

Stephen D. Brookfield, and Preskill, Stephen. (1999) *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for University Teachers*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.

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As the title implies this book contains useful ideas which university teachers may wish to try out as they teach classes.

### **Some examples from the text**

#### Fifteen claims for the benefits of discussion

1. It helps students explore a diversity of perspectives.
2. It increases students' awareness of and tolerance for ambiguity or complexity.
3. It helps student recognize and investigate their assumptions.
4. It encourages attentive, respectful listening.
5. It develops new appreciation for continuing differences.
6. It increases intellectual agility.
7. It helps student become connected to a topic.
8. It shows respect for students' voices and experiences.
9. It helps student learn the processes and habits of democratic discourse.
10. It affirms students as co-creators of knowledge.
11. It develops the capacity for clear communication of ideas and meaning.
12. It develops habits of collaborative learning.
13. It increases breadth and makes students more empathetic.
14. It helps students develop skills of synthesis and integration.
15. It leads to transformation.

#### Types of questions (to keep discussion going)

- a) Questions that ask for more evidence, e.g. How do you know that?
- b) Questions that ask for clarification, e.g. What's a good example of what you are talking about?
- c) Open questions, e.g. Sauvage says that when facing moral crises, people who agonize don't act, and people who act don't agonize. What does he mean by this?
- d) Linking or extension questions, e.g. How does your observation relate to what the group decided last week?
- e) Hypothetical questions, e.g. If Shakespeare had intended Iago to be a tragic or more sympathetic figure, how might he have changed the narrative of Othello?
- f) Cause-and-effect questions, e.g. What is likely to be the effect of raising the average class size from 15 to 30 on the ability of learners to conduct interesting and engaging discussions?
- g) Summary and synthesis questions, e.g. What remains unresolved or contentious about this topic?

## The book chapters and what they include

1. Discussion in a democratic society  
*moral and political justifications for discussion methods, particularly in the experience it provides of democratic process; difference between 'discussion', 'conversation' and 'dialogue'; the concept of 'critical discussion'; the attitudes and habits required for democratic discussion.*
2. How discussion helps learning and enlivens classrooms  
*benefits to learning and teaching which can be derived from discussion; fifteen claims for the ways in which it helps learning and enlivens classrooms; five common reasons teachers might give up on discussion.*
3. Preparing for discussion  
*how to ensure students come to class able to talk about the discussion topic; use of demonstration and modelling; setting appropriate preparatory assignments; clarifying rules, expectations and purpose.*
4. Getting discussion started  
*common mistakes that kill discussion; specific examples that prompt students to talk; how to debrief preparatory reading.*
5. Keeping discussion going through questioning, listening, and responding  
*question types and benefit and purpose of each; three exercises to improve students' listening skills; three ways for teachers to respond to student contributions.*
6. Keeping discussion going through creative grouping  
*ways of organising smaller breakout groups, their dynamics and reporting back to the larger group; benefits of electronic discussion methods*
7. Discussion in culturally diverse classrooms  
*race and class; honour and respect for differences; exercises to address diversity issues; monitoring racist speech; speech codes and their disproportionate representation in discussion.*
8. Discussion across gender differences  
*manifestation of male and female speech patterns in conversation; exercises to clarify the role of gender in how we talk to each other.*
9. Keeping students' voices in balance  
*why some students talk too much and others talk too little; how to address this and achieve a balance.*
10. Keeping teachers' voices in balance  
*common reasons why teachers say too much or too little; ways to avoid either extreme; scenarios which demonstrate why it is important to get this right.*
11. Evaluating discussion  
*how to evaluate discussion; use of audits, logs, portfolios, evaluation forms; judging discussions against the fifteen claims in Chapter 2.*

The book is available to borrow from the Oxford Learning Institute Library.

Other Oxford Learning Institute resources based on Brookfield and Preskill's book.

- Keeping students' voices in balance
- Critical incident questionnaire