

Leading the Discussion

Setting and Tips

by James Riley Estep, Jr.

“Don’t teachers just use discussion as a time-filler? I mean, some teachers come unprepared, then fill the class time with discussion!”

Unfortunately, we all have experienced discussions that fizzled. As with any teaching method, discussion sometimes is used *unintentionally*, meaning without a purpose and design. Discussions that lack purpose and design can indeed degenerate into pointless time-filling. The result may be a meandering exercise in the sharing of personal experience and perspective. When discussion is not directed toward a learning goal, you may hear one of your small groups discussing who’s playing in the football game later that afternoon rather than discussing, say, the significance of Ruth in the lineage of King David. This is called *discussion drift*. How do we fix this problem?

When properly used, discussion can be a most effective teaching method that values the input from your learners. Discussion sends the signal that the teacher’s viewpoint is not the only valid one in the class, but that the insights, perspectives, and experiences of the students are also important. Discussion also can teach participants how to think biblically about life decisions and circumstances in a classroom environment before facing the issues in real life.

Setting the Stage

Using discussion as an effective method of teaching requires that you set the stage in four ways. *First, make sure to use purposeful, open-ended questions.* Discussion often fizzles as a teaching method because the question the teacher poses is not capable of fostering discussion. Questions that require a simple factual answer or that can be answered *yes* or *no* fall into this category.

For example, one teacher might ask, “Does the Bible describe Ruth as an ancestor of King David?” Answer: “Well, yes.” How can anyone *discuss* such a question? While any given discussion question can have a desired outcome—

something on which the rest of the lesson can build—the question should not be so “closed” that it does not allow an open exchange of ideas.

Now think of this question: “Why is Ruth’s ancestry in King David’s lineage significant?” This kind of question calls for more than a one-word response. Such a question calls for the student to analyze and synthesize biblical material. They have to *think*, not simply recall.

Second, you as a teacher have to be mentally prepared to use discussion. Your mental preparation as teacher includes the realization that your role is somewhat different from what it is in the lecture. You as teacher must see yourself not as the sage-on-the-stage, but as a guide-at-the-side.

Many times teachers think their role is to respond quickly to questions with the “correct” answer. But when using discussion, the teacher often will turn questions back to the class to keep the discussion going. There will be time for the teacher to provide his or her own thoughts once the class has had an opportunity to wrestle with the question. Learners will be more receptive to the teacher’s thoughts once they have had a chance to discuss the matter. This requires a certain amount of patience as you assist students in working through difficult questions for themselves.

Teachers using the discussion method also must know how to respond gently to a student whose response is way off base. Promoting discussion doesn’t mean that you will allow heretical suggestions to go unchallenged. Even so, a certain amount of gentleness is needed here. Too firm of a response to a student may cause others in the class to become hesitant in sharing their ideas for fear of a negative response from the teacher.

Your mental preparation also should include being thoroughly familiar with the lesson material. Such preparation often will need to be more extensive than it would be when using lecture. In a lecture format, the teacher knows exactly what is to be said and how it is to be said. Under a discussion format, the teacher’s preparation includes anticipating the possible responses of students in order to be able to address them. Of course, you can’t be prepared for every possible question. In that case, don’t pretend! Be honest and say, “I don’t really know, but I will look into it.”

Third, prepare your students in advance for discussion. Discussion will fizzle if students are not ready for it. Suppose you announce, “Today we are going to discuss Ruth,” but students were not asked to read Ruth prior to class or e-mailed a list of possible discussion questions to investigate. As a result, students enter class cognitively cold but are expected to heat up very quickly!

Effective discussions are those in which the students are equipped to engage. If students are neither informed about the subject nor provided relevant information, then their discussion is more likely to end up being a pooling of

ignorance, a grasping for truth in the dark, or an occasion to talk about the big football game. The result is a discussion that does not achieve your learning goals.

This problem is avoided by providing students with relevant material in advance. This material can take the form of print media (for example, a quarterly curriculum student book) or digital media (for example, a web site that includes information about upcoming lessons). Students also can be provided with a list of possible discussion questions in advance (perhaps by e-mail) so they can think about appropriate responses. Informed students make for an informed discussion and a genuine learning environment.

Fourth, a learning environment conducive to discussion will be a great help. The physical aspects of your learning space are important. In general, someone who walks into your learning space can make an educated guess as to what method of teaching is favored by the instructor (or, at least, which method of teaching the room is designed to support) just by looking at the layout. Classrooms that feature a front-and-center podium, a projector, and rows of seats facing forward scream “lecture!”

On the other hand, a classroom environment that favors discussion may have chairs in circles around tables. While such a classroom may have a podium, it will probably not be centered in front of the class, but located off to the side (being used to hold the teacher’s notes). An environment conducive to discussion can also have a markerboard on which to write student ideas and responses.

When someone sees this kind of classroom, discussion is immediately assumed. After all, it is difficult to lecture to a class of students sitting at six round tables with some backs turned to you! When the environment is right, discussion is more readily used as a means of instruction.

Classroom Tips

Now that you know how to set the stage for discussion, we move to some practical tips. *First, make sure to provide the questions in written form.* This means writing them on the board, putting them on PowerPoint slides, or reproducing them on handouts. (If some students have their backs to the board or screen because they are sitting at round tables, handouts may be best.) Students should not have to ask, “Now, what question are we supposed to be discussing?” or “Can you say that again?”

Second, make sure to walk around the room if you are using a small-group discussion format. Don’t just stay at the front of the class or walk into the hallway. Rather, roam throughout the class, listening to the group discussions.

This allows you to know what might be brought up when the groups share their conclusions. It can also allow you to correct an erroneous idea while it is still contained within one discussion group.

Third, set a time limit for discussion. When the question is provided to the class, say, for example, “Take eight minutes to discuss this question.” This helps you keep the class time flowing. It also keeps the groups on task, since they know they don’t have time to meander.

Fourth, don’t reveal all your questions at once. Occasionally, one discussion question will build on another. For example, consider these two questions from a lesson on Ruth: “How significant can one ‘common person’ be in the history of a nation?” and “How significant was Ruth’s impact on biblical history?” Students may wrestle with the first question and conclude that common people have little significance in the grand sweep of history. But the second question will challenge that conclusion and force the participants to reconsider. The impact of the discussion may be diminished if you put both questions on the board at the same time.

Fifth, always bring closure. Using the discussion method does not mean allowing students to leave class with nothing more than questions. Provide directions, summations, and answers to the questions by utilizing their insights and the material you have prepared.

Finally, don’t give up. The way to use discussion productively is to practice using it. Learn from the experience, correct your mistakes, and keep trying. It will be worth it!