

# Faculty Forum



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## Discussions with Structure



**“Slow down the pace—it takes time for students to formulate answers”**

Discussion is a staple in most teaching repertoires, but it frequently disappoints faculty and students. Students often don't contribute or do so tentatively or blandly; a few outspoken students dominate the discussion; discussions wander off topic; and main points may be difficult to ascertain. On some days it's just easier to present the material. Faculty are a big part of the problem. The offense? We talk too much. A few suggestions from recent articles on teaching may help us structure better discussions.

**Develop a limited set of questions that do not have “known answers.”** Use these to direct the discussion. If the questions are regularly returned to, they keep the discussion on topic.

**Ask a question and wait.** Slow down the pace; allow sufficient time for discussion to develop. Do not fill silence with your own comments. It takes time for students to formulate answers; and their thinking doesn't always get articulated smoothly. Ask a question about the question.

**Hold back your thoughts.** The climate for discussion is improved when students have to take the lead. The teacher is the facilitator or provocateur, even when stated ideas are unclear, lack evidence, are wrong. Although across the discussion, unsupported views should be constructively challenged, students do not learn to correct and improve answers if teacher always does it for them. Try not to

use student responses as springboards for your own comments. If necessary, teachers can address claims and validity of arguments in turn, between or after discussions.

**Be open and accepting.** Hold back judgments of agreement or disagreement expressed—respond with interest but neutrality. If first response is overly praised, the class thinks that is the “right” answer and there is no need for further discussion.

**Keep discussions productive.** Begin with a clear purpose: Is the goal to clarify understanding? Is it to pose new problems from previous discoveries? Is it to explore different viewpoints expressed in readings or encourage students to >>

## Proactive and Interactive

**“Faculty can adjust to more successfully meet learning goals”**

One way to proactively improve student interest in a course is to solicit their opinions on course content and teaching style during the course when adjustments can be made. Rare is the student who hesitates to give an opinion anonymously on end-of-course rating forms. However, those assessments come after the fact, and don't help instructors or students if

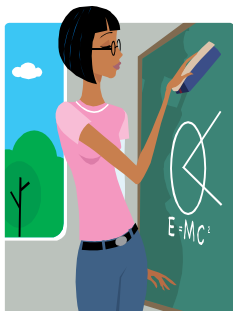
the approach in the current course needs changing. Quick, easy feedback can be gathered on 3x5 index cards: On one side, students write two or three things they have learned thus far; on the other, they can indicate what gets in the way of learning. After reviewing the anonymous feedback, faculty can report what they have learned and what they will do. Such

an immediate response lets students know that we value their opinions and allows faculty an opportunity to adjust course style, presentation, tempo, and other components which can improve learning. Repeating the process a few weeks before finals will also help identify modifications necessary to meet course objectives and finish well. >>

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**“A vibrant climate helps teaching and learning”**

#### On-line Journals:

#### Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

<http://titans.iusb.edu/josot/>

#### Inventio

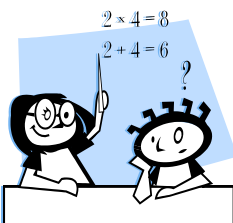
[www.doiit.gmu.edu/inventio/](http://www.doiit.gmu.edu/inventio/)

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## > Proactive and Interactive

>> Characteristics of successful student-faculty interactions include both verbal techniques that hold student interest and the instructor's physical gestures and movement in the classroom. Being savvy about what's going on verbally and non-verbally goes beyond positively responding to student questions or comments. It gives one the ability to interpret and respond to classroom dynamics in real time. In short: get out from behind the podium and move around the room as you talk. Body language is part of the professor's message. Moving among the students has the added benefit of identifying those who are less-attentive (engaging in text-messaging or preparing for another class).

It's not a stretch to conclude that a vibrant classroom climate is important to enhancing student attitudes toward the instructor, and by extension, to acquiring the skills and knowledge of the course.

Proactive engagement with student assessment of the course and its ingredients along with faculty movement and interaction among students can be potent motivation forces in an otherwise staid environment. Proactive and interactive behaviors can improve teaching and enhance learning.

Excerpts from Allen, S. (2008). "Warming the Climate for Learning." *The Teaching Professor* 22 (2): 1.

### 7 Principles of Good Teaching Practice

1. ENCOURAGES STUDENT – FACULTY CONTACT
2. ENCOURAGES COOPERATION AMONG STUDENTS
3. ENCOURAGES ACTIVE LEARNING
4. GIVES PROMPT FEEDBACK
5. EMPHASIZES TIME ON TASK
6. COMMUNICATES HIGH EXPECTATIONS
7. RESPECTS DIVERSE TALENTS AND WAYS OF LEARNING

From *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education*, Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda F. Gamson.

Essay available On-line at <http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/7princip.htm>

**RECOMMENDED READING:**  
**The Civically Engaged Reader**  
Adam Davis & Elizabeth Lynn, editors  
Chicago: Great Books, 2006

## > Useful contact information:

**Library: 989-2224**  
**Academic Affairs: 989-2446**  
**Technology help desk: 989-2888**  
**User Services: Jeff Schieb, 989-4186**  
**Faculty Development: Suzanne Degges-White, 989-2693**  
**Office of Research and Professional Development:**  
**George Hong/Terri Szot-Chance, CLO 176, 989-2925**  
**Center for Instructional Excellence (cie):**  
**Lee Artz, 989-2393**

## > Discussions

>> think critically about the material? As implied above, discussions should have specific themes or topics.

It is so much easier to tell students what you know, to retreat to the more controlled world of lecture, but in-class discussions are better at building instructor-student rapport and can do more to stimulate students' minds and interests than any other form of teaching.

Most problems with discussions can be prevented or significantly reduced when they are structured with the above suggestions in mind.

Adapted from Laing, D. (2007) "Nurturing Discussion in the Classroom." In Smith, K., (ed) *Teaching, Learning, Assessing*. Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press; and Sautter, P. (2007) "Designing Discussion Activities." *Journal of Marketing Education*, 29 (2): 122-131.

## June 2008 Retreat on Teaching & Learning

Each summer, the Center for Instructional Excellence hosts a 2-day retreat for faculty fellows from a cross the University. Faculty are selected from the 22 departments at Purdue University Calumet as fellows at the Summer Institute for Teaching Excellence (SITE) in New Buffalo, Michigan at the Harbor Grand Resort Hotel. SITE features outstanding scholars and facilitators who lead conversations on teaching and citizenship, multiculturalism, service learning, and other teaching and learning topics.

The annual SITE retreat gives faculty time for reflection, relaxation, and dialogue with peers—a time away from daily tasks and family and work responsibilities—a time to re-consider the value of higher education, to rejuvenate enthusiasm for teaching in conversations with colleagues.

Interested faculty should inform their chairs as nominations will be made soon.