
**Categories:** Pedagogy, Active Learning, Discussion

**Summary**

According to scholarly literature, students who are engaged in the classroom tend to have better academic outcomes than those who receive information passively. A common means of engaging students in higher education classes is discussion. There is, however, little research on whether students understand how to effectively lead or participate in class discussion, despite the fact that many undergraduate students are reluctant to engage in discussion. While some work has been done that suggests the employment of collaborative learning groups and student-led discussions, these studies offer little in the way of detailed explanations of how to make these mechanisms work. In the hopes of mitigating the problem of ineffective class discussion, the authors conducted a study examining the impact of “discussing discussions” in the classroom on the quality and level of participation of subsequent student discourse.

The study consisted of seventy-six students broken up into two sections of an advanced social psychology class over two different semesters. Each class was similar in that they employed the same textbook, a personality type questionnaire (given at the beginning of the class), course assessments (exams, term paper, course evaluation, and end of course self-evaluation), and discussion scores. The experimental section, offered in the spring, was different from the control section, however, in that the class spent the first week of the semester engaging three articles on discussion and had a discussion about these works. Other than the initial week, the two classes utilized the same procedure for discussion; each class met twice a week for seventy-five minutes, with the second session set aside for discussion based upon previous lecture information, text readings, and other homework assignments. The discussions themselves were conducted in a group format, in which two students in each group served as discussion leaders. Over the course of the semester every student in each class served as a discussion leader twice.

The results of the study suggested that “discussing discussions” had some statistically significant impact on the students in the experimental section. Despite the fact that student responses to the personality type questionnaire in both sections showed little divergence, students in the experimental section did significantly better on the first exam and the term paper. Similarly, students in the spring semester had higher scores on the first discussion than did their peers in the fall section, though both groups performed significantly better on subsequent discussions. Finally, students in the experimental section had mean evaluation ratings for the course that were higher than those of the students in the control group, and posted higher self-assessment scores than their peers in the fall class.

**Conclusions**

The study suggests that having a discussion about discussions had a positive impact on student performance. The study also raised several questions that deserve further attention. In particular, the
authors noted that the decision to study advanced students, as opposed to first year or beginning students, may have had an undue effect on the study.

Applications

On the most basic level, this article raises some provocative and seemingly crucial issues for those instructors who make heavy use of discussion in their classes. It is unlikely that any such instructor at U.D.C. has not had to confront the problem of student reluctance to participate in discussion, and subsequently face a situation in which discussion devolves into lecture or some other activity, or a class in which a few students engage in discussion with each other and the professor. Given this fact, the study presented by the author offers a potential means by which discussion-reliant instructors can mitigate the problem of limited student participation. Less useful, is the authors' detailing of the “discussing discussions.” While they clearly cite the articles that they used in the experimental section’s week on discussions, they offer no specific information on how those articles were employed. Moreover, the fact that this method was tested on advanced students suggests that a significantly different approach to improve discussion performance might be necessary for beginning students. Nonetheless, the article provides considerable food for thought, or for “discussion.”

Citations of Interest


See Article for available examples of Personality Type Questionnaire and End Course Self-Evaluation