Think all of your students are participating in class? Take another look.

Greta just had an amazing discussion with her fifth period history class. They’ve been studying the Holocaust, and in today’s class, they just nailed it. She had originally planned for about ten minutes of discussion, but things were going so well, she let it go for the whole period. Days like this rock.

Except for the stuff she didn’t notice. Like Haley.

Haley is in Greta’s fifth period. She had a lot of questions today, but never found the right moment to ask them. She doesn’t like to interrupt. A few times, she almost put her hand up, but someone else would start talking before she ever managed to lift it.

Robert is in that class too. He felt like an idiot the whole period – that one kid kept mentioning the Third Reich, and Robert wasn’t 100 percent sure what that was. He definitely didn’t want to ask.

Nadia thought the discussion was dumb – people really oversimplified the whole tragedy. But she didn’t want to start any trouble, so she said nothing.

And Becky and Kyle? The super shy ones? Naturally, they also stayed quiet. Oh, and three other students secretly texted the whole time. In fact, in Greta’s class of 28 students, only nine of them
actually contributed to that discussion: Four of those were really into it, five commented once. The other nineteen just sat there. The whole time. Really.

Greta doesn’t realize that she is suffering from Fisheye Teaching. It’s a condition that impacts our perception, as if we’re looking through a fisheye lens – the kind they use in peepholes. To those afflicted with fisheye, some students appear “larger” than others. They take up more energy and grab more of our attention, making the others fade into the periphery. We have a vague sense that the others are there, and we nag ourselves to include them, but those magnified students are just too hard to resist.

Not You!

Maybe you’re thinking this doesn’t apply to you, especially if you’re used to having animated debates with your students. Unlike some classrooms, where students are asleep most of the time, yours is interactive and engaging, right? Here’s the weird thing: The fact that your class seems so lively might actually be a stronger indication that you’re operating behind the fisheye lens.

I’ve been guilty of fisheye teaching. A lot. Recently, even. And I’ve seen many other teachers, good teachers, do it too.

I don’t think any of us do it on purpose. We do it out of habit, and because it’s so freakin’ gratifying: You pose a question, and one of your sharp, verbal kids pipes up right away with an answer. It’s a good answer, one that takes the class in the direction you were hoping they’d go, demonstrating a solid grasp of the material. Wow, you think, they’re really learning! (…and, if we’re being honest: You like me! You really like me!) Then it happens with another student, another extrovert, and then one more. Things are hopping now, a bona fide “class” discussion, but really, you’re just volleying with three or four students. Most of the others have already checked out. We don’t realize it because we’re high on the whole thing, the nice rhythm we’ve got going with those three or four, that we lie to ourselves just a little.

So even if you have the tiniest suspicion that you might be afflicted, do some investigating. The best way is to videotape a few of your classes. The only problem is, once you become aware of the imbalance in participation, you’re more likely to try and correct it while videotaping. Not necessarily a bad thing, unless you overcorrect for the recording, then go back to old habits and never recognize the presence of the fisheye. Another diagnostic tool is a laminated seating chart: Using a dry-erase marker, put a mark in each student’s place on the chart every time he or she contributes to the class. In no time you’ll have a visual on who is talking and who isn’t.

Whether you think this is an issue in your teaching or not, my goal here is just to put the bug in your ear. To raise your awareness. Tomorrow, when you interact with your students, move your vision to the periphery and ask yourself if those students are as involved as they could be.

Why Equitable Participation Matters

Sure, there’s an element of “no duh” here: Obviously, increasing student participation is a good thing. But apart from making school a more interesting place to be, why is it important to get all of our students involved in discussions? Can’t a student get just as much from listening as they would from actively participating?

Discussion equals formative assessment.

Classroom discussion is one of the simplest, quickest, and most effective means of formative assessment we have. By asking our students good questions, we can determine what they know and how well they know it in seconds. But when we allow a pattern to emerge where only our most
confident and verbal kids respond, we miss the opportunity to assess the thinking of the others, and we may very well be fooling ourselves into thinking they’re all getting it, when really, they’re not.

The quiet ones MUST learn to speak.
Every year, the National Association of Colleges and Employers surveys employers about the skills they most want in potential employees. In 2013, ‘verbal and written communication skills’ climbed to the top of the list. If our task is to help our students become college- and career-ready, we are responsible for helping them grow as talkers. All of our students — especially the quiet ones — must learn how to present their ideas effectively, and no amount of listening compares to the cognitive and social challenge of actually having to frame your thoughts into coherent spoken sentences. Although our painfully shy students will resist, and our compassion will make us want to protect them, we do them no favors by letting them avoid this practice. Writer and teacher Jessica Lahey, in her February 2013 Atlantic column, agrees: “If anything,” she says, “I feel even more strongly that my introverted students must learn how to self-advocate by communicating with parents, educators, and the world at large.”

The talkers MUST learn to listen.
The extroverts need to learn how to let someone else take the stage. In school, in their careers, and in their most important relationships, listening skills are hugely important. Chances are, your big talkers don’t have a lot of practice in skills like paraphrasing another person’s ideas, asking thoughtful follow-up questions, or thinking quietly before they speak. By making a concerted effort to balance the participation in our classes, we are also giving those extroverts a chance to grow in ways that could have a powerful impact on their quality of life.

The End of Fisheye Teaching
So now that the lens is off, how to keep it off? How do we get more students involved? First of all, know that the goal is not to have all students participate at exactly the same rate; the push should be for more balance. If your quieter students contribute one good comment per discussion, that’s a step in the right direction.

Here are some ways to balance things out:

Make your intentions transparent. Talk to your students about this issue, and ask them to help change the current dynamic. This will prepare your quiet students, so they won’t be startled by the sudden shift in attention. It will also help your extroverts understand why they are no longer getting the floor the way they’re used to. Some of this might happen behind the scenes: For the class dominators, you might encourage them to limit the number of comments they make to three per class, or offer points any time they paraphrase or build on another student’s comment or question. For those who typically hang back, have them choose a question ahead of time that they feel they could contribute something to, and plan to call on them for that item.
Increase wait time. Typically, female students and those with more reflective learning styles need more time to process higher-level questions. This can be accomplished with some good old-fashioned wait time. We should be waiting at least three seconds between posing a question and calling on a student to answer. (Easier said than done.) This gives everyone more time to think about what they want to say. Want to go even further? Add a “no hands” time, where no one gets to raise their hands at first: You ask the question, EVERYONE thinks for a moment about their answer with their hands down, then give them the go-ahead to raise their hands, then you call on someone. You’ll be surprised at what a difference this makes to the number of hands that go up.

Pre-load discussions. Give shy students a head start by slipping them the discussion questions ahead of time. Actually, go ahead and give them to everyone. The talkative students could also benefit from some more thinking time.

Vary discussion formats. Any time you can give students a chance to share their thoughts with a smaller audience, you build their courage to share them with the larger group. This is where think-pair-share comes in handy: Rather than holding whole-class free-for-alls, put students in groups of 2 to 4 and pose questions one at a time, allowing each group to talk it over with each other first, then call on representatives to recap for the whole class. Take this a step further by doing a think-WRITE-pair-share, where each student first considers their own answer, writes it down, then shares it with someone else. Not only does this give them more thinking time, it also forces them to answer the question on their own, rather than “what that guy said.”

Use icons. This strategy, described by Ruth Wickham, an English language teacher in Malaysia, is an ingenious way to get active participation from students in large classes. “I printed out four sets of little pictures, just clip-art type things, then I cut them up and stuck one on the first inside page of each (participant) workbook. The icons were all mixed up, so no one had the same as the person next to them, and there were four of each scattered around the room.” She then placed the same icons onto certain slides in her presentation. Whenever an icon (such as a duck) appeared on the screen, participants who had a duck on their paper had to come to the front of the room and answer a question or perform a task. “The looks on their faces every time they saw an icon appear was just classic! We all had a lot of fun and a lot of laughs even with such a big group.”

Some students are naturally going to be more active, more talkative, livelier than others. We’re not trying to make them all be the same, just better, stronger, more balanced versions of the people that showed up on day one. With your little case of fisheye taken care of, you’ll be ready to help every one of them stretch closer to their full potential. That’s when the real conversation will begin. ♦
Class Discussion Challenge: Getting Students to Listen and Respond to Each Other’s Comments

By: Maryellen Weimer, PhD

Add Comment

Issue 1: The classroom discussion is going pretty well. Students are offering some good comments and more than one hand is in the air. Then a student makes a really excellent observation that opens up a whole avenue of relevant possibilities. You follow-up by calling on a student whose hand has been in the air for some time. Her comment is fine, but it’s totally unrelated to the previous comment. How do you get students to respond to each other’s comments? How do you get student comments to build on a key topic so that it becomes more like a real discussion?

What about this idea? Tell students that when they hear you say “hold on to it” that means the next comments must respond to the comment just made. The faculty member who suggested this to me pointed out that often students aren’t listening all that closely to each other, so after saying “hold on to it,” you may need to repeat the original comment and give students a bit of time to prepare an appropriate response.

This same faculty member mentioned that those of us who’ve been doing academic discourse for almost as long as we can remember are sometimes a bit blithe in our assumptions that students know how to do it. She recommended identifying for (or maybe with) students a few ways they could respond to a comment made by a classmate. Here are some ideas:

- Agree or disagree with it and say why. The “why” is the most important part of the student’s response.
- Ask a question about the comment. Asking for an elaboration on part or all of the original comment is a good approach, assuming it needs further explanation.
- Provide an example of it. Examples can come from content covered in class, from the reading, or from experience.
- Relate or link the comment just made to another comment, maybe one the teacher or another student made. A link also can be made to something in the reading material.
- Make a new, related comment. It needs to be different from what’s been said and don’t assume that how it relates to the first comment is obvious to others.

The “hold on to it” request can mean two other things as well. For students who have things they’d like to say unrelated to the comment being elaborated on, it means they should “hold on to” their thoughts; maybe jotting down a brief note so they don’t forget what it is they want to share. For the teacher, “hold on to it” is a good reminder to not succumb to the sometimes irresistible urge to say something in response to every comment a student makes. It’s a much better class discussion if students offer three or four responses before the teacher chimes in.

Why do students so rarely comment on the contributions of other students? First off, they tend not to value each other’s comments, especially if the teacher has a habit of clarifying and elaborating on
everything a student says. Those elaborations sound a lot like right answers to students, so they tend to
tune out their peers knowing the teacher will put everything in just the right context. And then there are
those participation policies where the grade is primarily a function of how often one speaks, with little
mention as to the quality of the contributions.

Issue 2: “Talk to each other.” It doesn’t matter how often you say it or where you position yourself in
the room, students still address all their comments to you. You are the person in charge. Do you tend to
be the person who answers the most questions?

Try this: assign yourself the role of the recorder. As students make comments, type them on your
computer or write them on the board. Take a look now and then at the student speaking, but mostly
keep your eyes on the comments you’re recording. If you use the board, that permits you to keep your
back to students and it’s pretty awkward talking to somebody’s back.

If class size permits, seat students so that they face or at least can easily see each other. Sit with them
and let them speak without being called on. You can step in and facilitate when too many students are
talking at once, when someone needs help getting into the conversation, and to gently offer a reminder
when it’s needed: “You’re responding to Reid’s comment, speak to him.”
When I worked with student teachers on developing effective lesson plans, one thing I always asked them to revise was the phrase “We will discuss.”

We will discuss the video.

We will discuss the story.

We will discuss our results.

Every time I saw it in a lesson plan, I would add a note: “What format will you use? What questions will you ask? How will you ensure that all students participate?” I was pretty sure that We will discuss actually meant the teacher would do most of the talking; He would throw out a couple of questions like “So what did you think about the video?” or “What was the theme of the story?” and a few students would respond, resulting in something that looked like a discussion, but was ultimately just a conversation between the teacher and a handful of extroverted students; a classic case of Fisheye Teaching.

The problem wasn’t them; in most of the classrooms where they’d sat as students, that’s exactly what a class discussion looked like. They didn’t know any other “formats.” I have only ever been familiar with a few myself. But when teachers began contacting me recently asking for a more comprehensive list, I knew it was time to do some serious research.

So here they are: **15 formats for structuring a class discussion** to make it more engaging, more organized, more equitable, and more academically challenging. If you’ve struggled to find effective ways to develop students’ speaking and listening skills, this is your lucky day.

I’ve separated the strategies into three groups. The first batch contains the **higher-prep strategies**, formats that require teachers to do some planning or gathering of materials ahead of time. Next come the **low-prep strategies**, which can be used on the fly when you have a few extra minutes or just want your students to get more active. Note that these are not strict categories; it’s certainly possible to simplify or add more meat to any of these structures and still make them work. The last group is the **ongoing strategies**. These are smaller techniques that can be integrated with other instructional strategies and don’t really stand alone. For each strategy, you’ll find a list of other names it sometimes goes by, a description of its basic structure, and an explanation of variations that exist, if any. To watch each strategy in action, click on its name and a new window will open with a video that demonstrates it.

Enjoy!
Higher-Prep Discussion Strategies

**Gallery Walk**
*a.k.a. Chat Stations*

**Basic Structure:** Stations or posters are set up around the classroom, on the walls or on tables. Small groups of students travel from station to station together, performing some kind of task or responding to a prompt, either of which will result in a conversation.

**Variations:** Some Gallery Walks stay true to the term *gallery*, where groups of students create informative posters, then act as tour guides or docents, giving other students a short presentation about their poster and conducting a Q&A about it. In Starr Sackstein’s high school classroom, her stations consisted of *video tutorials created by the students* themselves. Before I knew the term Gallery Walk, I shared a strategy similar to it called *Chat Stations*, where the teacher prepares discussion prompts or content-related tasks and sets them up around the room for students to visit in small groups.

**Philosophical Chairs**
*a.k.a. Values Continuum, Forced Debate, Physical Barometer, This or That*

**Basic Structure:** A statement that has two possible responses—agree or disagree—is read out loud. Depending on whether they agree or disagree with this statement, students move to one side of the room or the other. From that spot, students take turns defending their positions.

**Variations:** Often a Philosophical Chairs debate will be based around a text or group of texts students have read ahead of time; students are required to cite textual evidence to support their claims and usually hold the texts in their hands during the discussion. Some teachers set up one hot seat to represent each side, and students must take turns in the seat. In less formal variations (which require less prep), a teacher may simply read provocative statements students are likely to disagree on, and a debate can occur spontaneously without a text to refer to (I call this variation This or That in my classroom icebreakers post). Teachers may also opt to offer a continuum of choices, ranging from “Strongly Agree” on one side of the room, all the way to “Strongly Disagree” on the other, and have students place themselves along that continuum based on the strength of their convictions.

**Pinwheel Discussion**

**Basic Structure:** Students are divided into 4 groups. Three of these groups are assigned to represent specific points of view. Members of the fourth group are designated as “provocateurs,” tasked with making sure the discussion keeps going and stays challenging. One person from each group (the “speaker”) sits in a desk facing speakers from the other groups, so they form a square in the center of the room. Behind each speaker, the remaining group members are seated: two right behind the speaker, then three behind them, and so on, forming a kind of triangle. From above, this would look like a pinwheel. The four speakers introduce and discuss questions they prepared ahead of time (this preparation is done with their groups). After some time passes, new students rotate from the seats behind the speaker into the center seats and continue the conversation.

**Variations:** When high school English teacher Sarah Brown Wessling introduced this strategy in the featured video (click Pinwheel Discussion above), she used it as a device for talking about literature, where each group represented a different author, plus one provocateur group. But in the comments that follow the video, Wessling adds that she also uses the strategy with non-fiction, where students represent authors of different non-fiction texts or are assigned to take on different perspectives about an issue.
Socratic Seminar >
a.k.a. Socratic Circles

Basic Structure: Students prepare by reading a text or group of texts and writing some higher-order discussion questions about the text. On seminar day, students sit in a circle and an introductory, open-ended question is posed by the teacher or student discussion leader. From there, students continue the conversation, prompting one another to support their claims with textual evidence. There is no particular order to how students speak, but they are encouraged to respectfully share the floor with others. Discussion is meant to happen naturally and students do not need to raise their hands to speak. This overview of Socratic Seminar from the website Facing History and Ourselves provides a list of appropriate questions, plus more information about how to prepare for a seminar.

Variations: If students are beginners, the teacher may write the discussion questions, or the question creation can be a joint effort. For larger classes, teachers may need to set up seminars in more of a fishbowl-like arrangement, dividing students into one inner circle that will participate in the discussion, and one outer circle that silently observes, takes notes, and may eventually trade places with those in the inner circle, sometimes all at once, and sometimes by “tapping in” as the urge strikes them.

Low-Prep Discussion Strategies

Affinity Mapping >
a.k.a. Affinity Diagramming

Basic Structure: Give students a broad question or problem that is likely to result in lots of different ideas, such as “What were the impacts of the Great Depression?” or “What literary works should every person read?” Have students generate responses by writing ideas on post-it notes (one idea per note) and placing them in no particular arrangement on a wall, whiteboard, or chart paper. Once lots of ideas have been generated, have students begin grouping them into similar categories, then label the categories and discuss why the ideas fit within them, how the categories relate to one another, and so on.

Variations: Some teachers have students do much of this exercise—recording their ideas and arranging them into categories—without talking at first. In other variations, participants are asked to re-combine the ideas into new, different categories after the first round of organization occurs. Often, this activity serves as a good pre-writing exercise, after which students will write some kind of analysis or position paper.

Concentric Circles >
a.k.a. Speed Dating

Basic Structure: Students form two circles, one inside circle and one outside circle. Each student on the inside is paired with a student on the outside; they face each other. The teacher poses a question to the whole group and pairs discuss their responses with each other. Then the teacher signals students to rotate: Students on the outside circle move one space to the right so they are standing in front of a new person (or sitting, as they are in the video). Now the teacher poses a new question, and the process is repeated.

Variations: Instead of two circles, students could also form two straight lines facing one another. Instead of “rotating” to switch partners, one line just slides over one spot, and the leftover person on the end comes around to the beginning of the line. Some teachers use this strategy to have students
teach one piece of content to their fellow students, making it less of a discussion strategy and more of a peer teaching format. In fact, many of these protocols could be used for peer teaching as well.

**Conver-Stations >**

**Basic Structure:** Another great idea from Sarah Brown Wessling, this is a small-group discussion strategy that gives students exposure to more of their peers’ ideas and prevents the stagnation that can happen when a group doesn’t happen to have the right chemistry. Students are placed into a few groups of 4-6 students each and are given a discussion question to talk about. After sufficient time has passed for the discussion to develop, one or two students from each group rotate to a different group, while the other group members remain where they are. Once in their new group, they will discuss a different, but related question, and they may also share some of the key points from their last group’s conversation. For the next rotation, students who have not rotated before may be chosen to move, resulting in groups that are continually evolving.

**Fishbowl >**

**Basic Structure:** Two students sit facing each other in the center of the room; the remaining students sit in a circle around them. The two central students have a conversation based on a pre-determined topic and often using specific skills the class is practicing (such as asking follow-up questions, paraphrasing, or elaborating on another person’s point). Students on the outside observe, take notes, or perform some other discussion-related task assigned by the teacher.

**Variations:** One variation of this strategy allows students in the outer circle to trade places with those in the fishbowl, doing kind of a relay-style discussion, or they may periodically “coach” the fishbowl talkers from the sidelines. Teachers may also opt to have students in the outside circle grade the participants’ conversation with a rubric, then give feedback on what they saw in a debriefing afterward, as mentioned in the featured video.

**Hot Seat >**

**Basic Structure:** One student assumes the role of a book character, significant figure in history, or concept (such as a tornado, an animal, or the Titanic). Sitting in front of the rest of the class, the student responds to classmates’ questions while staying in character in that role.

**Variations:** Give more students the opportunity to be in the hot seat while increasing everyone’s participation by having students do hot seat discussions in small groups, where one person per group acts as the “character” and three or four others ask them questions. In another variation, several students could form a panel of different characters, taking questions from the class all together and interacting with one another like guests on a TV talk show.

**Snowball Discussion >**

*a.k.a. Pyramid Discussion*

**Basic Structure:** Students begin in pairs, responding to a discussion question only with a single partner. After each person has had a chance to share their ideas, the pair joins another pair, creating a group of four. Pairs share their ideas with the pair they just joined. Next, groups of four join together to form groups of eight, and so on, until the whole class is joined up in one large discussion.

**Variations:** This structure could simply be used to share ideas on a topic, or students could be required to reach consensus every time they join up with a new group.

**Ongoing Discussion Strategies**
Whereas the other formats in this list have a distinct shape—specific activities you do with students—the strategies in this section are more like plug-ins, working discussion into other instructional activities and improving the quality and reach of existing conversations.

**Asynchronous Voice >**
One of the limitations of discussion is that rich, face-to-face conversations can only happen when all parties are available, so we’re limited to the time we have in class. With a tool like Voxer, those limitations disappear. Like a private voice mailbox that you set up with just one person or a group (but SOOOO much easier), Voxer allows users to have conversations at whatever time is most convenient for each participant. So a group of four students can “discuss” a topic from 3pm until bedtime—asynchronously—each member contributing whenever they have a moment, and if the teacher makes herself part of the group, she can listen in, offer feedback, or contribute her own discussion points. Voxer is also invaluable for collaborating on projects and for having one-on-one discussions with students, parents, and your own colleagues. Like many other educators, Peter DeWitt took a while to really understand the potential of Voxer, but in this EdWeek piece, he explains what turned him around.

**Backchannel Discussions >**
A backchannel is a conversation that happens right alongside another activity. The first time I saw a backchannel in action was at my first unconference: While those of us in the audience listened to presenters and watched a few short video clips, a separate screen was up beside the main screen, projecting something called TodaysMeet. It looked a lot like those chat rooms from back in the day, basically a blank screen where people would contribute a few lines of text, the lines stacking up one after the other, no other bells or whistles. Anyone in the room could participate in this conversation on their phone, laptop, or tablet, asking questions, offering commentary, and sharing links to related resources without ever interrupting the flow of the presentations. This kind of tool allows for a completely silent discussion, one that doesn’t have to move at a super-fast pace, and it gives students who may be reluctant to speak up or who process their thoughts more slowly a chance to fully contribute. For a deeper discussion of how this kind of tool can be used, read this thoughtful overview of using backchannel discussions in the classroom by Edutopia’s Beth Holland.

**Talk Moves >**
a.k.a. Accountable Talk

Talk moves are sentence frames we supply to our students that help them express ideas and interact with one another in respectful, academically appropriate ways. From kindergarten all the way through college, students can benefit from explicit instruction in the skills of summarizing another person’s argument before presenting an alternate view, asking clarifying questions, and expressing agreement or partial agreement with the stance of another participant. Talk moves can be incorporated into any of the other discussion formats listed here.

**Teach-OK >**
Whole Brain Teaching is a set of teaching and classroom management methods that has grown in popularity over the past 10 years. One of WBT’s foundational techniques is Teach-OK, a peer teaching strategy that begins with the teacher spending a few minutes introducing a concept to the class. Next, the teacher says Teach!, the class responds with Okay!, and pairs of students take turns re-teaching the concept to each other. It’s a bit like think-pair-share, but it’s faster-paced, it focuses more on re-teaching than general sharing, and students are encouraged to use gestures to animate their discussion. Although WBT is most popular in elementary schools, this featured video shows the
creator of WBT, Chris Biffle, using it quite successfully with college students. I have also used TeachOK with college students, and most of my students said they were happy for a change from the sit-and-listen they were used to in college classrooms.

Think-Pair-Share >
An oldie but a goodie, think-pair-share can be used any time you want to plug interactivity into a lesson: Simply have students think about their response to a question, form a pair with another person, discuss their response, then share it with the larger group. Because I feel this strategy has so many uses and can be way more powerful than we give it credit for, I devoted a whole post to think-pair-share; everything you need to know about it is right there.

So what else do you have? I would like to think this is a pretty complete list, but I’m sure more strategies are out there. If you use a discussion strategy that’s not mentioned here, please share it below.
How can we get students to talk to each other in class discussions?

In reading Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill’s *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, I’m learning new things and remembering things I’d forgotten about how to help students discuss well. The book is a wonderful resource, rich with theory and practice for teaching with discussion as a way to promote democracy in the classroom and society, which is to say, at least in part, getting students to participate in their own and each others’ learning. Discussion undertaken in the way that Brookfield and Preskill describe gets students actively involved and loosens up the strict teacher-student hierarchy implied and enacted by, say, the traditional lecture.

But these benefits do not occur as well in discussions where all questions and comments by students are directed to the teacher and the teacher responds directly to each thing said. In those cases, the teacher doesn’t hog the ball the whole time, just half of the time. Of course, we usually don’t do this on purpose. We would love a more spontaneous exchange to break out, with students speaking to each other, asking each other questions, responding to each others’ comments. I’ve desired this sort of give-and-take more often than I’ve seen it. But Brookfield and Preskill offer some useful ways of preparing students and structuring discussions to increase student-student interaction. One method is to use small groups for discussion, rather than limiting discussion to a whole class setting. I learned this practice from my own teachers and already use it extensively. But when it comes to whole class discussions, which I hold after each small group discussion, I must confess that I’ve often accepted, aside from the occasional exhortation to students that they can talk to each other too, that the talking would revolve around me, even if that’s not what I really wanted.

But after reading Brookfield and Preskill, I’ve put together a structured protocol for discussion that helps students talk to each other. The structure helps students know to and know how to engage with one another. I’m afraid I don’t remember where all the parts of this protocol came from. Which aspects were directly lifted from Brookfield and Preskill? Which aspects were adapted more loosely from them? Which aspects did I borrow from other books and other teachers? Which aspects did I invent myself? I’m not sure if this forgetting makes me a bad scholar or a good teacher. (Don’t the best teachers steal from anywhere and everywhere?) At any rate, very much informed and prompted by Brookfield and Preskill but not by them alone, I would like to share the following protocol, which I’ve now used variations of a couple times with good success. The discussions that this structure facilitated seemed deeper and more substantive than discussion often seems and, to my joy, the students talked to each other the entire time.

To use the protocol, I print out the instructions and go over them with students before we begin. I encourage them to realize that silence is okay because sometimes people need time to think before
speaking. I also tell them that I won’t bail them out if the discussion runs into a rocky patch but will tell them when we need to move to the next part or have run out of time.

1. **Small Group Discussion**
Select different group members for the following roles:

- **Leader** – keeps things moving forward and on task.
- **Note taker** – writes down key points of the group’s discussion.
- **Presenter** – shares with the class a selection of points from the group’s discussion.[1]
- **First responder** – speaks up to comment on the presented points of other groups.

Read aloud a selected passage.[2]
Discuss the passage in terms of ____. [3]
Discuss the passage in terms of whatever else occurs to you. [4]

2. **Whole Group Discussion**

- **Presenter** for Group 1 shares with the class highlights from the group’s discussion. Make sure to speak to the whole class, not to the professor.
- Responders from each of the other groups speak up in response to the presenter to get a larger conversation going. Make sure to speak to the presenter or the whole class, not to the professor. In responding, you can contribute the following sorts of comments. Begin your comment by noting which type of comment you’re going to make (i.e. “I have an affirmation,” “that raises a question for me,” “I have something to add that elaborates on what you’ve said,” etc.).[5]
  - **Affirmations** (i.e. “I really like that,” “I wouldn’t have thought of that,” “That helps me see the text in a new way,” etc.)
  - **Elaborations** (i.e. “You know what that makes me think of is . . .” “Another thing that goes along with that is . . .” “This additional passage also ties into that . . .” etc.)
  - **Connections** (i.e. “We noticed that too,” “That connects to something our group was asking,” “We came at something similar from a little different angle,” etc.)
  - **Questions** (i.e. “Why do you think ___?” “Can you say more about ___?” “How is that related to ___?” “Did your group consider ___?” etc.)
  - **Divergences** (“I see your point, but . . .” “A different perspective on that is . . .” “A passage in the text that might contradict that is . . .” etc.)[6]

- Those not designated as responders may also make comments. Everyone should take care to exhibit positive, engaged body language throughout the discussion.
- Once Group 1 has presented and there has been discussion on the points they have raised, Group 2 goes. This process continues until each group has presented or we run out of time.

3. **Individual and Whole Group Summation**

- Individually write responses to the following questions:
  - What did I learn or have reinforced through this discussion?
  - What questions remain or have been raised for me through this discussion?

- Several volunteers share their summations with the whole group. Make sure to speak to the whole class, not to the professor.
So there you have it. A structure that helps students talk and talk to each other. Feel free to adopt or adapt this to your own classes. Or better yet, run out and get *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, read it, and come up with your own approach.

**Notes**

[1] This role and the following one (presenter and first responder) are selected in the small groups but performed later in the whole group setting.

[2] The passage I ask them to read aloud is from a text they’ve already all read (in theory). I’ve both assigned a specific passage for students to focus on and asked students to select a passage that interests them. This rereading aloud of a specific passage in the small group setting allows all the students in the group to be on the same page, literally and figuratively, to be able to discuss the text while it’s fresh in their minds.

[3] To help students know what to discuss, I include here in this blank space some specific things I want students to work on in the context of the course. In one course, it was to come up with questions and possible interpretations of a text; in another it was to explore the text in terms of its form, its function, and how one might respond. In both cases, my prompt related to skills we had already been working on.

[4] Leaving space for things to emerge unplanned, raised by the students’ own concerns and interests, seems integral to discussion based teaching, even while I’m otherwise providing lots of structure for the students.

[5] I tell students that while naming the kind of comment they’re about to make may feel a little silly, it can help us all together become more aware of and familiar with these modes of comments.

[6] I’ve added this category of “divergence” in retrospect, after trying out the protocol in classes. It wasn’t that my experience in the couple times I’ve used it suggested I needed another category for the conversation to work better. But I wanted to purposefully create space for disagreements. Brookfield and Preskill suggest, wisely I think, that disagreement and critique have an important part in discussion but that those sorts more more critical dynamics might best be held off on until after students in a class have had the time and experience to develop trust and community with the others in the class.
I once heard class discussions described as “transient instructional events.” They pass through the class, the course, and the educational experiences of students with few lingering effects. Ideas are batted around, often with forced participation; students don’t take notes; and then the discussion ends—it runs out of steam or the class runs out of time. If asked a few days later about the exchange, most students would be hard-pressed to remember anything beyond what they themselves might have said, if that. So this post offers some simple suggestions for increasing the impact of the discussions that occur in our courses.

1. **Be more focused and for less time** — It’s easy to forget that students are newcomers to academic discourse. Academics can go on about a topic of interest for days; hours, if it’s a department meeting. Students aren’t used to exchanges that include points, counterpoints, and connections to previous points with references to research, related resources, and previous experience. Early on, students do better with short discussions—focused and specific. Think 10 minutes, maybe 15.

2. **Use better hooks to launch the discussion** — Usually discussion starts with a question. That works if it’s a powerful question—one immediately recognized as a “good question.” Prompts of that caliber require thoughtful preparation; they don’t usually pop into our minds the moment we need them. But questions aren’t the only option. A pithy quotation, a short scenario that requires content application, a hypothetical case or situation, a synopsis of a relevant current event—all of these can jump-start a discussion.

3. **Pause** — Stop the discussion and ask students to think about what’s been said so far, or ask them to write down what struck them as a key idea, a new insight, a question still unanswered, or maybe where they think the discussion should go next. Think short pauses, 30 seconds, maybe a minute.

4. **Have note takers** — Ask whether there are two or three students who’d be willing to take notes during the discussion. Then post their notes on the course website or otherwise distribute them. This should count as class participation! It gives introverts a way to contribute comfortably. You might encourage some extrovert who has tendency to over-participate to make your day by volunteering to quietly take copious notes, which he or she could use to summarize the discussion when it ends.

5. **Talk less or not at all** — Too many classroom discussions are still dominated by teacher talk. You will talk less if you assign yourself a recorder role. You’ll key in on the essence of comments, record the examples, and list the questions. You’ll be listening closely and will probably hear more than you usually do because you aren’t thinking about what to say next. Or you can function as the discussion
facilitator. Recognize those who are volunteering. Encourage others to speak. Point out good comments that merit response. Ask what questions the conversation is raising. Challenge those with different views to share them. Do everything you can to make it a good student discussion.

6. **End with something definitive** – Return to the hook that launched the discussion. Ask some students to write a one-sentence summary of the discussion. Ask other students to list the questions the discussion has answered. And ask a third group to identify unanswered questions that emerged during the discussion. Finally, use what students have written to help them bring closure to the discussion.

7. **Use the discussion** – Keep referring to it! “Remember that discussion we had about X? What did we conclude?” Refer to individual comments made during the discussion. “Paula had an interesting insight about Y. Who remembers what she said? Does it relate to this topic?” And if you really want students to listen up and take discussions seriously, use a comment made in the discussion as the frame for a short essay question on the next exam or quiz.

8. **Invite students to suggest discussion topics** – If the suggestion is good, reward the student with a few bonus points and ask him or her to launch the discussion by explaining why it’s a topic that merits discussion.

9. **Discuss discussions** – Briefly is fine. “Why do teachers use them? What keeps everyone listening? How do they help us learn?” Or do a debriefing of a discussion that just occurred. “So, the discussion we just had, say we’d like to improve it. What would you recommend?”
Resources

http://www.cultofpedagogy.com/fisheye/

http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/class-discussion-challenge-getting-students-respond-others-comments/

http://www.cultofpedagogy.com/speaking-listening-techniques/ (podcast and blog)

http://teachingandlearninginhighered.org/2016/03/11/getting-students-to-talk-to-each-other-rather-than-the-teacher/

http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/nine-ways-to-improve-class-discussions/