

**Engaging Students Through Discussion**  
Compiled by Carl Ehrett, Graduate Assistant

Brookfield, S., & Preskill, S. (1999). *Discussion as a way of teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This book is a great resource for instructors wanting to use discussion methods in their teaching. It offers practical ideas, tools, and techniques for creating meaningful discussions in college classrooms in order to enhance student learning. It suggests exercises to get discussion started, strategies for maintaining momentum, ways to elicit a diversity of views and voices, ideas for creative groupings and formats, and processes to encourage student participation. It also addresses issues arising from ethical, cultural, social class, and gender differences among students and faculty and discusses how to balance the voices of students and teachers.

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Christensen, C. R. (1991). *Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership*. Christensen, C. Roland, David A. Garvin, and Ann Sweet, eds. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Written by high school and college level teachers who use discussion methods, this book includes essays that address key principles, benefits, and barriers of discussion teaching and learning. Instructors who are considering using discussion methods in their courses will find practical advice, inspirational cases, and theoretical arguments throughout these essays. This book is a good reference and read for instructors who are unsure about using discussion methods in their teaching, but want to explore the possibility.

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Crombie, G., Pyke, S., Silverthorn, N., Jones, A., & Piccinin, S. (2003). Students' perceptions of their classroom participation and instructor as a function of gender and context. *Journal of Higher Education*, 74(1), 51–76.

This article reports on research that examines students' perceptions of their participation in the university classroom. This work finds some support for the "chilly climate construct" for women in academic settings in which women students are disadvantaged by the aggregated impact of classroom occurrences of such things as sexist language use and examples depicting women in stereotypical roles. This study, however, found that gender effects were mediated by reported level of participation. The biggest differences were seen favoring males categorized as active participants. This article is helpful for instructors who are concerned about gender differences in discussion participation and are interested in finding ways to engage all students in discussion.

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Fassinger, P. A. (1995). Understanding classroom interaction: Students' and professors' contributions of students' silence. *Journal of Higher Education*, 66(1), 82–96.

This article discusses why students offer comments or raise questions in class. The study uses survey data from 1,059 students from a small, private college to get at this question of classroom interaction. The authors conclude that both class traits and student traits explain the most variance and that neither the professor's gender nor the professor's interpersonal style plays a central role in class participation. This article is helpful for instructors who want to know what kind of classroom climate (classroom traits) and which strengths of students (student traits) are most conducive to engaging students in discussion.

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Fassinger, P. A. (1996). Professors' and students' perceptions of why students participate in class. *Teaching Sociology*, 24(1), 25-33.

This article reports on university level classroom interaction using survey data to assess why students offer comments or raise questions in class. The author argues that class traits (e.g., interaction norms, emotional climate) and students' traits (e.g., comprehension, confidence) may encourage participation more than the professor's traits. The data suggest that faculty members may play a much less direct role in classroom interaction than has previously been assumed. This article is helpful for instructors who want to know how to play to students' strengths as individuals (student traits) and as collective groups (class traits) in order to engage them in meaningful discussion.

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Fritschner, L. M. (2000, May/June). Inside the undergraduate college classroom: Faculty and students differ on the meaning of student participation. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 71(3), 342-362.

Though not an article specifically about classroom discussion, this article reports on an investigation of student participation in liberal arts and science courses at a public university. Results of this study show that students participate more in upper level courses, non-traditional students participate more compared to traditional students, and the ways of participation differed between upper-level and lower-level students. One conclusion drawn here is that faculty and students have different ideas about what student participation looks like in these courses. This article can help instructors understand why there are differences not only in the ways students participate during class discussions but also in how students may think about what it means to participate in a discussion.

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Glidden, J. & Kurfiss, J. G. (1990). Small-group discussion in philosophy. *College Teaching*, 38 3-8.

This short article reports on a discussion method used in a philosophy course. Small student groups discuss complicated philosophical problems. There is a comparison of this method to the more traditional lecture method. Findings indicate a slight advantage of the discussion method over the traditional method across five cases. Instructors who teach courses that lend themselves to controversial problems and discussions will find the method reported here worth consideration.

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Gross Davis, B. (2009). Chapter 5: Facilitating Discussion. In *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Pp. 95-132.

This chapter provides useful and practical advice for effectively facilitating discussions, both in class and on-line. She offers suggestions for how to prepare to lead discussions, strategies for encouraging student participation, and pointers regarding online discussions. She also discusses how to stimulate discussion through asking your students questions, as well as how to field students' own questions.

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Gullette, M. M. (1992, March/April). Leading discussion in a lecture course: Some maxims and an exhortation. *Change*, 24(2), 32-39.

This short article is a practical piece discussing the importance of incorporating discussion into college lecture classes. It examines problems in starting and expanding students' exchange of ideas and offers techniques for raising the level of intellect in a class. This article uses anecdotal examples from a variety of disciplines to illustrate how discussion is used effectively in lecture classes. The article is helpful for instructors of lecture-based courses who want to incorporate some discussion but are not sure how to do this.

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Hollander, Joyce. (2002). Learning to discuss: Strategies for improving the quality of class discussion. *Teaching Sociology*, 30, 317-27.

This article offers reasons why teachers and students lose interest in the discussion method as well as offers a way of improving the quality of class discussions. It focuses on a strategy to help students improve their discussion skills, thereby improve overall class discussions. This article can help instructors understand why class discussions often lack depth as well as help them overcome this issue in their own teaching.

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McBroom, W. H., & Reed, F. W. (1994, October). An alternative to a traditional lecture course. *Teaching Sociology*, 22(4), 328-332.

This article provides a description and formal assessment of a course in social psychology that uses discussion rather than lecture as a primary teaching method. Specifically, the course is organized around short daily reading assignments, class discussion, and daily assessment. The authors compare student learning outcomes in this course to those in a more traditional course. The students in this course did better on exams. This article is helpful for instructors who are interested in examples of the impact of discussion teaching methods on student learning outcomes, in this case exam scores.

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Tsui, L. (2002). Fostering critical thinking through effective pedagogy: Evidence from four institutional case studies. *The Journal of Higher Education* 73(6), 740-763.

This article discusses four institutional case studies looking at effective pedagogy for fostering

critical and deep thinking in college students. The authors analyze both interview and classroom observation data to arrive at findings that support the use of writing assignments and class discussions. The authors argue for the conduciveness of these practices in developing critical thinking skills in students. This article is helpful for instructors trying to engage students in critical thought and expression both in discussion and in writing.

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Welty, William. (1989). Discussion method teaching. *Change*, 21(4), 40-49.

This practical article discusses how to use case studies to guide discussion in the college classroom. Specifically, the article discusses a discussion teaching method in which the professor maintains authority and control and in which content and theory is forefront. The article is helpful for instructors who want to use discussion methods but are concerned about the quality of discussion in terms of content and intellect.