Centre for Teaching and Learning

The Centre for Teaching and Learning has as its mission to support and promote teaching and learning excellence, innovation, and scholarship at the University of British Columbia Okanagan.

The Centre for Teaching and Learning serves all faculties and schools at the University of British Columbia Okanagan. The Centre also provides support for graduate students/teaching assistants, post-doctoral fellows/scholars, and sessional/adjunct faculty.

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Classroom Discussions

Discussions are a useful way to get students to work with the information you give them and express it in different ways. If you can go beyond lectures and engage students in classroom activities that extend their thinking and get them to apply what they have learned, you will create a deeper and often more enjoyable level of learning.

The following are tips to improve discussions.

The Plan
If you plan carefully, you will find that students respond eagerly. Decide what you want the students to be able to do as a result of your lecture, and then create a discussion that gives them practice at it.

Discussions usually centre around processing, interpreting, analyzing, and debating issues. As Bloom’s Taxonomy suggests, these are higher levels of thinking than just recalling facts. For example, your discussion plan could be to pose questions to groups of 6 students. Allow them 10 minutes to discuss, and then report back to the class.

The Discussion Question
Students are familiar with questions that require recall of information, but to get them to better understanding, give them questions that do not have one right or wrong answer.

It is a good idea to formulate your critical questions ahead of time so that the questions are clear and concise. Creating questions “on the fly” could lead to run-on or confusing questions which will hamper student involvement.

Convergent questions have a single answer and push students to infer and recognize relationships.

Evaluative questions get students to make judgements about the logic of their answers, and the reasonableness and ethical relevance of their arguments.

Divergent questions have a number of possible answers and demand imagining new possibilities. Such questions might begin with “what if?”

During the Discussion
Walk around and listen in on the group discussions. If you can accurately summarize what students are saying, then you are really listening.

Ask extending questions such as “How might you do that?”, “Why do you think that would happen?”, or “What else might the consequence be?”

Ask CTL about Bloom’s Taxonomy for wording of questions associated with higher level thinking.

To learn more about classroom discussions, contact CTL (ctl.helpdesk@ubc.ca).