

# Facilitating Discussion

*Get them talking.*



Learning doesn't happen in a vacuum, and promoting meaningful discussion in the classroom helps create a more dynamic and effective learning community.

## ESTABLISH EXPECTATIONS

How do you get students talking to each other? First, make sure they understand what you mean by "discussion." Is it attempting to give a definitive answer to a question you pose, or is it finding multiple ways to approach a question? Some instructors prohibit "I don't know," as a response, clarifying that students don't have to know - discussion isn't about knowing - but they do need to think and explore.

## PREPARE

While it can be fun to introduce a brand new topic, stand back and open the floodgates of ideas, it's a good idea to give students some time to think about some discussion questions earlier in the course. Think of any experience of *esprit d'escalier* you've had - it's not that you weren't engaging in the situation, it was that you didn't think of your response until two hours later, far too late.

## GUIDE

No matter how cool and groovy you may be, the instructor has the ability to intimidate and thwart a discussion by interjecting too frequently and too forcefully. While you may be tempted to jump in when Chris says, "The Magna Carta was one of the ships Columbus led across the sea," remember that Jamie might be perfectly capable of clarifying the point, without suggesting a state of surveillance and reactionary pouncing. While you can't allow fallacies to perpetuate, you can certainly give students a chance to sort things out themselves.



*No one wants this.*

## ASK GOOD QUESTIONS

The students' most commonly held belief is that the instructor is asking a question with the answer already in mind. Absolutes tend to be another discussion-killer, so find ways to encourage students to think through ideas without fear that there's a right or wrong answer.

Example of a "leading question":

Instructor: Why is *Moby Dick* the greatest novel ever written?

Students: ...

Consider opening up the field for possibilities:

Instructor: What aspects of *Moby Dick* do you find interesting/inscrutable/confusing/challenging?

Students: WELL LET ME TELL YOU (etc.)

## BE PATIENT

There's no one trick that will get every student participating in every discussion, but over the semester, you can work to promote an environment of ideas and experimentation.

## LEARN MORE

Find out more about facilitating effective classroom discussions here: <http://bit.ly/HsC7s0>