



Starting a Discussion

Getting a good discussion going in a class is not a matter of chance. It is a matter of asking stimulating questions that lead to critical thinking.

1. Refer to any questions you may have distributed in advance.

You might ask the class which questions they found most interesting or provocative.

2. Ask for students' questions.

You can prepare students by requesting that each student bring 2 questions about the reading/assignment/topic.

3. Pair students to discuss the material in a question/answer format.

The students bring two to four questions about the material (modeled after a good "essay" type question). Each student asks his/her partner those questions. That way each student asks and answers some questions.

4. Phrase questions so that students feel comfortable responding.

Avoiding questions that have a single right answer tends to make students more likely to offer their ideas.

5. Pose an opening question and let students have a few minutes to write an answer.

This particularly gives the quiet students time to form thoughts, but it also forces the "instant reactor" student to take more time before answering verbally.

6. Ask students to describe a "critical incident."

This is one of Stephen Brookfield's ideas. Ask students to recall an event in their own lives that pertains to the topic at hand.

7. Ask students to recall specific images from the reading assignment.

See what kind of memorable image they remember. List them on the board and look for themes, commonalities.

8. Ask students to pose the "dumbest" question they can think of.

It's kind of a game, but it does separate out what might be relevant questions from others.

9. Pose questions based on shared experience.

If the class has watched a video, gone on a field trip, seen a demonstration, that can be the beginning of the conversation about perceptions and reactions.

10. Make a list of key points.

Ask the students to generate those points as you write them on the board. They might be points that support a particular argument or position from the reading.



11. Use brainstorming.

This works well when trying to get at multiple causes, effects, solutions, reasons, or contributing factors. The rules are that anyone can contribute an idea and ALL ideas are written on the board (to be evaluated, culled, etc. later).

12. Pose a controversial statement and ask students to group themselves according to their response (for/against, pro/con).

You can have students move to a corner of the room representing their agreed-upon stance (yes/no; pro/con; multiple choice).

13. Use small groups to discuss a particular (specific) question.

Threesomes work well. Make sure the task is specific (“List as many comparisons as you can in ten minutes.”). Set a time limit and one spokesperson from the group will report their remarks.

14. Use a brief questionnaire.

This is a few questions that students answer and sign their names to. You refer to them specifically, such as “William, I see you’ve answered #1 in the negative. Would you explain why?”

15. Use student panels.

This is a more in depth kind of project that groups of students would prepare over a few days. Each student has a role to play—perhaps representing different points of view—and then comes ready to present it.

16. Use storyboarding.

Each subtopic or question is written on a piece of flipchart paper and posted. Divide the class into groups (the same number of groups as questions) and have students write their ideas/answers on post it notes and stick them on the paper. After a few minutes, they move to another question/topic and do the same. The post it notes can later be moved around to show collections of good ideas or organization of an argument or point of view.

Davis, Barbara (2009). *Tools for teaching* (2nd Ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.