Participating in Classroom Discussions

At some points in your university career you may find yourself participating in classroom discussions. Some disciplines might have a discussion component in almost every course! However, sometimes it can be confusing or daunting to participate when the classroom discussion starts. Therefore, it may benefit you to learn why we hold discussions and how you can make the most of it.

Why are we even doing this?

Participating in class discussions is about more than just raising your voice for participation marks. Class discussions help build crucial skills that you can apply throughout your professional and even personal life. There are many skills (so I won't list them all), but some of the major ones are these 4 C's.

Critical Thinking – Have you ever thought you knew something and then were forced to explain it, revealing that you actually knew less than you thought you knew? This is a cognitive bias called, t*he illusion of explanatory depth*.[1] By being forced to explain our thoughts and analyses out loud, we build our critical thinking skills and fill in the gaps by being an active communicator of knowledge rather than a passive consumer of knowledge.

Communication – Nowadays, we often have time to think about what we are trying to communicate. We often pause and edit as we text and email, but oral discussions take away that safety net; they help you think critically in real time. Practising this will help you to effectively communicate complex thoughts in a variety of environments both professional and personal.

Confidence – What if I'm shy or introverted? What if I don't have great thoughts to share? Look, no one is expecting you to be the main character, but even if you are more of a listener, it is important to find and raise your voice. Of course, you only need to contribute as much as you want and at your own pace, but just participating a little helps build your confidence. Classroom discussions come and go, class by class and course by course. They are a fairly low-stakes place to practise raising your voice and to believe that you have valuable contributions. This is a rewarding and valuable experience for both you and the class.

Collaboration – We are only one person with our own life experiences and intellectual journey, but by co-constructing understanding with diverse people, we can think thoughts and achieve an expansive understanding that is not possible on our own. This is, after all, why scholars work together and cite each other. Further, we gain important experience in working within group dynamics, an important professional skill that may serve you well in your career.

[1] For a brief overview, see David Robson, "The 'illusion of knowledge' that makes people overconfident?" *BBC*, August 16, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220812-the-illusion-of-knowledge-that-makes-people-overconfident

Classroom discussions are important, but what do I do?

There is no one correct way to participate. Nonetheless, there are some strategies that you can use that will help you make the most of your discussions. We'll break down a few strategies into preparation and participation phases.

Preparation

Summarize the material – It is really important to do the readings or review the slides. However, sometimes life can get in the way. If you lack time, some is better than none. So, read the abstract, the intro, the conclusion, the bullet points, etc., and take a few notes. If you're going to sit through the discussion anyway, you might as well have a general idea of what's going on. And even if you've already done the reading once, doing this breakdown again before class helps a lot!

Interrogate the material – Beyond just summarizing the *what* of the material, interrogate it. How is it saying what it's saying? Who is speaking and whom are they addressing? Do you agree, disagree, or are you unsure? Why? Does it remind you of something else? By asking questions, we extend our understanding and gain the ability to elaborate. Write down a few thoughts illustrating your position and justifications to share beforehand (and don't be afraid to disagree or be unsure). When the discussion starts and that awkward silence hits, you'll be glad you already have a thought or two ready to go.

Participation

Listen – Discussions might seem daunting because you are expected to talk, but most of what you'll be doing in a discussion is listening. Pay attention to key words and claims. Take note of what other students are saying. Does it align with your ideas? Did they bring up something you hadn't thought of? You can collaborate by building from their ideas later.

Advance a thought – There are a few formulas and verbs that can help you advance a thought. You want to base your participation on the material (or include a perspective from elsewhere). So, you may say, "I think X because Y," where X is your analysis, and Y is part of the material. You may also say, "I disagree/agree with Y because X." Here is where you collaborate as well. For example, you may say, "Building off what [student] said, I agree/see it differently because Y shows that X." The key in advancing a thought is that you base a claim on information. You have a reason to think what you think.

Question – Sometimes you might be unsure about the material. Don't be afraid to raise your confusion and state that you're not entirely sure what the material means. You are there to learn. But again, you want to have a reason based on the material. So you may say, "I'm unsure about Y because X." Someone may have a good answer or you may start a good interrogation of what you are learning.

There are many ways to participate, but, hopefully, these strategies help you get started!