

Select readings

From *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*, by Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill. Published by Jossey-Bass (2005). Available in the LTC library.

Excerpt from Ch. 4 Mistakes to avoid at the Start of Discussion

Don't Lecture

Don't start the discussion by giving a minilecture in which you summarize salient points, outline different perspectives, and introduce your own concerns... Even the most judiciously evenhanded prologue conveys subtle message about what you want or expect students to say once the discussion starts.

Don't be vague

Don't always open the discussion by posing vague or general questions like, "What do you think?" or "Would anyone like to react?" or "what wants to start us off?" This opening works only when two conditions are in place: when participants know and trust each other and are used to talking easily and democratically and when they are so immersed in and provoked by the topic or preparatory reading that they are bursting to speak.

Don't play favorites

Don't allow a pecking order of opening contributors to develop. Every teacher knows the one or two students who are so committed to learning (or two impressing the teacher) that they can be relied on to speak up and get the discussion going...After watching this happen two or three times at the start of the discussion, the others in the group lose their desire to participate because they can predict that the usual suspects will speak up.

Don't fear silence

Don't panic at silence. At the start of a discussion, there may be long periods of silence as people settle into the new intellectual project that the conversation represents...A typical conversation dynamic in discussion is for teachers to start the session by asking a provocative question designed to spark some fruitful responses. Sometimes, though, students choose not to say anything, and in panic, teachers start to answer their own question. Do this even once and you let students know they can rely on you to answer the question and do their thinking for them.

Don't misinterpret silence

Don't mistake students' silence for mental inertia or disengagement. Conversation is halting, tentative, and circuitous, filled with hesitations and awkward attempts at reformulating thoughts... Effective discussion leaders take steps to ensure that periods of reflective silence become accepted as a normal and necessary element of people's deliberations.

Excerpt from Ch. 5 Keeping discussion going through questioning, listening responding

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