

AALS CONFERENCE

PLENARY SESSION TEACHING

A Dozen Tips for Student Engagement in Classroom Discussions

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1. Set Participation Expectations In Your Syllabus. Announce that participation and contributions as well as good listening are expected of everyone. Explain that learning how to participate and share conversation space are professional skills that lawyers need. Explain why you value all voices to enrich the conversation. Students have previous participation patterns that may be difficult to disrupt. The “talkers” are used to having the floor and the “lurkers” are used to giving it to them and worse may be otherwise engaged. Importantly, these roles can be gendered and racialized. When that happens, the diversity we seek in classroom conversation is lost.

2. Model Participation Early and Reinforce It With Ground Rules. Disrupting previous patterns and establishing new ones needs to be set from the beginning. From the first day, make sure everyone is participating and keep rough track of contributions to make sure no one is dominating. Set ground rules that disrupt patterns and promote trust. For example – establish a norm that no one talks again until all have spoken at least once unless it is to follow-up in a back and forth discussion. If the same hands go up or jump into conversations, ask for new voices to join the conversation.

3. Make Goals for Conversations Clear. By outlining goals of the discussion, we allow students to monitor their understanding as the discussion ensues. Clearly articulated goals also help the faculty member to structure the discussion so that it is productive. Students have a better idea of what a valuable contribution is and appropriate behavior when they know the purpose of the discussion.

4. Develop Low Stake Ways to Contribute. Ask for a report on work in small group. “Tell us one idea your group developed.” Or give people a quick write to allow them to formulate thoughts to a prompt before you ask for discussion. Warm-ups to broader conversations enable greater and often better participation in large group conversations. If the students hesitate to join a conversation or conversation is heated among only a few, call a time out for a quick write.

5. Reward Participation. Some teachers grade contributions but those that don’t reward participation in other ways such as thanking students for participating, affirming their participation through nodding, eye contact, smiling, or moving closer to the speaker.

6. Use Large Group Discussion Techniques that Promote Participation. Start an idea chain that goes around the room with each student contributing an idea. Call on students who are not regulars when they volunteer and do not be afraid to cold call on them if they do not volunteer. Or, let students call on each other after they talk with the only caveat that they cannot call on someone who has already spoken. (Over the years, I have had

many students comment that they never participated in class before and they really enjoyed participating in class. They thanked me for calling on them.)

7. Assign Roles in the Discussion. Assign Roles whether in small group or large – people who are hesitant to give their own opinion will often offer an opinion when in role of another. Or, assign facilitative roles in the discussion – e.g. some students are assigned to ask others questions about their ideas, others are asked to make contributions that continue a line of conversation, others to surface assumptions, while others summarize/synthesize the conversation.

8. Include Participation Instructions in Exercises or Role Plays. For example, “each person will do xxx” or “first one will, then the next will do or tell xxx.” Announce in the middle of the exercise that it is time to change, i.e. “If you have not switched story tellers do that now. “

9. Motivate Students by Connecting Conversation to Their Work as Lawyers. When students find positive value in a learning goal or activity, see achievement as possible, and perceive support from their environment, they are motivated to learn and participate.

10. Use Questions That Spark Conversation. Generally, questions that ask for multiple interpretations or approaches, different theories to connect to, build on other comments, or ask for facts to support or oppose are ones that will continue conversations. Vary questions used to vary the discussion (e.g., exploratory, relational, diagnostic, cause-and-effect, summary). Avoid questions that have right or wrong answers, as they often will kill conversations.

11. Live with Silence. Do not answer your own questions. Reframe them or try to figure out why you are getting silence. (Are they too obvious, too confusing, or do they just take some thought before answering?) Most often students will attempt to answer your question if you give them time.

12. Build a Community of Learner/Practitioners. Students are engaged in a common endeavor of representing clients and becoming excellent lawyers. An ethic of commitment to life-long learning and collaborative purpose includes students’ ability to have frank conversations about strengths and weaknesses with each other; to reflect together about ways to improve the practice; and to agree and disagree while listening to each other. A clinical classroom that teaches students these skills is educating students in ways that enable them to be leaders and learners.