

Teaching Techniques

Discussion

Purpose

One of the most effective teaching methods to facilitate active learning is discussion, which can be used in classes of all sizes. Discussion is more effective in smaller classes, but instructors should stimulate active learning in large classes as well. Discussions provide a learning experience that encourages learners to engage in active thought about the subject area (McKeachie, 2006, 35).

Goal

Discussions can (McKeachie, 2006, 35–36):

- encourage learners to practice thinking more deeply about topic areas;
- help learners to evaluate the supporting evidence and logic of their perspective and the perspective of others;
- enhance motivation for learning about the subject area;
- help learners articulate what they have learned;
- provide specific feedback to learners about their perspective and knowledge in a given content area.

Strengths

Effective ways to start a discussion are to (McKeachie, 2006, 37–40):

- present a specific and concrete example that everyone can relate to (i.e. a common experience). This method focuses the discussion on a common experience in which everyone has the same information and it takes some of the pressure off of learners to share their opinion.
- start with a *controversy* which can stimulate discussion. Based on experimental evidence, “a certain degree of surprise or uncertainty arouses curiosity, a basic motive for learning.” Provoking disagreement can be used constructively.

Weaknesses / Suggestions for Improvement

Difficulties instructors might face when using discussions in class (McKeachie, 2006, 37):

- Encouraging participation in the discussion.
- Managing disagreement between learners or the emotional reactions of learners.
- Supporting the discussion by providing every learner with equal opportunity to contribute to the discussion.

Instructors should set clear expectations for learners’ involvement. Instructors can ease learners into the discussion in stages by (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, 29):

1. asking learners to work independently for a short period of time on the question/problem and develop possible solutions or thoughts;
2. asking learners to work in small groups and share their perspectives;
3. having learners work in large groups and letting the learners lead the direction of the discussion;
4. supporting the discussion by posing further questions (i.e. probing questions) to stimulate further thought.

References

- Bonwell, C. C., & Eison, J. A. (1991). *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom*. Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, George Washington University.
- McKeachie, W. J., & Svinicki, M. (2006). *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.