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## Introduction: Why Bother with Classroom Discussion?

The class session has been moving along nicely as you cover important material in your lecture when your students' body language tells you that you are losing them. Some are propping up their heads with arms and hands. Others have stopped making eye contact as they gaze off to the side. Faces glaze over while students shuffle distractedly in their seats. It appears a few are texting—only semi-covertly. Others appear to be surfing the web on their laptops—probably checking Facebook again. Yours has been the only voice heard in the classroom for at least 30 minutes now. So, on impulse, you decide to switch gears. Instead of pointing out the pros and cons of the competing perspectives you have just summarized for the class, in hopes of waking them up and getting their brains back into gear, you ask students to compare and contrast the perspectives.

But your worst fears materialize. You are greeted by blank stares, if the students look at you at all. You pause, hoping at least one student will speak up and venture to offer a comment. You rephrase the question to give students a little more time to consider their views on the matter. You notice the hum of the fluorescent lights as you begin to feel the uncomfortable silence. It's clear now that most are trying to avoid eye contact with you lest they be called upon. Some are thumbing through the textbook looking for clues as to how they should respond. Internally, you are shaking your head. Isn't it obvious that the question calls for students to compare and contrast,

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to weigh the merits of the two perspectives, identify strengths and weaknesses, and bring their own values and judgments to bear on them? There is no single “correct answer” to be found in the pages of the text. After a seeming eternity, you give up and begin to offer your own assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the competing perspectives, hoping that at the least you are modeling the process of comparing and contrasting.

After class, you find yourself asking, why is this discussion stuff so difficult? With all the talk at faculty development workshops about the need to engage students in the classroom and how students supposedly both enjoy such pedagogies and learn more effectively when they are utilized, why doesn't it seem to work for you when theory meets the hard realities of classroom practice? Why not simply stick to the lecture? You can cover more material that way. Why struggle to get students talking when you're not convinced they will have anything worthwhile to say? Is the effort required to engage students worth it?

Yet, there are other times when students take you by surprise. A thoughtful discussion erupts in class seemingly spontaneously. Students get excited about a topic and engage with energy and enthusiasm. They may not always be the most well-informed on the topic, but at least they are showing interest. Of course, some students speak up more than others. In fact, it would be nice if a couple of them spoke less frequently, and what about Tameka sitting in the second row toward the side? She turned in what was easily the best paper in the class on that last assignment. Why won't she share her insights? Still there are enough students participating to have a thoughtful, well-rounded conversation on the topic. Sometimes students take the class on tangents that are particularly insightful. Where did that come from? It's clear that a number have actually read the assignment by their references to the book. This is what makes college teaching so rewarding! It's one of those moments when students “own” their education and seize opportunities to learn—not just from you, the faculty member, but from

each other. You leave class energized, affirmed, and renewed in your commitment to facilitate student learning and to develop their critical thinking skills.

On the walk back to your office, you ponder, what can I do to ensure exciting, helpful conversations like these happen more frequently? They seem to be spontaneous, not easily created. Sure, sometimes you succeed in igniting such beneficial discussions, but you're not getting any younger. It's getting increasingly hard to predict what topics or what aspects of a topic will grab the attention of students and spark that exciting moment of learning in your classes.

If you have found yourself in similar situations, both times when discussions fall flat and times when they succeed in unexpected ways, you are not alone. The majority of college and university faculty members take teaching and learning seriously. We want to do well by our students. We want them to learn and we want to help. We find intrinsic value and excitement in our discipline's content and we want our students to share in that excitement. Igniting the spark that creates the blaze of engaged learning and critical thinking is one of the great rewards of being a college professor. Yet it sometimes seems like a one-way street—we do all the work in the attempt to make learning happen as our students sit by passively waiting to be spoon-fed.

Facilitating an effective discussion in class feels like hard work sometimes. Is it worth it? Are the benefits sufficient to justify the effort? How can discussions be managed in such a way as to increase the likelihood of success and avoid those painfully awkward silences or one-word answers that do nothing more than barely scratch the surface?

Yes, effective discussions are hard work—all good teaching requires significant effort. Great teachers are made, not born. In this book I will argue that while facilitating effective discussions takes forethought, planning, and structure, it is well worth the effort and makes the experience of teaching much more enjoyable. However, too often faculty members assume that worthwhile discussions

merely happen spontaneously in class. And sometimes they do. But just as an effective lecture takes preparation, planning, and structure in order to facilitate student learning, so does an effective discussion. An effective discussion in the college classroom is much less frequently the result of a lucky happenstance. It is more likely to be the result of forethought and intentional planning.

### Benefits of Engaging Students in Discussion

The first and most important reason to tackle the hard work of facilitating an effective discussion is that students learn more as a result. This is a rather bold claim that will be supported as the book unfolds, but I want to point out here that discussion is one way in which faculty members can actively engage students in the classroom. And over the past 30 years with the expansion of scholarship of teaching and learning research in higher education, there is an abundance of evidence that points to the value of active learning and student engagement in facilitating learning (see, for example, Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 2005).

Chickering and Gamson's (1987) summary of the research on effective classroom practices is one of the first and most influential efforts to draw attention to the value of active learning—one of their seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. Since that time scholars in many disciplines have been investigating and articulating the benefits of active learning. Kuh et al. (2005) conclude that student engagement is a key to academic success. They note that students learn more when they are intensely involved in their own education and have the opportunity to think about and apply what they are learning.

Prince (2004) in his review of the research concludes there is broad support for all forms of active learning. As an engineering educator, Prince (2004) notes that despite a tendency in his field to “push through as much material as possible” (p. 229), students will learn more if lectures are interrupted with brief activities that

engage students. In their review of the research, Bonwell and Eison (1991) conclude that active learning strategies are comparable to lecture in terms of promoting mastery of content, but are superior to lecture in promoting the development of thinking and writing skills. To be engaged in active learning, students must do more than passively listen in class. They need to read, write, discuss, and solve problems while engaging in higher-order thinking skills such as evaluation, synthesis, and analysis (Bonwell and Eison 1991).

### Discussion versus Participation

While active learning can take many forms, our primary focus here is on students' verbal participation in class discussions. While some faculty define participation as including things such as attending class or actively listening, when students verbally participate they maximize their engagement and their learning. Students can and do learn simply by attending class and absorbing what they can, by being prepared for class—having completed homework and reading assignments, and by being active listeners—carefully adhering to the presentation of ideas and insights by their professor and their classmates (Howard 2005). While Reda (2009) argues that some students value speaking and silence differently than does the contemporary culture of American higher education, when students verbally interact with the material, the professor, and their classmates they are most actively engaged and most likely to be learning and developing thinking skills. Nonetheless, as Reda (2009) cautions, speaking does not automatically result in learning. And some students may perceive demands to speak out in the classroom as a high-stakes, anxiety-inducing form of verbal testing. Therefore, it is important to remember that discussion occurs in many forms.

Participation in discussion can take the form of occasional questions or comments in the class as a whole, interacting with others in a small group or even pairs, or making more formal oral presentations to the class. Whereas large-group discussion might be

perceived as quite threatening, participation in smaller groups or pairs may be perceived as safe by our more introverted students. The benefits of this participation in class discussion, whether in large or small groups, are well documented.

When students are actively participating in discussion they learn more than when they merely listen (Kuh et al. 2005). In two national surveys, Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) found that students reported greater learning when faculty utilized active and collaborative learning pedagogies. On a smaller scale, Murray and Lang (1997) in their study of students in a psychology course found that students who participated more frequently in class discussion earned higher exam grades and students generally learned more when topics were taught using active participation compared to topics taught strictly by lecture. Kuh et al. (2005) stress the importance of students interacting with faculty, both inside and outside class, for development of thinking skills necessary for solving practical problems. In an intriguing study that utilized an experimental design in two zoology courses with pre- and post-test assessments, Bodensteiner (2012) found that students in the course that utilized discussion learned and retained information better, as well as felt more confidence in their answers, than students who received content-only instruction. Numerous additional studies have found that active participation in classroom discussion leads to greater student learning (Astin 1985; Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 1991; Kember and Gow 1994, McKeachie 1990).

In addition to increased learning, participation in class discussion also leads to the development of thinking skills. Smith (1977) found that student participation, encouragement, and peer-to-peer interaction was consistently and positively related to the development of critical thinking skills. Crone (1997), Garside (1996), and Greenlaw and DeLoach (2003) each found that active participation in discussion led to improvements in students' critical thinking.

Other benefits to students resulting from participation in class discussion include greater motivation (Junn 1994), improved communication skills (Berdine 1986; Dancer and Kamvounias 2005), and, not surprisingly, higher grades (Handelsman et al. 2005). In many cases, utilizing classroom discussion versus lecture alone makes class more interesting and enjoyable for both students and faculty. It also makes students co-creators in their own learning and promotes a more democratic classroom (Brookfield and Preskill 2005).

Brookfield and Preskill (2005, 21–22) summarize the many benefits of effective classroom discussion for student learning in 15 arguments.

1. It helps students explore a diversity of perspectives.
2. It increases students' awareness of and tolerance for ambiguity or complexity.
3. It helps students recognize and investigate their assumptions.
4. It encourages attentive, respectful listening.
5. It develops new appreciation for continuing differences.
6. It increases intellectual agility.
7. It helps students become connected to a topic.
8. It shows respect for students' voices and experiences.
9. It helps students learn the processes and habits of democratic discourse.
10. It affirms students as co-creators of knowledge.
11. It develops the capacity for the clear communication of ideas and meaning.
12. It develops habits of collaborative learning.
13. It increases breadth and makes students more empathetic.
14. It helps students develop skills of synthesis and integration.
15. It leads to transformation.

At a time when, judging by talking heads on cable TV and by partisan bloggers, many Americans seem to have lost the ability to engage in reasoned, respectful debate and dialogue, encouraging the development of skills and dispositions necessary for civil discourse is particularly important. College classrooms can and should be a place where the skills necessary to be an effective citizen are developed and practiced. Yet, as Brookfield and Preskill (2005) acknowledge, these benefits are not accrued automatically.

### Challenges in Utilizing Classroom Discussion

Effective discussion that generates these rewards requires a set of classroom norms to facilitate them. When sociologists discuss the idea of norms, they are referring to unwritten “rules” that guide our behavior in social situations, that is, when we are interacting with other people. Typically, norms are taken for granted to such an extent that typically we notice them only when they are being violated. The vast majority of the time we adhere to norms without giving them much thought. We merely take them for granted as how things are or how one *ought* to behave. For example, when you got up this morning you got dressed without consciously thinking that in our society we have a norm that says people should wear clothing in public. Even more, you probably chose clothing appropriate for the particular settings you would be entering. If you were headed to a basketball game, you most likely chose to wear clothing that was quite different from what you would wear if you were heading to work in your office on campus or to attend a wedding.

All sorts of social situations have norms associated with them. Take, for example, the simple act of riding on an elevator. There is a long list of elevator norms that you very likely follow without giving the matter much thought. What is the first thing you do when you get on an elevator? No, the answer is not “push the button for the desired floor.” Before you can do that, you must turn around and face the elevator door. Imagine you are waiting for the elevator.



The doors open and there in the middle of the elevator I stand facing the rear of the elevator. Would you get on the elevator or wait for the next one to come along? Odds are good that, at the very least, you would be quite uncomfortable riding in the elevator with me if I were facing the “wrong” way. Is there a law that says elevator occupants must face the front of the elevator? Of course not, but we all follow the norm that says we should face the front when riding on an elevator.

There are also personal-space norms for elevators. Where do you stand when you are the only person on the elevator? You stand wherever you wish. But as soon as a second person gets on, an invisible line is magically drawn down the center of the elevator. You each stay on your own side of that line. When a third and fourth person boards the elevator, we further subdivide the personal space. Imagine if I boarded the elevator with you and instead of staying on my side, I chose to stand beside you, nearly making physical contact. You would likely shuffle a bit away from me. You definitely would feel uneasy. You may even choose to shove me away or tell me to “back off!” There is no rule posted in the elevator that says I cannot stand close to you on an elevator, but to do so violates a social norm.

## Norms in the College Classroom

Just as elevators are a social setting with many taken-for-granted norms that guide our behavior, college classrooms are also chock-full of norms that guide faculty and student behaviors. Take, for example, student seating. On the first day of class, have you ever arrived in your assigned room to find a student seated at the professor’s desk or standing behind the podium ready to lead the class session? Never? Why not? That seat might even be more comfortable than the tablet armchair students typically have available to them. While the professor’s chair may be more desirable, it is highly unlikely that any student would sit behind the professor’s desk or

stand at the podium because our social norms indicate that space is reserved for the professor. Throughout their high school experience students likely had assigned seats in each of their classes where they were required to sit every day as the practice facilitated the taking of attendance or perhaps helped avoid behavioral problems that might result from close friends sitting near each other. Students probably complained about this practice and a quick Google search will reveal students complaining about this practice in online forums. In contrast, typically, there are no assigned seats in college classrooms. Students are free to change seats whenever they wish. But what usually happens? Students spend the rest of the semester sitting in the exact same chairs they selected on the first day of class—even if they would prefer a different spot. Should one student switch seats after a few class sessions, another student is likely to feel that “his” or “her” seat has been unfairly taken away by a classmate. While the offended student is unlikely to make too much of a fuss, he or she will feel at least momentarily uncomfortable and perhaps annoyed with the norm-violating classmate.

There are also norms that have quite a bit to do with the interaction that does or does not occur in the typical college classroom. These are norms that are rarely articulated and are merely taken for granted, yet they have significant impact on student learning.

Sociologists David Karp and William Yoels (1976) were among the first to investigate discussion norms in the college classroom. In particular, Karp and Yoels (1976) found that while faculty members tend to define the college classroom as a *focused* environment, students define it as an *unfocused* environment (p. 435). In a focused environment, participants are expected to interact with one another. In an unfocused environment, while interaction is possible, participants do not feel obligated to interact. In a more recent study, Roberts (2002) found that while 82 percent of the faculty in his sample saw the classroom as a focused environment, only 55 percent of his student sample shared that understanding (p. 12). This can lead to some tensions between faculty and students as

we define the classroom and its normative expectations differently. If faculty members prod or pressure students to verbally participate when students do not see it as their responsibility, students may take offense. The faculty member may even pay a price for this disconnect in understanding of classroom expectations in the end-of-semester evaluations as students may accuse the professor of making unfair demands of them or being unfriendly toward them.

Students and, very often, faculty are complicit in creating and reinforcing classroom norms that allow the majority of students to avoid participation in classroom discussion. Karp and Yoels (1976) identified particular norms that reinforce this situation. One norm they termed *civil attention*. In most college classrooms, unlike elementary and secondary school classrooms, students do not have to pay attention. Instead, the real expectation is that students pay civil attention.

What's the difference between actually paying attention and paying only civil attention? In college classrooms, civil attention requires that students create the appearance of paying attention. How do they do that? They do so in a large number of ways: occasional nodding of the head; chuckling at appropriate times when the professor attempts to be humorous; making occasional but fleeting eye contact with the faculty member (prolonged eye contact invites verbal interaction); taking notes (or at least appearing to be taking notes); and, merely keeping eyes open and facing the front. Of course, we all have occasional students who violate this norm by closing their eyes, putting their heads down on their desk, reading a newspaper, surfing the web, texting, or engaging in whispered side conversations with classmates. However, many if not most faculty members find this behavior both distracting and offensive. It violates our taken-for-granted norms for classroom behavior. Frequently you can find statements on course syllabi specifically prohibiting many of these behaviors as faculty members attempt to make clear that at a minimum civil attention is the norm in our classrooms.

## **Igniting the Spark of Engaged Learning through Discussion: What Lies Ahead**

In this book I invite you to join in igniting the spark of learning by engaging students in participation in classroom discussion. I present research-based findings regarding classroom norms and how they impact discussion. We will find that students are not equally likely to participate: Which students are most likely to participate and why do they choose to do so? Which students typically choose not to participate in discussion and why do they choose not to do so? Utilizing research results, I offer a variety of strategies for engaging more students with the goal of increasing student learning. Perhaps some of these strategies will be familiar to you already, but knowing the research foundations for their use will hopefully increase both your commitment to use them and your confidence in doing so. Other strategies may be completely new to you and may spark some creative thinking about how to adapt and implement them in your courses.

Chapter 2 provides an in-depth exploration of the norm of civil attention and explains why students can get by without actually paying attention in the college classroom. I also identify the ways in which faculty members are complicit in the development and reinforcement of this classroom norm. But I won't leave you hanging. Chapter 2 addresses strategies for overcoming the norm of civil attention and engaging students in classroom discussion.

In Chapter 3, I address another classroom discussion norm identified by Karp and Yoels (1976): the consolidation of responsibility. The norm of the consolidation of responsibility means that in any college classroom, regardless of size, a very small number of students (three to seven) will account for 75–95 percent of student verbal contributions. We use the extensive scholarship on this topic to show which students are most likely to accept the consolidation of responsibility and become the dominant talkers and which are more likely to choose to remain silent or participate only rarely.

We explore research-based evidence regarding why students choose to participate in discussion and why they often choose not to participate. Chapter 3 concludes with strategies for overcoming the consolidation of responsibility and increasing student participation in discussion.

In Chapter 4 I explore the differing definitions faculty and students, as well as different groups of students, bring to the college classroom. The definitions we bring, based largely on our prior experiences in education, guide our behavior. When faculty and students disagree on those definitions, tensions are likely to arise and students may penalize faculty for the disagreements in the end-of-semester course evaluations. Chapter 4 summarizes the research that illustrates the reasons talkers chose to participate in class discussion and the reasons quieter students chose not to participate.

Chapter 5 presents an overview of the burgeoning scholarship regarding online courses, discussion forums in online and hybrid courses, and online discussion forums as a part of face-to-face courses. I compare synchronous and asynchronous discussion forums online and review the research concerning the effectiveness of online discussions. How does one avoid the problems of civil attention, the consolidation of responsibility, and differing definitions of the course in the online context? What are some strategies for using discussion as an online supplement in a face-to-face course and for discussion in a course that is taught entirely online?

Chapter 6 addresses several conundrums related to discussion as a classroom pedagogical strategy. We consider the issue of grading participation in discussion—a topic about which there is a surprising amount of commentary in the literature. We examine the argument against grading students' participation in classroom discussion before moving to the argument in favor of grading and proposing strategies for effective grading. I also provide a variety of approaches and strategies for grading participation in discussion. Additionally, we address the issue of helping students identify key points and the

learning that is occurring in discussion. Students are often more comfortable with and more easily able to identify key information in lectures than in discussion. Recognizing important learning outcomes in discussion is a skill instructors often must facilitate in students. Finally, Chapter 6 provides some research-based insights on balancing coverage of content, student learning, and discussion.

This book has several goals, many of which are related to the challenges described in the scenario at the beginning of the chapter. The first is to answer the “why bother” question by equipping you with a research-based understanding of the value of classroom discussion for increasing student learning. I also hope to provide you with an appreciation of classroom norms that can undermine the effectiveness of discussion and strategies for how to overcome them by redefining your classroom with your students and thereby avoiding attempts at discussion that fall flat. A third goal is to empower you with strategies for keeping discussions focused, productive, and on topic. Given the increasing prevalence of online learning, this book also introduces the ways in which discussion can be utilized in an online course or moved online to supplement learning in a face-to-face course. Another goal is to introduce you to both sides of the debate over whether to grade students’ participation in discussion. A final goal is to help you equip students to understand what they are achieving through discussion and to maximize that learning.