

Seminar & Discussion Protocols

Prepare

These are strategies that encourage students to prepare for a vibrant discussion. Just like stretching before a workout helps prepare your muscles for exercise, a pre-discussion activity helps prime learners for a discussion by “working out” some of their ideas.

Community Agreements or Discussion Norms (CA)

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-qpxFwfddlJ0EaCYSZoQ9MxDmesLfGUq6MC3Gq1xG6el/edit#>

Community agreements or discussion norms define for the group the guidelines for discussion and respecting and valuing one another.

A sample community agreement from Stephen Beck:

All participants will participate fully and respectfully in class discussions. Respectful participation involves allowing others to express their views fully, expressing one's own views concisely enough to allow others the opportunity to respond, responding to other's views by commenting on the view expressed rather than on the person who expressed it, honestly exploring the underlying reasons for differences of opinion, being aware of differences in participants' backgrounds and experiences and how these might affect all of our attitudes to the views expressed.

Many if not all of these features, as well as other important ones, will typically emerge from a discussion among the students, by asking them, “What does respect in seminar look like to you? What does disrespect look like?” A discussion about respect can be a good “ice-breaker” seminar as well.

If you are new to developing community agreements, you might find this [Protocol for Developing Community Agreements](#) a useful guide. If you don't have time to co-create norms with a group, [the National School Reform Initiative has developed a set of community agreements for educators](#) that provide a good starting point.

Anticipation Guide (AG)

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/anticipation-guides>

An anticipation guide activates learners' prior knowledge and builds anticipation for concepts, ideas or theories. An anticipation guide is a list of statements that ask a learner to agree or disagree before they have a depth of knowledge on a topic. Sometimes these statements will intentionally ask learners to struggle with a difficult choice in order to get them “primed” for learning about a topic.

Preflection (PR)

pre-flec-tion - serious and careful thought about an event before it occurs. As an activation technique, preflection helps students anticipate and prepare for learning by thinking about an idea or experience before they know much about it or go on to deepen their understanding. Preflections typically consist of priming questions or prompts that students respond to before they engage with a reading or other materials.

Dialogue Journal (DJ)

<https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/dialogue-journals/>

Give students 5 minutes to journal about the reading, lecture, etc. on the left side of a page. You may want to have a specific question for them to respond to or you may want to just let them respond as they see fit. Then have students swap journals and respond to their partner in the right hand column. This gives students time to ponder the topic before the discussion begins. I often alternate between a few minutes of dialogue journaling and then a few minutes of discussion, then a few minutes of dialogue journaling, and a few minutes of discussion.

Popcorn (PO)

This is a method to spur conversation in general. Students may not be very good at getting conversation started, so in this method, you ask every student to choose one sentence from the reading that they found particularly provocative or interesting and then one by one, they read their sentence aloud to the class. Encourage students to listen for patterns or themes in the sentences chosen. Were there even some sentences chosen by more than one person? Looking for these patterns gives everyone some idea of where conversation might begin.

Seminar Ticket (ST)

A student brings in evidence of their preparation for a seminar as a response to a clearly defined task. You could use one of the protocols listed above. You might encourage this habit by collecting them early in the term but students should be able to develop self-accountability as the program or course progresses.

Engage

These are strategies that you can use during the seminar to create a vibrant discussion. This is where students “exercise” their skills at drawing out new themes and connections through discussion.

Think, Pair, Share (TPS)

Often helpful for students who need a little more time to formulate their thoughts or who are hesitant to speak, this method begins with students doing some individual reflection. You can develop a specific prompt, or give students several alternative prompts; you might encourage them to write or sketch their thoughts, so that they have something to refer to when speaking.. After 5-10 minutes, students pair up and take turns sharing their reflections. You might ask students to mirror back their partner’s reflection, perhaps also offering a further observation. Depending on the seminar size as well as the time available, you might then have each pair join with another pair to form a group of four. As before, the students take turns sharing their reflections, with a brief mirroring response and perhaps an observation offered by another student (other than their original partner). After each student has shared and heard a response, you might have a further prompt for each group that leads them to move towards a synthetic discussion -- for instance: “What commonalities and what differences emerged from all of your reflections?” You might decide to dedicate the bulk of seminar time to the small-group discussions, or you might move to a full-group seminar. If you choose the latter, it can be helpful to have a speaker from each group give a 1-minute report to the rest of the seminar, with a summary of their discussion, or a point of consensus that the group found, or perhaps a point of disagreement, with equitable representation of all sides of the disagreement.

Circle of Voices (CV)

Students form into groups of 4-5 and take 5 minutes to form their thoughts. Proceeding around the circle, each student has 3 minutes to voice their thoughts -- no interruptions allowed! Once everyone has spoken, the group can move to less structured discussion. The only rule is that each speaker can speak only about someone else's idea; they can, however, speak more to their own idea if another student asks them to do so.

Role Assignments (RA)

This method is built around some or all of the students having a task or role to play in the discussion. Consider these two examples:

Example 1: Co Construction Circles

This strategy provides structure to support the co-construction of knowledge in small groups by ensuring that everyone has expertise to bring to the conversation. Unlike whole class discussion, every student has many opportunities to speak, and no one is likely to tune out or become disengaged. The structure imposed by this strategy helps students keep discussion flowing and resist the temptation to veer into unrelated topics, which can happen in unstructured small groups. This strategy is effective in large courses and can even be modified for online courses. The circles can last from 10-40 minutes. Visit our website for a detailed protocol.

[Student Handout.docx](#) | [Instructor Notes.docx](#)

Example 2: Task Assignment Discussions

This strategy asks students to take on key tasks, but this strategy is designed for whole class or large group discussion rather than small group conversations. Copy the task descriptions, cut them into strips, and hand them out randomly to students. You can assign one student per role or give everyone in the class a role to play. At the end of the discussion, take a couple of minutes for students to guess what roles others were playing.

- A. Keep us on track – when you see that we are going off on an unproductive tangent or dwelling on one idea too long, encourage us to pick up the pace or get back on track.
- B. Mediate – if people seem like they are getting argumentative or making others uncomfortable, try to help students understand and be open to other opinions
- C. Make connections – how does the current conversation relate to other ideas we have visited in the past? How can you clarify a complicated idea by connecting it to something we all understand in everyday life?
- D. Play devil's advocate – You don't have to be difficult, just say "What would you say to someone who said ____?" Or "I've heard people say ____ . How would we respond to that?"
- E. Compliment others – When someone makes a good point, say so. It is especially good if you can be specific. "That point was really clear/ interesting". "I hadn't thought of it like that."
- F. Summarize – "So is what you are saying..." "Would you agree that what you are saying is..."
- G. Encourage others – "We haven't heard from ____; what do you think?" "I'd be interested in knowing if you agree, Jennifer."

Two Cents' Worth (.02)

In this method, each student gets a certain number of poker chips, coins, or whatever. Our experiments suggest that each student needs a chip for each 30 seconds. If you have 20 students and 20 minutes, you'd give them 2 coins each. If you had 30 students and 15 minutes, 1 coin each, and so on. Students must contribute exactly as many times as they have coins, no more, no less. When they contribute, they move one coin to the front of their desk so that you and others can see who is getting involved and perhaps who needs to be drawn out.

Pros: the conversation is much more even with talkative students talking less and quiet students talking more. Students may actually beg you for another coin.

Cons: Students may tune out once they have made their contributions. Or a student may have an important idea that would really further the conversation but they don't have a coin left.

Partnered Circles (PC)

This strategy is useful for classes of 16-30 students where it is difficult to keep everyone engaged in a whole class discussion. One third of the class forms the central circle, who will do the speaking. Each individual in the circle has two people sitting behind them that pass notes to the student in the circle. One person provides feedback on "what" - ideas they would like the speaker to consider adding to the conversation. The other person provides feedback on "how" - process feedback such as encouraging their speaker to talk more or less or invite someone into the conversation or noting when they perform a useful task (such as the ones in "task assignment" above). If time allows, students can rotate roles. Ideally in partnered circles, students lead and direct the discussion, and the teacher attempts to stay outside the circle and take notes.

Signs (SI)

An effective way to allow students to actively participate in discussions without interrupting a speaker is to ask every student to make a "sign" when any other person has made a point. For example, the learning community might develop four hand signals to indicate, "I agree," "I disagree," "I have a question," or "I have something to add." This opens space for the facilitator to guide the conversation by asking questions such as, "Tannia, why do you disagree?" or "Felix, what would you like to add?"

OTFD Communication Framework (OTFD)

Sometimes discussion can get heated and lead to conflict or challenging situations. In these circumstances, it is helpful to have a solid communication strategy in your toolbox. For example the OTFD or "Open The Front Door" Communication strategy is a useful way to use gentle interrogation to mitigate the impact of microaggressions.

- Observe: You state what happened in a factual, nonjudgmental way.
- Think: Then you share your thoughts on what occurred.
- Feel: explain your emotions.
- Desire: state your desired outcome.

Tasha Souza's excellent, concise article "[Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom: Concrete Strategies for Cooling Down Tension](#)" (2016) reviews the OTFD framework and provides additional useful strategies for working through challenging moments in the classroom.

Fishbowl (FB)

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/fishbowl>

In fishbowl, a group of 3-5 students sits in an inner circle and the rest of the class forms an outer circle. The inner group gets to discuss for a few minutes and then some or all of them move to the outer circle while a new group moves in. This method often builds a lot of suspense because when students can't speak, they often very much want to. Also, all students get a chance to talk. The "more intimate" setting allows for good conversation because it is a lot easier for four people to talk in a meaningful way than 24 people. It takes some practice for students to get good at moving in and out of the fishbowl quickly. Those not currently in the fishbowl may tune out. It may be possible to frequently stop the conversation and ask someone not in the circle to summarize what the group just said.

Variation: "Tag-in" Fishbowl

Online (Text-only) Discussion (OD)

https://docs.google.com/document/d/18SzDXJINgS56VI9PHf_sUFdv-jA9SIhclPwsO8uIXR4/edit

These discussion protocols were developed by former Evergreen faculty member, Jose Gomez. The protocols provide a structure for students to engage in a text only seminar discussion using slack, chat, or other communication softwares.

Reflect & Integrate

Minute Papers, Muddiest Point & Exit Tickets (MME)

<https://www.nyu.edu/faculty/teaching-and-learning-resources/strategies-for-teaching-with-tech/best-practices-active-learning/active-learning-techniques/techniques-3.html>

These quick formative assessments provide an opportunity to check understanding. They can be great ways to get a quick scan of student learning after a seminar discussion. These and many other simple formative assessment techniques are described in the classic text, Classroom Assessment Techniques (1993) by Angelo and Cross.

Concept Map (Mind Map) (CM)

<https://ctl.byu.edu/tip/concept-mapping>

A concept map is a drawing or diagram showing connections between ideas or concepts. It is a way to organize knowledge. Typically, the concepts are enclosed in boxes or circles and linking words are written on lines connecting the boxes that describe how the concepts are related. A concept map illustrates the mental maps learners use to organize information - and can highlight where individuals have strong understandings and where misconceptions remain. If you've never created a concept map before, then you may want to google the term to see some examples.

Chalk Talk (CT)

https://www.nsrffharmony.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/chalk_talk_0.pdf

This method is similar to the concept but is developed collectively by students without speaking out-loud. The activity starts with a facilitator-posed question or concept that is written in the center of a chalk-board. Students contribute silently when so moved by adding branching comments to build a concept map that reflects community learning.

Critical Incidents (CI)

https://www.nsrharmony.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/critical_incidents_0.pdf

The Critical Incidents protocol is useful to employ when a community agreement is broken or an incident occurs in the learning community that needs repair. It is also a good practice when you want to dig into any particular moment or incident as a collective. Stephen Brookfield's adaptation, the [Critical Incident Questionnaire](#), takes this protocol outside of the classroom.

“Advanced” Protocols

Looking for a challenge? These protocols require a bit more leg work but can be really valuable!

Gallery Walk (GW)

<https://serc.carleton.edu/introgeo/gallerywalk/what.html>

In a gallery walk, students place work or reflections on the wall where others can read and leave comments. This type of activity is a way to bring some “physicality” to a discussion along with structured peer feedback.

Jigsaw (JS)

<https://www.sps186.org/downloads/blurbs/54806/Jigsaw%20Protocol.pdf>

A jigsaw activity is a cooperative learning strategy that builds interdependence among learners. In this approach, students become experts on a particular reading or component of a concept and then become responsible for teaching one another their *piece of the puzzle*.

World Cafe (WC)

<https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/evaluation-options/worldcafe>

“The core design philosophy of a World Café session is that people possess an intrinsic ability and insights to address issues of decision-making or planning effectively, and that natural conversation is one of the best options for eliciting such dialogue.” - www.betterevaluation.org

The World Cafe is a dialogue technique that uses small group conversations as a path to large scale change or understanding.

Resources & References

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