



CREATING ENGAGING DISCUSSIONS

Strategies for “Avoiding Crickets” in Any Size
Classroom and Online

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Stylus

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GAUGING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A DISCUSSION

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The idea of assessing a discussion may seem novel; the topic rarely appears in the literature. However, we really need to know how well a discussion has engaged our class, and we need data that are more reliable than just the amount of participation we can vaguely recall. We also need to know how effectively a discussion has met our learning objectives for the session. If we don't find out these things, how will we be able to improve our discussions or know whether they are effective in the first place?

In this chapter we examine three areas of effectiveness that need assessment: how engaged the class overall is in a discussion, how well the discussion advances the learning objectives or content, and the quality and quantity of individual student contributions.

Assessing Class Engagement and Participation in a Discussion

With little published guidance on assessing a discussion as a whole, we have to draw most of our ideas from those strategies used in the cases in chapters 6 through 13 and our own personal experience. So how did the faculty in our cases assess their classes' engagement and participation in discussions? How did they gauge the breadth of this engagement and participation, not individual student contributions? The variety of approaches may be surprising. Of course, the following suggestions represent just a sample of the possible strategies imaginable.

- Monitor student participation grades in an online or face-to-face class (Marquart & Drury, chapter 7). (The section later in this chapter "Assessing Individual Students' Contributions" addresses ways to evaluate individual participation.) This method assumes that you use the same measure of individual participation throughout a class and in each course offering.
- Monitor whether student enrollment increases in later offerings of a classroom or online course (Marquart & Drury, chapter 7). However, remember that course enrollments may change due to other factors.
- Have students prepare for the discussion by writing responses to specific questions (in this case, in online journals on which the instructor may comment) to be shared and analyzed during the discussion to identify themes, which then become prompts for written reflections. This structured technique is called *collaborative autoethnography* (CAE) (Shapiro, chapter 8). With the responses in front of them, even reticent students would find it relatively easy to participate.
- Keep count of the number of different students who make a contribution during a face-to-face class or online discussion and then calculate the proportion of participating students (Shewmaker, chapter 9). When used in a face-to-face class, this method assumes that you are calling on volunteers. When many different students participate, overall class engagement is high.
- Keep count of the number of classroom or online discussions during which more than two or three students dominate (Shewmaker, chapter 9). Again, this method in a face-to-face class assumes that you are calling on volunteers. A discussion dominated by only two or three students demonstrates little overall class engagement.
- Monitor the apparent level of excitement and passion during a discussion, which the amount of student movement, debate, and noise level may indicate (Townsend, chapter 11). This indicator is quite subjective but can still be valid.
- Ask students to evaluate the degree of community among them, whether in an online or face-to-face class (Voegele, chapter 12). Of course, other factors can influence a perceived sense of community, such as how well students in the class know each other from other contexts.
- Monitor the lengths of posts during an online discussion; longer posts indicate higher engagement (Wilson, chapter 13). The type of discussion question will also affect the length of the posts.

- Have students write evaluations of the overall participation in the discussion at the end of the class or as homework (authors' experience; McGonigal, 2005). Although each student's evaluation may be subjective, the collective class opinion may come close to reality.
- Ask students to write evaluations of their own contribution to the discussion, followed by strategies to improve their contributions (authors' experience; McGonigal, 2005). You need to supply your students with criteria on which to evaluate and improve their contributions. For suggested criteria, see the section later in this chapter, "Assessing Individual Students' Contributions."

Assessing a Discussion's Effectiveness in Helping Students Meet Course Learning Objectives

A discussion can evoke a great deal of student participation but go off topic, skim over the material superficially, not meet the learning objectives, or otherwise fail to advance students' learning in the way it was intended. This learning may emphasize mastery of the course content or the development of specific skills, such as active listening, argument analysis, use of evidence to back up claims, use of the language of the discipline, or critical thinking. Therefore, assessing a discussion's effectiveness in helping students meet the course learning objectives is another important task. Unfortunately, the literature offers some but not much advice here.

Conderman (2017) asks a question at the beginning of class to gauge his students' level of knowledge or confidence on the topic of the day and the same or a related question at the end. For example, a discussion might start with this prompt (ours, not Conderman's):

We've been reading about several species that went extinct through the ages and why they did. Why should we try to save species before they go extinct, or should we? Why shouldn't we just let nature take its course? Even if humans had something to do with the extinction, aren't we a part of nature?

After students have listened to and debated a range of positions, the discussion might close with these related questions: What is your stance on the issue of species preservation? Should we try to preserve species that are going extinct or not? Does it depend? If so, on what?

Conderman's pretest/posttest approach has scientific appeal, but remember that your assessment of a class period is an informal tool for you to improve your teaching and should be an organic part of the discussion.

McGonigal (2005) suggests a number of ways to assess student learning in a discussion. One is simply to have students complete a written assignment at the end of the class. If students have missed or misconstrued major points, you can revisit the topic later and give them a follow-up assignment. Another is to require students to post a response on an online discussion board to a question that formed the spine of the discussion. You can also ask students to evaluate the quality of the discussion, describe how it solved a problem, or reflect on how the discussion changed their understanding or thinking on the main topic. If the class addressed a controversy or disagreements emerged, ask students to summarize the conflict, assess how effectively the discussion handled it, and explain their own perspective on the issue. Students can respond to any of these questions in writing at the end of class, in a homework assignment, or on a follow-up online discussion board (McGonigal, 2005).

All of our cases in the next several chapters use various methods to assess the effectiveness of a discussion in helping students advance their mastery of the content. At the end of the following list, we add our own experience in assessing discussions.

- Have students informally write responses to prompts asking how their thinking and understanding changed or deepened due to the discussion (Festle, chapter 6). This method also provides students with a valuable metacognitive exercise.
- Have students post their list of takeaways from the discussion (Marquart & Drury, chapter 7). This activity also has metacognitive value.
- Ask students for anonymous feedback about the quality of the discussion (Marquart & Drury, chapter 7). Students may not know the characteristics of a high-quality discussion and will need a list or rubric from you. You can also lead a first-day discussion on what students have experienced as a high-quality discussion.
- Assign and assess individual papers in which students draw on their CAE journals to create their own model of leadership identity development (Shapiro, chapter 8). You can adapt this assessment technique to your course if you have your students keep a pre- or postdiscussion journal of their learning that they use in a paper or project that they develop individually.
- Keep track of the quality of the student comments in terms of how well they demonstrate deep, accurate understanding of the concepts as compared to the comments in previous offerings of the course. This increase in student learning seems to increase participation as well,

- perhaps because students have higher confidence in their command of the material (Shewmaker, chapter 9). This method assumes you have at least an informal record of the comments in previous course offerings.
- Use classroom assessment techniques (e.g., one-minute paper and four-square, which poses four questions about the discussion experience) at the end of class. In addition, assess students' conceptual understanding and application skills on papers and exams (Strean, chapter 10). This assessment is not comparative, except to your own expectations.
 - Assign a major research project and observe improvements in students' research skills, from total unfamiliarity to being able to locate and read journal articles (Townsend, chapter 11). This method examines students' growth as researchers.
 - Survey students on how they benefited from the major assignment around which discussions took place (Townsend, chapter 11). This method homes in on students' self-assessment as researchers.
 - Have students write critical reflections on what they gained from the face-to-face and online discussions, with an emphasis on their sense of class community, their ability to integrate the discussions on both platforms, and their perceived depth of the understanding of course concepts (Voegele, chapter 12). To ensure students have an accurate memory of the discussions, they must write these reflections shortly afterward.
 - Keep track of the quality of posts compared to posts in previous offerings of the course (Wilson, chapter 13). You must have a record of the posts from one or more previous course offerings. This assessment strategy echoes Shewmaker's (chapter 9) discussed previously, although hers is in a face-to-face course and Wilson's is in an online course.
 - Give a short-essay quiz at the end of class that assesses how well students have achieved the ultimate outcome(s) of the discussion (authors' experience). To help students pay attention, inform them in advance about these objectives and the quiz they will take later.
 - Have students reflect how well the discussion met its goals (authors' experience). Of course, you must articulate these goals at the beginning of class.

Assessing Individual Students' Contributions

We already described many strategies for assessing the degree of *class* engagement and in the learning value of a discussion, but you may also want to evaluate the quality of the contributions of your individual students, especially if

you are grading them on their participation. The literature offers three different approaches to this task, all of which work well across the disciplines. The first involves developing and using a *participation rubric* (Kustra & Potter, 2008); the second, having students keep, submit, and evaluate a *participation log* (Docan-Morgan, 2015); and the third, having students keep, submit, and grade a *participation portfolio* (Division of Information Technology, University of Maryland Baltimore County, n.d.). A rubric also pairs well with the other two approaches, but Kustra and Potter (2008) intend that *you* use it to grade participation, whereas the participation log and the participation portfolio have *students* use the respective tools to self-assess.

Kustra and Potter (2008) make a strong case for using a rubric to assess the discussion skills and contributions of individual students. They explain the many good purposes that a good rubric serves: focusing your attention on the objectives you want students to achieve in the discussion, and more broadly, the course; minimizing any grading biases; making your expectations explicit; helping students understand and meet your expectations; and increasing rigor in grading.

You must carefully consider the criteria you will use because you shouldn't burden students with more than six, and you have many options, including the following:

- quantity/frequency of contributions;
- listening skills;
- accuracy of content;
- demonstration of knowledge gained from assigned material;
- relevancy/responsiveness to the discussion issues;
- insight into discussion issues;
- demonstration of higher level thinking (e.g., analyzes critically, draws inferences, solves problems, makes comparisons and connections, draws conclusions, critically evaluates);
- evidence offered to support claims;
- sense of community fostered;
- professionalism;
- responsiveness to instructor feedback;
- responsiveness to student feedback; and
- quality of follow-up responses and feedback to other students.

In face-to-face discussions, you may also want to take delivery, such as audibility and eye contact, into account, whereas in online discussions, you may want to include the timeliness of posts, post length, student adherence to online protocols and netiquette, post clarity, mechanics, and even

references. You can weight each criterion equally or differentially; just be sure you explain the different levels of quality (three to five) for each one.

For rubric models and examples, simply type “sample participation rubric” into a search engine. The Web contains dozens of rubrics that you can access for free (e.g., Augustine and Culture Seminar, 2008; Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence, n.d.; Maznevski, 1996; Oregon Health & Science University, n.d.; Stanny, 2010; University of Northern Arizona e-Learning Center, 2016; University of Wisconsin, Green Bay, n.d.; Vandervelde, 2016). Table 5.1 is an example rubric that adopts and modifies elements from many of the participation rubrics that are available online.

The *participation log* eases much of the burden of trying to track student participation accurately in the classroom and online (Docan-Morgan, 2015; Rogers, n.d.). To implement it, you distribute a form that asks students to report specifically what they contributed to a whole-class discussion or lecture or to a small-group discussion or activity and on what day, as well as how their contribution aided the progression or the interaction. In addition, you should request two self-assessments during the semester in which students identify their strengths and ways for them to improve both the quantity and quality of their participation. According to its developer, Docan-Morgan (2015), your syllabus should outline your participation expectations, such as at least one contribution weekly with connections to the assigned readings, or include a participation rubric. You must also inform students from the first day of the course that they will be recording and evaluating their contributions on a simple form that you provide. You should give your own written feedback on each student’s participation on at least the first form they submit. By helping you view the discussions through your students’ eyes, both self-assessments can help you improve your discussion questioning and management skills.

The *participation portfolio* also streamlines the grading process for online discussion (Division of Information Technology, University of Maryland Baltimore County, n.d.). At the beginning of the course, you furnish a participation rubric that specifies what constitutes quality contributions and replies. As with the participation log, you must also inform students that they will be recording and evaluating their contributions. Every two to four weeks, students submit in writing a number of examples—two, three, or four, your choice—of their best contributions or replies along with a collective grade, which you can then accept, raise, or lower. This technique not only saves you grading time but also frees you from tracking student participation. At Baltimore County’s website, you will find detailed instructions and can watch a demonstration (University of Maryland, Baltimore, n.d.).

TABLE 5.1
Example of a Rubric to Assess Individual Students’ Participation in Discussions

Criterion Level	Mature/Exemplary	Satisfactory/Good	Developing	Unacceptable
Preparation for discussion	Shows deep understanding of the readings and frequently refers to them for ideas, evidence, and perspectives	Usually shows good understanding of the readings and refers to them for ideas, evidence, and perspectives	Shows superficial understanding of the readings or infrequently refers to them	Shows little or no evidence of doing the readings on a regular basis
Quality of thought demonstrated in contributions	Analyzes, synthesizes, or evaluates course material on a regular basis and advances the discussion in new directions	Occasionally analyzes, synthesizes, or evaluates course material deeply enough to advance the discussion	Repeats information from course material, showing little thought about the ideas or perspectives	Makes superficial, disruptive, or irrelevant comments, or none at all
Frequency of participation	Makes multiple high-quality contributions every discussion without dominating it	Makes at least one high-quality contribution almost every discussion	Occasionally makes a worthwhile contribution	Rarely or never makes a worthwhile contribution
Sense of community encouraged	Consistently attentive and respectful when other students contribute; makes eye contact with them and does not interrupt, roll eyes, or show disdain*	Generally attentive and respectful when other students contribute; usually makes eye contact with them*	Occasionally attentive when other students contribute; makes little eye contact with them*	Inattentive to what other students contribute; fails to make eye contact or interrupts, rolls eyes, or shows disdain*

(Continues)

TABLE 5.1 (*Continued*)

Criterion Level	Mature/ Exemplary	Satisfactory/ Good	Developing	Unacceptable
Quality of feedback to other students	Makes multiple high-quality comments on the contributions of other students every or almost every discussion; builds on contributions, asks questions about them, or tactfully critiques them	Regularly makes comments on the contributions of other students, but the comments may vary in quality	Occasionally comments on the contributions of other students, and the comments vary in quality	Does not comment, at least not constructively, on the contributions of other students

*Applies only to face-to-face discussions.

Reducing Risk, Enhancing Value

The idea of assessing the discussions you build into your courses merits your attention because discussion can be a high-risk teaching method. When discussion fails to elicit your students' participation or advance their learning, it can negatively impact engagement in the rest of the course. With so many different ways of assessing a discussion's success in engaging students and furthering their learning, you can experiment with different options. Most of them will take very little time, and all of them will help you develop a better rapport with your students and make better use of class time.

LEARNING AND INTERPRETING HISTORY THROUGH DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUE

Mary Jo Festle

I face multiple challenges in teaching the face-to-face history survey course The United States Since 1865. One challenge is that many of the students, who are almost all nonhistory majors, mistakenly assume that history primarily involves memorizing an endless, boring, and indisputable string of names and dates. Many are surprised by the threshold concept that historians actually interpret the past and make arguments about how to judge and characterize events. Students need practice in making thoughtful interpretations using facts as evidence to bolster their arguments.

I am also challenged to introduce students to historically important concepts and skills that students will find useful after college. One such concept is that people experienced the past differently based on who they were. Because it is difficult to shift our lens to that of others, and because perspective taking is a foundational skill for developing intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2011), I want to give students practice making this shift.

My final challenge is facilitating sustained and thoughtful discussion in which almost all of the students participate. In smaller classes and those populated by more advanced students, I don't have a problem with this. To my dismay, however, my attempts at facilitating a whole-class discussion with a group larger than 25 students had fallen into a pattern more like a fact-based recitation dominated by a handful of ever-ready students than an in-depth discussion of ideas by an engaged majority. I know how to stimulate energetic debates, but I want to avoid the sort of polarized debates that students