



5.1.1 Classroom Arrangements

It is difficult for students to talk to people they cannot see. In a typical classroom, with fixed seats facing forward, students tend to direct their comments to the front of the room - to their teacher - rather than to other students. This arrangement encourages one-to-one dialogues rather than group discussion. If, on the other hand, students can see each other, they are more likely to interact with one another as well as with the teacher.

A circle or U-shaped arrangement of chairs is the most useful for discussion. Instructors also find that if they sit with their students rather than stand in front of them or sit behind a table, it helps promote group discussion rather than student-faculty exchanges.

5.1.2 Discussion Questions

Students are more inclined to participate when they know the focus or intent of a discussion. A preview of discussion topics can help students organize their thinking and prepare to express their views. Several faculty members develop discussion questions in advance and distribute them to their students.

“In my Education course,” one professor explains, “I give students a series of four to eight discussion questions on each week’s reading assignment. These are spelled out in my course syllabus which is handed out during the first week of class. All of my students are responsible for all of the questions each week. These questions serve both as study aids and stimuli for discussion.”

5.1.3 Large Classrooms

An Engineering professor teaches a lecture course with an enrollment of over 40 students. Because of its size, there is no TA for the class and no formally scheduled discussion class. “I believe that discussion is quite important, but the current size of 40+ students really prohibits useful exchange in the lecture setting.” As a result, he decided to restructure one of the lecture meetings into two discussion classes.

On Mondays and Wednesdays, he lectures to the entire class. On Fridays, students meet in two different classes (15-25 students in each group) to discuss the material. The faculty member conducts both discussion classes. Although it may be difficult to schedule a convenient time for one of the discussion classes (the other can meet during regular lecture hours), the benefits are worth the effort to this instructor.

5.1.4 Group Assignments

An Education professor divides his class into groups of six to eight students. Each group is assigned a specific question or topic to discuss, selected from a list of questions prepared in advance. But, because students do not know beforehand which questions their group will be assigned, they must be prepared to discuss all of them.

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“I look carefully at my students’ faces,” says one History professor. “You can’t teach a bored or confused class. If I see a glazed look which suggests that students are not following me, I interrupt my lecture and say, ‘We may be going too fast....’ or ‘This point doesn’t seem to be clear to some of you...’”

Some faculty members prefer to direct their questions to the entire class; others find it effective to call on students by name, interrupting their lecture to say, “Jerry, you look like you had a question,” or “Several of you looked puzzled. Sally, can you tell me what doesn’t seem to be clear?”

