

Staff Teaching and Reflection/Research (STARR) Program

Activities to enhance learning in large groups

‘Read some material’

Ask students to read part of a handout and note (and share) their response to it. Alternatively, ask them to read from an overhead transparency. May be followed by a small group discussion.

‘Write a question’

Ask students individually or in pairs/groups, to write down one or two precise questions on a recent lecture. These can be dealt with in a variety of ways. An effective way is to put them in a hat and draw them out at random and get the whole group to suggest answers.

‘Solve a problem/answer a question’

Set a question based on a lecture, a text etc. Ask students to answer the question, individually, or in small groups, or individually followed by group work.

‘Give an example’

Ask students to invent examples of a presented concept or idea and compare them with another student.

‘List pros/cons’

Ask students to consider briefly likely advantages and disadvantages, or strengths and weaknesses, of a theory. Discuss.

‘Watch a video-clip’

Show a short video, giving clear instructions on what to look for. Discuss.

‘Read your notes’

Ask students to read their recent lecture notes or summary of a chapter in a text. Invite students to exchange and discuss notes so that they can add to their notes and compare approaches. This strategy works best when students are pre-warned that they will be asked to do this.

‘Brainstorm your ideas’

One way to help students focus is to get them to write down any ideas they have on a topic first, before any discussion begins. Comparing notes briefly with their next door neighbour is also another good idea.

It could be helpful to **alert participants about an upcoming discussion** (a week before) so that anyone who is nervous has the opportunity to do adequate preparation, and will feel more at ease about the prospect of contributing.

Questions and questioning

Questioning is a key facilitation skill and if done poorly can stifle discussion and inhibit group learning. Lively discussions are more likely to take place if our questions are 'open-ended'. Questions that invite yes or no answers will 'kill' discussion. Vague, ambiguous, and difficult questions should also be avoided.

- **Prepare strategies for asking questions.** Will you pose questions to the group as a whole, to pairs of students, to small groups? Will the question be a prompt for brainstorming, consensus building or debate?
- **Use open-ended questions.**

'What thoughts do you have about X's position on Y?' vs... 'Does X portray Y as Z?'

- Try and make the questions interesting and relevant by using **real life examples** that students can relate to.
- **Identify your key questions in advance** and anticipate the range of student responses. Ask 'why' or 'how' questions that lead students to figure things out for themselves.
- **Show that you value all answers.** This can be done by non-verbal signals (eye contact, nod, smile) as well as verbal responses.
- **Give students time to answer.** A useful technique is to get the students to jot down ideas before a discussion begins. **WAIT** for a response!
- **Encourage students to take more responsibility for asking questions.** Be careful about how you elicit questions. Asking 'any questions?' is easily dodged by those who don't want to contribute. They simply answer- 'No!' A skilled teacher is more likely to say 'What are your questions?' This presumes that at least some students have a question and it is merely a matter of asking it.
- You could also ask them to **work in pairs, choosing one of a set of questions** to discuss for a pre-set time.

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