

Leading a Good Discussion: Posing Useful Questions

1. Let them think.

Don't rob students of the chance to think/learn for themselves. Consider reframing a lecture as a series of questions (especially useful if you lecture to clarify material in readings).

2. Avoid public humiliation.

Don't use questions as a way of proving a student's lack of preparedness.

3. Ask both open and closed questions.

Open questions (questions that can be answered in different ways) increase student participation because there are many chances of getting the answers right. Closed questions (with one right answer) can be used to effectively establish a knowledge base.

4. Ask sequenced questions.

Ask questions that establish a shared foundation of knowledge *before* encouraging students to consider more demanding tasks like comparison/contrast, analysis, synthesis, or evaluation.

5. First ask . . . then wait.

Wait at least three seconds. Silence can produce anxiety. If a question is complex tell students you want them to think about it for a minute before answering. Or ask them to jot down two ideas (or talk briefly with another student) before answering.

6. Set up a "Think-Pair-Share" moment.

Ask students to discuss the question with someone sitting nearby before volunteering an answer. Invite three or four pairs to respond.

7. Toss questions and comments back to the class.

Invite students to respond to each other's comments. Refrain from commenting in response to every statement by a student.

8. Invite elaboration by individuals or by class.

Ask for clarification or extension: "Can you elaborate or give an example?" or "Who can build on what she is saying?"

9. Set up contrasts or paradoxes and invite reactions.

"How can we make sense of this contradiction?"

10. Respond reflectively and holistically.

Paraphrase student comments; reconnect with earlier questions; connect to earlier discussions or whole-course issues.

Adapted from:

Tom Drummond, "A Brief Summary of the Best Practices in College Teaching," nscx.see.cac.edu/~eceprog/bstprac.html (November 25, 1998).