

Discussion Formats to Support Student Interaction

Which structure fits your goals for the discussion?

Think, Pair, Share

Give students a topic to think or write about individually for a couple of minutes. Next, ask them to pair up to discuss what they wrote for a few minutes. You can then ask the pairs of students to share some of their views/conversation with the entire group. This activity encourages all students to speak and allows them a chance to articulate their ideas several times before sharing them with a larger group.

Minute Paper

Give students a topic, question, or quote, and ask them to take a minute or two to write about it individually. Then ask them to either volunteer responses to open up a full class discussion or go around the room and ask each student to share before you highlight the key themes that emerge.

Reflection Memo

Prior to class, have students write a memo in response to a question or set of questions that you pose. As part of the discussion, ask students to read their memos, and/or share them in pairs or threes. Good w/ *The Round*.

The Round

Give each student an opportunity to respond to a guiding question without interruption or comments. Provide students with the option to pass. After the round, discuss the responses.

Brainstorming

Explain to the class that in this discussion format, you will serve primarily as the recorder or scribe. [This works best if you also instruct them that instead of you calling on students to speak, the first person to respond must invite the next person to speak, and so on.] Pose a question to the class and record their responses on the board or shared notes.

“Toss the Ball” Discussion

Instead of the instructor calling upon students with raised hands, each student is responsible for calling on the next person to speak. This works especially well for a topic where everyone is asked to share a perspective, or where you want to hear multiple answers to the same question.

Affinity Mapping/Diagramming

Divide students into small groups. Pose a question for the groups to consider. Give students several minutes to answer the question individually. Then, ask students to work together in their group to organize or categorize their individual answers. Each group then presents a conclusion to the whole class.

Fishbowl Discussions

In this activity, students are divided into two groups: speakers (fish) and listeners (fishbowl). In the classroom, this activity is typically arranged so that a small group of students (speakers/fish) sit in a circle in the middle of the room while the rest of the class (listeners/fishbowl) sits in a larger circle around them. The speakers discuss the topic, while the listeners watch silently and listen carefully. The fishbowl activity is useful when you want to give voice to a particular group in the class, or when you want others to work on their listening skills.

Concentric Circles (Rotating Paired Discussion)

In this exercise, your students will engage in a series of short, one-on-one conversations. In the classroom, we typically ask students to arrange themselves into 2 circles, one inside the other, with the inner circle facing out/outer circle facing in (so that each person is facing someone). Give the group a question to discuss in

these pairs. After 1-3 minutes, call time and ask the members of the outer group to rotate one seat/space so that everyone is facing someone new. Again, give the group a question (perhaps a different question than the one you previously asked) to discuss in the pairs. After 1-3 minutes, call time, have students move again, etc.

Jigsaw

This cooperative learning strategy encourages students to depend on and collaborate with others. The instructor should arrange their students in small groups that are each assigned a different topic or reading to explore. (This works well with 3-4 readings/topics.) Each group meets to prepare their 'expertise' on their assigned topic or reading (comparing understandings, clarifying, strategizing about how to explain or teach it to peers). Then they move into mixed groups, with one 'expert' on each reading or topic, to inform or ask their peers about their particular piece of the puzzle and collectively build a more complete picture of the broader issue or question addressed by the several articles or topics.

Peer Interview

Students pair up (preferably with someone they don't know well) and work together on a series of questions that ask them to draw on their prior knowledge of a given topic. Some example questions include: *1) Have you ever formally studied this topic before, in high school or college?; 2) What kinds of attitudes or opinions have you heard about this topic?; 3) What questions do you have about the topic that you want answered, either by the instructor or your peers?* You might consider using this strategy before starting a new unit to get a sense of what your students already know and to provide them an opportunity to unpack what they know about the topic and/or collect their thoughts before sharing ideas in the large group.

Gallery Circuit

During a gallery circuit, students explore multiple texts or images that are placed around the room. Instructors often use this strategy as a way for students to share their work with peers, examine multiple historical documents, respond to a collection of quotations, or compare pieces of artwork. After moving around the room to review materials, students can meet in small or large groups to discuss their observations.

Carousel Brainstorm

Organize your students into small groups. Identify 3-5 major concepts you want your students to explore and then write one concept each on a piece of paper. Distribute the paper so that every group has one. Give groups 2-3 minutes (or longer) to brainstorm responses to the concept they've been given. When time is up, ask your students to pass their paper to a new group. Once each group has received a new concept, give them 2-3 minutes to respond to the previous group's brainstorm and add any new ideas. Continue this process until each group has had the opportunity to respond to each concept.

Concept Maps

Creating concept maps can help you to get a sense of what your students already know about a given topic and provide an opportunity for them to draw on any prior knowledge. Concept maps also provide insight into how your students represent and organize knowledge and ideas, as well as provide an opportunity to see students' developing understanding and knowledge over time. You can construct a concept map for a discipline, concept, or focus question. You might also use a concept map for review of course material. You can create a concept map as a class or your students can create concept maps in small groups.

- As a whole class: First, identify a concept to explore and write it on the board. Then, invite your students to come to the board and contribute 1 word/phrase (you might ask your students to put their contribution on a post-it before putting it on the board so that the words/phrases can be moved around the board as needed) and 1 linking line.
- In small groups: Identify a concept and in groups of 3-4, ask your students to create a concept map, contributing 3 words/phrases and 3 linking lines each. You might then invite each group to display their map on the board for each group to interact with.