

Supporting Whole-Class Discussion

Managing whole-class discussions is complex. Teachers have to encourage students to participate, while discouraging a few individuals from dominating the conversation. Reluctant students need repeated (non-threatening) invitations and support to help them participate. A discussion leader needs to keep the conversation on topic while allowing for the rich development of alternative ideas. Students need to feel comfortable asking genuine questions and challenging comments with which they disagree. Above all, such conversations need to remain student dominated.

As you work to develop discussion management strategies, you may wish to consider the following suggestions.

- Increase wait time. Silence is uncomfortable and research suggests that many teachers unwittingly give students only a few seconds to answer a question before offering prompts, or even answering it themselves. If you have posed a genuinely thought-provoking question, students will need time to frame a response. You might consider asking them to take a moment or two and jot down their written responses before you begin the discussion. Alternatively, you might place a clock with a second hand where you can see it, and consciously give students 15 to 30 seconds of think-time before asking, "Should I rephrase my question?"
- Use follow-up questions to keep discussion moving. Asking for clarification ("What do you mean by that?" or "Can you say that in different words?" or "Could you explain that a little more?") models the value of developed explanations. Suggesting that students substantiate their comments ("Where do you see that in the story?" or "What evidence do you have to support that?") helps them learn the value of looking to the text for information. Asking for another opinion ("Do you agree with that?" or "Does that make sense to the rest of you?") can be an effective strategy when an issue or an understanding is controversial.
- Help students connect their comments to what has come before, or to what they have experienced earlier. ("How does what X just said relate to the observation Y made yesterday about that?" or "How does what is happening now relate to events in the first chapter?")
- Be alert to nonverbal cues ("X, I notice you are nodding your head. Why do you agree with what Y just said?")
- As you plan for discussion, identify three or four issues that you feel students should address. Frame one or two **interpretive** or **evaluative** questions (see *Developing Questions for Literature Discussion*) to introduce those issues. You may wish to begin with one of these questions or, as your students become more proficient at class discussion, you might begin simply by asking, "What do we need to say or ask about our reading?"
- Use time-outs in the middle of discussion to allow students to do a quick write in response to a complex question or issue, to summarize the discussion so far, or to articulate a point of view.
- Have a discussion about discussions. Use an overhead slide or chart paper to make a list of characteristics of good participation in classroom discussions. Hopefully, students will identify some of the following:
 - Speak loudly enough to be heard.
 - Contribute, but don't dominate.
 - Ask genuine questions.
 - Try to connect comments to earlier observations when appropriate.
 - Stick to the topic.
 - Clarify ideas, and ask for clarification when necessary.