thoughts.

Discussions are a time for thinking out loud, not for expressing fully formed, coherent ideas. Partly formed ideas can be an impetus for elaboration by other students or for inspiring other thoughts.

Follow up discussions.

If discussions are meant to be a way of learning, students need to take them seriously. Test questions or activities can be based on discussions. Students should also reflect on discussions, either individually or as a whole group, assessing their own participation, as well as the overall effectiveness of the discussion.