

Facilitating Discussions

Davis, James R. and Arend, Bridget D. (2013). *Facilitating Seven Ways of Learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

The authors recommend creating learning objectives for each class period and designing the class based on them. The following evidence-supported insights and advice are for facilitating discussions. Many of these ideas can be applied to individual and online discussions.

- Prepare questions on handouts or in slides so students can reread them.
- Pose open-ended questions without singling out individuals.
- Use narrative questions: “Can you tell us what happened ...?”
- Ask people to write their answers or discuss with a neighbor before discussing as a class. Structure time for participants to think. If online, consider organizing small groups (3-4 students) to answer a question prior to having students participate in discussion threads.
- Whenever possible, redirect students’ questions to the rest of the class. In online discussions, reply to unanswered questions individually via email after the due date. Otherwise, students might defer responsibility for each other’s questions to you.
- Look not for answers, but rather for responses that provide assumptions that need questioning, common mistakes, useful information, clarifications, ground rules for evidence, alternative viewpoints, hypotheses, or tentative conclusions; when you hear them, restate them and consider writing them on the board. Online, summarize them as a separate post, not as a response to a specific student’s comment.
- Rephrase what students say and confirm what they meant.
- Welcome mistakes without judgment; emphasize learning over correctness.
- Highlight differences in your students’ answers and ask them to explain or reconcile the difference.
- Ask follow-up questions for more evidence, clarification, connections with prior statements or other ideas, cause-effect relationships, synthesis (combining) of ideas, or summaries.
- When students do not respond, you may discover that they did not hear or comprehend the question.
- Periodically paraphrase, highlight, and summarize discussed ideas.
- The facilitator’s attitude influences the quantity and quality of responses.
- In a face-to-face environment, know it may not be necessary for everyone to speak and that some people experience significant emotional discomfort from speaking in large groups.
- At the end of a discussion, ask participants to write in their own words whatever they have learned.