



Facilitating Student Discussions

When students discuss important ideas, they mentally consolidate information, apply the language of the field, and often refine their own ways of thinking about a subject. There is a wealth of cognitive science literature regarding the benefits of talking to others during the process of learning. However, as instructors, we have each likely had a classroom moment in which we asked students to discuss a concept and the room remained silent. This isn't a great feeling and so we often revert back to straight lecture even when we know that a discussion time would benefit students.

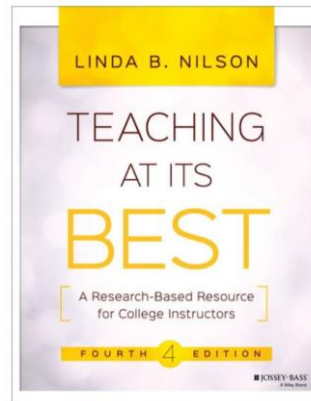
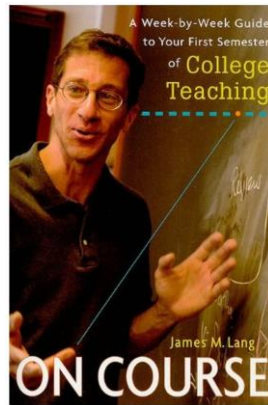
Those of us who have taught for a number of years tend to have several strategies that we use to ensure that in-class discussions go well. We consider these to be pre-emptive strikes as they help set the stage for productive conversation—and help prevent those awkward silences.

- Our first suggestion involves the use of small groups during discussions. It is almost always easier to get students talking in pairs or triads than it is to get students sharing in front of a group of 50.
- Next, we have a plan. Rather than asking students to simply discuss, we provide specific guidance by being explicit with our directions: “Identify three current events that relate to this reading,” or “What does the author not consider within this text?” or “What are three questions that you and your partner still have about this theory?” We typically think through discussion questions while planning the lesson and embed the discussion prompts within our PowerPoint slides.
- Sometimes we use a discussion protocol—a structured process or set of steps that students will follow during the discussion. Discussion protocols are nice in that they ensure voices are equally heard. They are also easy to find. A google search for discussion protocols will return a wealth of examples.
- Finally, we also remember the importance of time. It can be challenging to think on the spot, so processing time is often important prior to discussion. We will provide students with time to write before discussing so that they are warmed up to the subject matter or we will have given specific ideas for students to note during the week's homework or readings so they come in prepared. We will also be clear about the amount of time that will be devoted to a particular discussion and this amount of time is almost always less than we think students will want. It is much easier to offer more time than it is to police conversations that have gone off track.



DEPARTMENT OF
**TEACHING AND LEARNING
SUPPORT SERVICES**
Institute for Teaching and Learning Excellence

If you would like more information, read chapter four in the book *On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching* or chapter 13 in the book *Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors*.



Both are available electronically through the OSU library. Or, contact us at ITLE and schedule a visit!

Lang, J. M. (2008). *On course: A week-by-week guide to your first semester of college teaching*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Nilson, L. B. (2016). *Teaching at its best: A research-based resource for college instructors* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.