IDEA PAPER No. 15

center for FACULTY EVALUATION & DEVELOPMENT
Division of Continuing Education
Kansas State University

January 1986 KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Improving Discussions

by

William E. Cashin
Kansas State University

Philip C. McKnight
University of Kansas

"I have come to feel that the only learning which significantly influences behavior is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning."
Rogers (1969, p. 153)

Although such learning can take place during a lecture, it is more likely to occur in discussion classes where there is give and take. Everybody knows what a discussion is, but try to find a good definition or description. In this paper we will use "discussion" to include a variety of teaching approaches which focus on two-way, spoken communication between the teacher and the students, and more importantly among the students themselves, for example, recitation, dialogue, and guided and pure discussions.

Strengths of Discussion Approaches

As was suggested in the previous **IDEA Paper** on improving lectures (Cashin, 1985), what constitutes effective teaching, that is, what best fosters learning, depends upon your instructional goals. Discussion approaches are well suited to a variety of course goals.

1. Discussions provide the instructor with **feedback about student learning.** A major limitation of lectures (one-way communication) is the lack of information about what the students are learning. Discussions overcome this by using both instructor and student questions, student comments, elaborations, justifications, etc. These interactions allow the instructor to plumb the depths of the students' understanding.

2. Discussions are appropriate for higher-order cognitive objectives: **application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation** (Bloom et al, 1956; Gronlund, 1978). Discussions permit and encourage the student to introduce, explore, and refine ideas in ways which are impossible in a lecture.

3. Discussions are appropriate for affective objectives: **to help students develop interests and values, to change attitudes** (Krathwohl et al, 1964; Gronlund, 1978). Discussions can do more than change minds; they can change hearts, the way we feel about an issue and our appreciation of it.

4. Discussions allow students to become more **active participants** in their learning. This increases their motivation to learn and makes the learning more interesting

Weaknesses of Discussion Approaches

Like everything in life, discussions have not only advantages, but disadvantages.

1. It may be **difficult to get student participation.** First, discussions can be **threatening to students.** In lectures the student's ignorance can go undiscovered. To participate in a discussion means to run the risk of both being wrong and being found out. Also, there may be **peer pressure not to excel.** There are still students who prefer the "gentleman's (or gentlewoman's) C." Further, in some cultures it is considered inappropriate for the individual to stand out, for example, in some Asian countries and some Native American tribes. Other subcultures do not place a high value on intellectual achievement in general.

2. Discussions are **more time consuming.** The pace seems slower, not much may appear to be happening.

3. Discussions are **not well suited to covering significant amounts of content.** As instructors, we must wrestle with the issue of how much of the content we cover versus the depth of the students' learning.

4. Effective discussions **require more forethought** than do lectures. They are not opportunities for the instructor to take a break. Yet preparation cannot ensure that the discussion will follow the anticipated direction. After a few bad experiences, the instructor may take refuge in a more predictable method—lecturing.

5. In discussions the **instructor has less control.** To some extent we must go where the students' questions and interests take the group. We must allow the students to speak.

Recommendations

This part of the paper will summarize recommendations regarding three aspects of discussions: improving cognitive or intellectual learning, improving the affective or interest/value aspects of learning, and increasing participation. The authors included in the Further Readings section at the end of this paper treat most of these topics. Individual authors will only be cited where their treatment seems to be of special interest.

Cognitive Aspects

1. **Define the topic.** The topic for discussion should be relatively clear, that is, limited enough to focus the students' attention. "Real" or relevant issues rather than abstract or academic ones are more likely to engage the students. It is desirable to give students the topic a class or two before the discussion so that they may prepare. Often assigned readings and study questions help.

2. **The instructor must be prepared.** It is our contention that an effective discussion requires much more preparation than an effective lecture. In a lecture the instructor can decide what he or she will cover. In a discussion you should be prepared to explore any issue reasonably related to the discussion topic. This means you must know the topic very well. It is advisable to list possible issues or questions which the students might bring up and to outline possible answers or responses and if necessary, do some more reading or studying yourself.

3. **Use a common experience.** Discussions are likely to be more focused and therefore more productive if they deal with something the students have all experienced. Choosing something from the students' "real life" is one tactic. Providing a common experience by means of readings, a film, etc. is another. Ensure that the students have sufficient information to make the discussion productive—simply sharing ignorance is in no one's best interest. During the discussion you may have to provide additional information if lack of data is hindering or sidetracking the discussion.

4. **Acting as a facilitator is the instructor's primary role in a discussion.** Most of the content should be covered before the discussion, either in previous lectures, readings, films, or other sources, including the students' experience. The following behaviors tend to be facilitative:

a. **Listen**—attend to the points the students are trying to make, not just your points. (Attend to their feelings as well as their thoughts.)

b. **Observe**—pay attention not only to the content but to the group process, for example, who is responding to whom, and who is typically ignored by the rest of the group.

c. **Allow for pauses and silence.** Students need to be given time to think. So we must exercise that most difficult skill for college teachers, keeping quiet. This is necessary if students are to answer complex, higher order questions.

d. **Post and verify** what individuals are saying. Periodically take time to summarize or write on the chalkboard your understanding of the problems or positions, solutions or responses, being put forth by the students. Then check if your understanding is correct. When writing on the chalkboard, try to use simple phrases. Show relationships between ideas by using diagrams, etc.

e. **Request examples or illustrations.** Almost all writers agree that using examples helps people learn. The more complex or abstract the material becomes, the more helpful illustrations become.

f. **Encourage and recognize students' contributions.** Broad student participation in discussions enhances their value. Be especially alert to nonverbal clues that students who do not participate much have something to say; when they do, call on them. Occasionally comment positively on students' contribution, but do not do it every time. Otherwise, it becomes a dialogue between you and individual students rather than a discussion among the students.

g. **Test consensus.** If everyone agrees, then there will be no discussion. Beware of premature agreement. If the group seems to have reached a consensus, test this by paraphrasing your understanding of that agreement. Often only the talkers have agreed and there are still opposing positions to be explored.

h. **Provide a summary and/or conclusion.** By taking a few minutes throughout the discussion or at least at the end to summarize the main points which have been discussed, you provide the students with a sense of closure and help them remember. Making explicit any conclusions which have been reached is also very helpful if the topic will not be discussed further.

5. **Regarding questioning,** the following are some suggestions which encourage interaction among the students:

a. **Ask students for clarification** if their comments seem to you (and so probably to many others) to be incomplete or unclear.

b. **Ask students to support their opinions.** Sometimes students, especially freshmen, think it is sufficient simply to have an opinion. But in most college-level courses one's opinion is less important than the reasons behind it. You are not so much interested in what they think, as why. Make the students go beyond their initial, perhaps superficial reactions.

c. **Use open-ended questions,** that is, questions which permit the students to elaborate and think through their answer rather than just give a brief response, or a "yes" or "no." Use questions like, "What are the causes of . . . ?" or, "What is your opinion about . . . ?"

d. **Use divergent questions,** that is, questions to which there is no single, correct answer. Questions like "What were the causes of the American Revolution?" are both open-ended, and convergent—the student is likely to respond with a set of causes generally agreed upon by historians. Questions like "What is your opinion about the greenhouse effect? . . . or capital punishment?" permit the students to talk about what they think. They can explore one position without having to cover others.

e. **Rephrase questions** if students cannot respond to your first question. Your second question can help the students to focus on previous material that might be relevant, or to draw their attention to some limitation or inconsistency in a previous response, etc.

f. **Pause, give the students time to reflect** and think through their responses, especially with higher order concepts. In our culture, silence is socially awkward. You may need to train your students (and yourself) to feel comfortable with silences.

6. **Possible stages to follow.** There are many paths which a discussion might productively travel. The following is one general plan:

a. **Define the problem.** Until there is some agreement about what the problem, question, or issue is, the discussion is likely to make little progress.

b. **Have students suggest possible solutions.** Brainstorming—having the group suggest as many solutions as possible without any discussion of their feasibility—is one approach. The group should avoid criticizing or making evaluative judgments at this point

c. **Collect relevant data** or comments from the students about the relative advantages and disadvantages of the proposed solutions. At this stage the focus is still on elaboration rather than evaluation.

d. **Evaluate the various solutions, positions, and conclusions.** Now is the time to judge, compare, weigh, and evaluate.

e. **Decide upon a solution, position, etc.** If at the end of the previous stage one position clearly is better than the other alternatives, then you are already finished. But most questions have more than one "good" answer. In such cases, the group, or the various individuals, must decide which position they choose to embrace at least for now.

Affective Aspects

Many academics tend to conceive of college as primarily, if not exclusively, an intellectual or cognitive experience. Such a conception of college ignores at least two considerations. First, individual students often bring to college feelings, interests, and values that hinder their learning or understanding of content which we may consider objective. Second, college is about values, at least values like logical thinking, clear expression, knowing the data or literature, and even appreciating the subject and being responsible for one's own work. At a more profound level, college is also about what kind of person one aspires to be, what kind of world the student wants, and what life is about. Our teaching is value-laden, and appropriately so. Discussion approaches are well suited to many of these concerns about feelings, interests, and values; hence, this section on affective aspects of discussions is included.

7. **Know your students.** Start the discussion with something relevant to the students' interests and goals, something out of their experience.

8. **Be patient.** Discussion classes take more time to get going. Therefore, be careful you do not talk too much, especially at the beginning.

9. **Be sensitive to student feelings.** Sometimes students suppress their negative feelings. But those feelings still remain an obstacle to learning. Sometimes students get into arguments (vs. discussion); this does not foster learning. Sometimes students attack the professor. Do not take it personally. You may want to get these feelings out in the open and talk about them.

10. **Challenge the students, but do not threaten them.** This can be a very difficult balance to achieve. You want to arouse the students enough to stretch themselves, but not so much that it becomes counterproductive. What makes it especially difficult is that what challenges one student may distress another. Some suggestions are:

a. **Do not question a single student for too long.** If the student cannot respond after a second, focusing question, move on to other students. Demonstrating how much an individual student does **not** know rarely serves a useful purpose.

b. **Use personal anecdotes.** Using your own experiences and showing that you are human can facilitate the discussion if done in moderation.

11. **Avoid premature agreement.** We have already talked about testing for consensus (4g above). You may wish to ask a student or group to argue against the apparent consensus. Or you may want to play devil's advocate—very carefully; avoid being so convincing that later some students will consider you to be intellectually dishonest. (See McKeachie, 1986, pp. 33 – 34 for an extended discussion.)

12. **Deal with conflicts,** do not ignore them. A helpful first step is to define the apparent areas of conflict. The problem may simply be cognitive misunderstanding, although often not. You may want to write the pros and cons on the chalkboard, or you may want to arrange for the two sides to debate the issue. At least in some way explicitly address the conflict.

13. **Recommended instructor behaviors are:**

a. **Be silent;** when in doubt, keep quiet. (See 5f above.)

b. **Hear the students out.** Concentrate on the points the students are trying to make more than on the points you want to make.

c. **Inquire,** ask the student to elaborate, clarify, expand, explain, explore, etc.

d. **Paraphrase** what a student has said, first, to check your understanding, and second, to show that you are listening. This is helpful behavior for the other students also.

e. **Be accepting** rather than judgmental or evaluative. Try to focus on the "correct" part of the student's response. Positive reinforcement will foster more learning than negative reinforcement. (Eventually your grading criteria will have to be taken into consideration, and they will have an important influence. See 15 below.)

Regarding Participation

The following are some suggestions about what you might do to increase student involvement and interaction in your discussions.

14. **Create the expectation of participation.** Arrange the seating so it is easy for everyone to see one another, e.g., around a table or with a circle of chairs. Make the instructor part of the group, e.g., **not** behind a desk, but seated in same kind of chair, etc. Help students to get to know one another, e.g., have them interview someone they do not know. Get the students to talk, e.g., have them introduce the person they interviewed. Help them learn each other's name.

15. **Clarify how participation will influence grades,** and do this **early** and **clearly.**

16. **Avoid always looking directly at the student speaking.** Socially we are conditioned to look at the person who is speaking. If you, as the instructor, typically do this, the students will speak to you, not the group. If Student B is responding to something Student A said, you might look at Student A. Also, look at the other students to see how they are reacting to the speaker. Use gestures and nods to direct the students' attention to other students, not to you, or simply say, "Talk to him (or her)."

17. **Control excessive talkers,** by, for example:

a. **Do not call on the "talkers" first.** Wait to see if someone else raises a hand or volunteers a comment.

b. **Solicit responses from the "nontalkers."** Be alert to nonverbal cues indicating that they have something to say and call on them: "Did you want to say something . . . ?," or "Let's hear from some of you who haven't said anything yet."

c. **Have the class observed by someone assigned as an observer,** then discuss who is talking, how often, to whom, etc. Often this will make both the "talkers" and "nontalkers" modify their behavior.

d. **Talk to the student outside of class** if all else fails.

18. **Instructor's role as group leader.** Many of the "gatekeeping" responsibilities in the group process literature are also appropriate in discussion groups.

a. **Call the class to order.**

b. **Help the group clarify its goals.** Even if the goals are primarily the instructor's, it helps to make them clear. In more flexible groups where the students have a major voice in determining the goals, such clarification becomes essential.

c. **Keep the group on track.** Sometimes this can be done by simply calling attention to the fact that the individual or group is getting off the point.

d. **Clarify and mediate differences.** (See 12 above, on dealing with conflicts.)

e. **Summarize and draw conclusions.** (See 4h above.)

Conclusions

As with the **IDEA Paper** on improving lectures, the recommendations in this paper are suggestions of things that may help create and maintain an effective discussion. They are not prescriptions—things that you **must** do. If these recommendations are helpful, use them. If not, perhaps some of the further readings will be of help.

References and Further Readings

All of the citations which follow, if they have specific page numbers listed after them, are recommended for further reading. The recommended first choice has two asterisks after it; a single asterisk follows recommended second choices

Barnes-McConnell, P. W. (1978). **Leading discussions.** In O. Milton (Ed.), **On college teaching: A guide to contemporary practices.** San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. pp. 62 – 100.**

Bligh, D., Ebrahim, G. J., Jacques, D., & Piper, D. W. (1975). **Teaching students.** Devon, England: Exeter University Teaching Services, pp. 146 – 172.

Bloom, B. S., Engelhart, M. D., Furst, E. J., Hill, W. H, & Krathwohl, D. R. (1956). **Taxonomy of educational objectives: Handbook I, cognitive domain.** New York: David McKay.

Cashin, W. E. (1985). **Improving lectures.** (IDEA Paper No. 14.) Manhattan, KS: Kansas State University, Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development.

Cashin, W. E., Brock, S. C., & Owens, R. E. (1976). **Answering and asking questions.** Manhattan, KS: Kansas State University, Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development. 17 pp.

Crow, M. L. (1980). **Teaching as an interactive process.** In K. E. Eble (Ed.), **Improving teaching styles: New directions for teaching and learning,** No. 1. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. pp. 41 – 55.*

Davis, R. H., Frey, J. P., & Alexander, L. T. (1977). **The discussion method: Guides for the improvement of instruction in higher education,** No. 6. East Lansing: Michigan State University. 40 pp.*

Eble, K. E. (1976). **The craft of teaching.** San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. pp. 54-65.

Fuhrmann, B. S., & Grasha, A. F. (1983). **A practical handbook for college teachers.** Boston: Little, Brown. pp. 141 – 164.

Gronlund, N. E. (1978). **Stating objectives for classroom instruction.** (2nd ed.). New York: Macmillan.

Hyman, R. T. (1974). **Way of teaching.** (2nd ed.) Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott. pp. 69 – 186.

Krathwohl, D. R., Bloom, B. S., & Masia, B. B. (1964). **Taxonomy of educational objectives: Handbook II, affective domain.** New York: David McKay.

Lowman, J. (1984). **Mastering the techniques of teaching.** San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 119 – 145.

McKeachie, W. J. (1986). **Teaching tips: A guidebook for the beginning college teacher.** (8th ed.). Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath. pp. 27 – 52.*

McKnight, P. C. (1978). **On guiding (not leading) discussions.** Manhattan, KS: Kansas State University, Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development. 19 pp.

Olmstead, J. A. (1974). **Small-group instruction: Theory and practice.** Alexandria, VA: Human Resources Organization. 129 pp.

Rogers, C. R. (1969). **Freedom to learn.** Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill.