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TIPS FOR IMPROVING CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

by Kaitlin Woodlief

It's a common scenario: an instructor asks a question in front of a classroom packed with students and...crickets.

I think we've all had one of those classes, either as a student or an instructor. I literally heard crickets during a discussion I was leading last fall, and I am not using literally by its new figurative definition. Crickets had actually escaped from a nearby lab, and they found a convenient hiding space under the teacher station in my room! It made for a more dramatic silence.

There are other issues that may come up while trying to facilitate a discussion in class. The response to a question from the instructor may not be silence, but comments from the same few students dominating the discussion. Perhaps the discussion only progresses to the point of covering a topic superficially.

How can these problems be avoided during your next class discussion? While there are no simple cure-all solutions, there are strategies that can help you. Hopefully there is a tip here that you will find useful as you plan your next discussion with students:

Be prepared

It seems obvious that instructors should prepare discussion questions in advance, right? It's not just about having a few questions jotted down before class. It's important to think about what you're asking and what responses you're expecting from students. Make sure you include multiple types of questions. Some questions should be basic and just ask for factual responses, but you should also be prepared with questions asking for interpretation, evaluation, or reasoning. Be careful to limit the number of yes/no-type questions, as that can disrupt the flow of the conversation.

Encourage student preparation

Ask students to prepare a handful of their own questions before arriving in class. If you are discussing a reading assignment, ask students to write a short summary. Regardless of the type of discussion, give students adequate time to recall the material and collect their thoughts before starting the dialogue. This is something that is easy to overlook, and we should remember that many students may be rushing to class straight from work or an intense exam. Furthermore, students will be more likely to prepare if you emphasize the importance of participation by including expectations in your syllabus.

Create a supportive environment in the classroom

One way to get things rolling at the start of the semester is to start with an icebreaker. You may even provide students with the question prior to class so that they don't feel put on the spot. During the first few discussions, putting the students into pairs or groups to answer questions and report back may ease the transition for student not accustomed to talking in class. If students are still hesitant to participate and the conversation stalls, be prepared to try out some anonymous response platforms, like Poll Everywhere, to get students comfortable. During the class conversation, provide positive reinforcement by affirming student input (verbally and nonverbally), and carefully correcting erroneous contributions. You can also help set the tone by using student names and rearranging the seating in the room (if possible). Students will feel heard if you repeat or summarize what they have said, which has the bonus of clarifying the comment and helping other students hear what was said.

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TIPS FOR IMPROVING CLASSROOM DISCUSSION CONT.

Be sure the material is suitable to discussion

Typically, textbooks are not good sources for in class discussion. Make sure the topic or reading involves ample viewpoints so that students have plenty of ideas to bring up during the dialogue.

Consider cold calling

Cold calling, or calling on students in class when they

have not volunteered, works well for some instructors.

If you have fostered a supportive environment or are teaching advanced students, cold calling may work for your class. Warn your students that this may happen during discussions so that they come to class prepared. While this practice is somewhat controversial (just type "cold calling classroom" into Google and you will see a variety of articles and opinions), some research supports this practice.

PAPER + CLICKERS = PLICKERS: AN EASY WAY TO ADD INTERACTION TO YOUR CLASSES

by Mendi Benigni

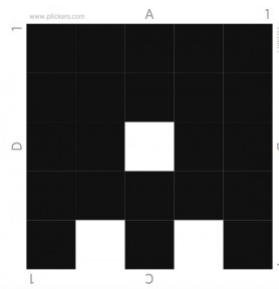
Clickers (or audience response systems) are a great way to check for understanding, poll students' opinions, and even give quizzes. Normally it requires the students to have a purchased clicker such as iClicker or Turning Point or a phone, tablet or computer for use with software like

Poll Everywhere. Either way, there is an investment of some type and this may make those of you new to polling a bit nervous. Well now there is an easy and investment-free way to get started with clickers in your class. It's called Plickers (Paper Clickers). Thanks to Tamara Kirshtein in Teacher Education for sharing this with TLT.

Plickers requires only the professor to have a *phone or tablet with a camera* and the students to have, you guessed it, paper clickers. Here's how it works:

- Professor goes to Plicker.com and sets up a class (free).
- Professor prints out the free Plicker cards and distributes one to each student (up to 63 students).
- Professor asks a question in class.

- Students hold up their cards with the right answer at the top.
- Professors uses the Plicker app (Android and Apple) to take pictures of the class.
- Plicker records all the answers and displays a graph.



With Plicker you can:

- Poll your class
- Check for understanding
- Tie a specific card to a student's name and give quizzes
- Display results in a live view in real time
- Save data to review later

With Plicker you can't:

- Use it with a class larger than 63
- Export the data for use in OAKS or other applications
- Ask open-ended questions

It's fast and easy to use. It's not as robust as some of the other applications like iClickers or Poll Everywhere but it's a great way to get some of the benefits quickly and easily with very little investment. Print out your cards and get started today.



USING DIGITAL PORTFOLIOS IN THE CLASSROOM

When I first began teaching, each class involved a major research paper that was due at the end of the semester. Much to my chagrin, most students never picked up their graded papers, having already left for home and forgotten the assignment entirely.

About four years ago, I was cleaning out my office, and discovered an entire filing cabinet filled with abandoned graded papers. Seeing this inspired me to alter my signature assignments. I began reading about the "write to learn" movement, which emphasizes process over product. I learned about scaffolding assignments, low-stakes writing, journaling, and free writing. I then participated in a workshop in which I learned more about writing across the curriculum, including the value of student portfolios. By the way, if this sounds interesting to you, I highly encourage signing up for the Writing Institute hosted by First Year Experience and English professors Chris Warnick and Amy Mecklenburg-Faenger (for College of Charleston faculty only).

Back to portfolios...

Student portfolios are collections of academic work and can be used for pedagogical, professional, or assessment purposes. In my writing-intensive classes, I decided longitudinal portfolios would be the most meaningful. This type of portfolio focuses on documenting the entire writing process, including notes, drafts, feedback, and revisions.

Next, I had to decide how students would curate their work. I could ask students to print hard copies of their papers and keep them in three-ring binders. But I have only so many filing cabinets in my office, and I had nightmares about being buried alive by stacks of papers. So I decided a digital option would be best.

There are a multitude of companies which provide e-portfolio services, but most of them require expensive subscriptions. Thus, I decided to use an application that College of Charleston students, faculty, and staff have free access to: Google Drive.

Google Drive is part of the Google Apps for Education suite, providing cloud-based storage space. Students can access their Drive from any device that connects to the Internet and files are automatically saved. For more information about

Google Apps for Education, visit the TLT tutorials blog.

At the beginning of the semester, I ask students to create a folder in their Drive specifically for their class portfolio.

The students then share that folder with me by adding my email address. Within their portfolio, they can create sub-folders for each writing assignment or each phase in the writing process. I ask students to upload everything—every draft and peer review, and all the feedback I have offered. For speeches (my class also includes a public speaking component), I require students to include their outlines, self-evaluations, and links to their videos (I upload videos of their speeches to Kaltura Media Space or an unlisted YouTube channel).

At the end of the semester, students compose a letter, addressed to me, reflecting on their evolution as a writer and speaker. I ask students to go through their portfolio and critically examine the strides they have made and the hurdles they still have to clear. Because they have access to all their work, they can select examples that provide evidence to support their claims about strengths and weaknesses.

In order for this type of reflection to be truly effective, I have learned to build a culture of reflection in my classes. Throughout the semester, students engage in peer editing, workshopping, and self-evaluation, giving them the practice necessary to successfully complete the final reflection letter.

Using Google Drive is a simple way for students to curate their academic work, share it with peers and faculty, and engage in critical reflection. From the longitudinal portfolios created for my class, students could cull their best work and create a separate "showcase portfolio" that may be useful when interviewing for internships and jobs.

If you're interested in learning more about Google Drive, TLT hosts training sessions throughout the year. Check out the training schedule at tlt.eventbrite.com. Email a picture of yourself as a zombie to tlt@cofc.edu with the subject line 'November Easter Egg' for a chance to win a fabulous prize. Use the following video as inspiration: <http://goo.gl/WNC9Dk>.

by Jessica Smith