

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION TIPS

Lest there be any question about the importance of discussion in a classroom, educators would list the following reasons:

- To recall information
- To determine comprehension
- To encourage analysis
- To enable one to apply what one has learned
- To further evaluation of the materials
- To synthesize thinking on the topic

PREPLANNED DISCUSSIONS

There's no argument whether OLLI members enjoy diving into a discussion. However, they also respect the time and effort instructors spend preparing lectures and they defer to the instructor's words as to when to participate, ask questions, and offer comment. Therefore, the instructor must make clear at what point class involvement is welcomed.

OLLI members in a class may have particular knowledge about the topic. In fact some may know more about one or another aspect of that topic than does the instructor. (A knowledgeable student would be wise not to reveal that fact, but as a courtesy to put a finger to the lips and listen quietly. A comment or two would be acceptable; however, one's classmates signed up for the class given by the teacher standing in front of it.)

Discussion typically follows questions, either within the lecture format, at the end to clarify material presented during the lecture portion, or independent of both. An example of the latter is a book club in which readers talk about what they have read. If that is the case, begin with an open-ended question, one that may have more than one answer, or leads to other questions. While single answers to questions may be useful for clarification, for the most part they dead-end at the answer.

An open-ended question calls for thoughtful consideration on the part of the group. Allowing time between the questions asked and expected responses permits thinkers to digest the issue and decide on what to say. Expecting a quick answer, the instructor may conclude that no one in the group has a reply, understands the question, or chooses to speak up. In fact, the group members may each be framing a response in their own minds before uttering a word. Prepare your group in advance by telling them they'll have plenty of time to consider their answers.

Sometimes a full-blown discussion of open-ended questions follows close-ended questions that remind students of the facts upon which the discussion will be based. Trying to get all participants on the same page before analysis or evaluation avoids communication issues as the result of not all knowing details of the topic to be discussed. Another way to avoid that problem would be for the teacher to give a quick run-down of the facts before putting the question.

In situations where a discussion period seems stalled with no responses, you can be prepared as follows:

- You may have offered a handout at the beginning of class that lists questions you'll be asking. This will focus students' thought before the appointed question time. Remember, however, that if you become impatient for an answer, you may break your students' frame of thought and deprive the group of a unique opinion or point of view.
- Certainly silence could indicate that no one has an answer or quite understood what the instructor was going for in the discussion. This may require rephrasing the question, breaking it down into more manageable components or narrower questions with logical progress of each. The discussion leader then actually leads into a full-blown spontaneous discussion.

Divisive Statement: Not all discussion arises from questions; a controversial quotation or a stated opinion on a topic could result in a spirited discussion as in a political forum, or religious or social situation.

- Sometimes in a situation like this, the leader or a member of the group may take the "devils advocate" position in order to widen the discussion or cause a more in-depth consideration of the topic. He/she may announce that is the intention in advance or remain silent about his/her personal belief.
- The leader in this sort of altercation should be careful to maintain control of the discussion as emotions can lead to lack of order, too many persons speaking, and, sometimes, chaos.
- Let it be known that not all questions have conclusions or problems have solutions based on one or two discussions, or ever. Suffice it that these matters were aired and that maybe just one aspect of the issue has been clarified. It's likely each participant will walk away with a totally different sense of what they learned during the session.

Helpful to have on hand at a pre-planned discussion:

- Handout with questions, statements to be considered in the discussion.
- Supplied paper, pencils, reference books, maps, charts, photos and/or diagrams.
- Syllabus: purpose of discussion, outline of topical questions.

NOTE: All instructors should be aware of, and use, the "DocStore" component of the OLLI Website to cut down on printing costs.

APPROACH OF DISCUSSION LEADER

General procedures:

- Set up room in an arrangement that encourages interaction, with chairs and tables and those seated facing one another as much as possible. In some circumstances ask someone to take notes if the topic should include information that may be useful at a later time.
- Set up rules of the discussion if they are not already known.
- Acknowledge the speaker (unless it's a very small group.)
- Depending upon acoustics, repeat either a question or response, or both, so that all may hear it.
- Determine when to close the discussion of one topic and move on.
- Encourage students to raise new questions that come from the previous discussion. The discussion should "bloom" as fresh thinking takes in new ideas offered.

Homework Assignments: Expect participants to come prepared having read material under discussion, but do not be discouraged if all have not. OLLI advertises that we don't do homework and we are non-judgmental of those who come unprepared. Usually enough will do it to get the talk going; unprepared students may participate in a general way once they get the gist of the discussion.

Be prepared to read from the document enough that the group could focus on it on the spot. Alternatively, the leader may have everyone turn to the material and someone can read from it. Then all can discuss.

"Know-it-alls" should be treated with respect but not permitted to ramble on or take over. The leader might say, "Let's have someone else's opinion"; "good point"; "let's move on"; "is there another comment?"; "Let me give that some thought and we can take this up in greater depth after the class."

Sometimes the opposite occurs and you will note that one or more class members do not join in the discussion. If the catalog specified that this would be a discussion class, each member should feel some obligation to get involved. Sometimes that member is only interested in the thoughts of others or is intimidated by the apparent expertise of other classmates and feels ill at ease speaking up. You can let it go or you might try simplifying the questions. Here is where a simple, closed-ended question may elicit an answer that will boost the courage of the weak respondent. (Hearing his own voice could be therapeutic for the shy member.) It may be just what is needed to provide confidence for a more complicated question. It's important that the leader somehow makes the answer work; here is where a negative reaction would be detrimental to the class member.

Occasionally students might engage in side discussions. These can be very distracting for you and the other students and should be discouraged.

Invite responses from the group:

- Use plurals: What are some of your insights? What do you want to know?
- Express tentativeness: possibilities rather than certainties. For instance, ask "How might you address the problem?"

- Embed positive pre-suppositions: “What are some of the benefits you will derive from engaging in this activity?”
- Encourage inquisitiveness: Use words such as: “*explore*”; “*observe*”; “*enthusiasm*”; “*creativity*”; *How come? What if? Tell me more? Where else can I get that information? This reminds me of... I enjoy...*”

With exceptions noted above, limit these types of questions:

- Verification questions: Questions where teacher and student already know the answers.
- Closed ended yes or no answers.
- Rhetorical questions: no answer expected.
- Defensive questions: leading to defensive responses.
- Agreement questions: phrased to encourage students to agree with the questioner.

CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION

During the class you can ask a student if he understood a particular point and get some feedback without putting that person on the spot. Showing your students that you are open to discussion about the class will encourage comments.

Another way to tell if the class is going well will be obvious the next week if all students return. However, this is not always a reliable measure because sometimes one or another factor may keep many away for a particular session. Some will warn you that they won't attend; keep a mental or specific note in that case.

Soon after each class you will want to evaluate what has just occurred. Was the purpose of the discussion accomplished or was there at least movement toward your goal? You will be the best judge of that, but your students may have already spoken to you about how well it went; some may want to talk about certain points at the end of class. There may be a buzz when they are leaving the room and you yourself will have a sense that all went well.

Upon conclusion of the course, OLLI has an evaluation questionnaire that you have the option of using or you may design your own. Consider sending an email thanking the group, summarizing the discussion and conclusions, if any. And then ask for opinions on how well it went or how to make it better next time.