

Student-Led Discussion Groups

These types of small groups are led by a student and meant to stimulate discussion on a given topic. The instructor is available to answer questions and guide the discussion if necessary, but the emphasis is on the exchange of student ideas to help students see a variety of views on a given topic.

Appropriate Student Level: Any level

Suggested Class Size: 3 – 100+

Ease of Use Rating: Moderate

Activity Description:

Depending on the size of the class, you may choose to use large or small groups. Smaller groups will allow for greater student participation, however, finding a large number of reliable student leaders may be difficult. If you are working with large classes, instruct students to ‘sit with their groups’ at the start of classes, this will save time when you want to begin the group work. Keep the groups consistent throughout the semester.

Once the class is broken into the groups, the leader should facilitate the discussion. These discussion groups are not small lectures, they are an opportunity for students to share ideas and problem solve with an individual who displays skills necessary to facilitate discussion such as a special interest in the field, an ability to work with groups and someone with whom students feel comfortable sharing. During the time that the student groups are meeting, the instructor will play a crucial role, coaching and mentoring leaders and group members. Roam through the class; listen to groups as they converse. Offer suggestions, ideas and redirection if the conversation is going in the wrong direction or wrong information is being dispersed. Be visible!

The selection and preparation of the student leader influences the ease of use and effectiveness of this strategy. You may ask students who are currently enrolled in the class or former students who have shown particular aptitude and/or interest. The student leaders need to be comfortable leading discussion without feeling the need to lecture. Be sure to review your expectations with your student leaders to be sure that the exercises meet your set learning objectives. The student leaders should remain consistent throughout the semester, although they do not have to be assigned a specific discussion group. This practice can allow student leaders to perfect their skills.

At least 5 or 6 times during the semester, it will be appropriate to meet with student leaders to review expectations and deal with any concerns or difficulties they are having with their individual groups.

Students also have an opportunity to discuss issues in a group led by the instructor (role modeling strategies). Issues can be discussed such as should student leaders get the questions in advance? Can students have access to questions in advance? What if issues come up that are way ‘off-topic’?

References:

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- Maudsley, Gillian, (1999) "Roles and responsibilities of the problem based learning tutor in the undergraduate medical curriculum", British Medical Journal, 318(7184), International edition; pp 657-662
- Paulson, Donald R. (1999) "Active learning and cooperative learning in the organic chemistry lecture class", Journal of Chemical Education, 76(8), pp. 1136- 1141
- Saenz, Terry Irvine (2000), "Issues in recruitment and retention of graduate students", Communication Disorders Quarterly, 21(4); pg. 246

Jill L. Lane

Center for Instructional Development, Clayton State University

<http://ctl.clayton.edu/cid/>

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