

## OTHER IDEAS FOR INVIGORATING YOUR CLASS

A good discussion may be facilitated by strategies not obviously related to conducting a discussion. For example:

### *Use writing*

Writing often facilitates good thinking and good conversation because it helps students to get engaged.

\*Have students free-write in class for a few minutes to gather their thoughts together--or to create some thoughts. They might examine an important passage in a text, reflect on the topic for the day, or recall what happened in the previous class. This may be the first quiet ten minutes for reflection that they've had in days. The discussion will benefit.

My students especially enjoy writing for five minutes before beginning to discuss an essay written by one of their classmates, an essay that has just been read aloud. They put these responses into the form of a letter, which they actually give to the writer. (The writer later has the benefit of seventeen responses to his or her essay.) Responses may be personal and the result of "free association"; or they can be as formal as students wish. When discussion of the student's essay proceeds, some students read their letters aloud or use them as the basis for comment.

\*Assign informal writing in advance. For example, students might answer questions about the text that you provide, or they might write a one-paragraph personal response. The writing might involve role-playing (a good way to get students personally involved): "You are Goneril writing from hell. Justify your behaviour toward Lear well enough and you can go to purgatory." Use these paragraphs in class, and/or collect them for your examination later.

\*Journals are another kind of informal preparatory writing that helps students to investigate a subject before the discussion begins. These can be directed journals or free-form.

\* Have students write out their own questions. You might begin class by having students write on one or two of the questions brought in by their peers. You can also put students in charge of leading discussion on the questions they wrote up and brought in. Small groups can also work on such questions.

\* If a discussion flags, pause to have students write for five minutes. They can write their comments about the topic, or you can provide a specific question or passage for analysis. Then resume discussion.

\* Have students write summaries of and commentary on the inquiry that has occurred in class; also have them examine their own part in the discussion. These summaries can act as an encouragement for students to reflect on ideas discussed and on their contribution to those ideas. The notes can provide an informative record for both you and the students. Another way to approach this task: have each student write down one

thing he or she learned that day. You can collect these for your own information; you can have the class share their collected wisdom.

\* Combine individual pre-writing, small group work, and general discussion. For instance, begin by having students individually write down (at home or in class) their definition of a term: define "feminism." Next have students meet in groups to compare notes and refine their positions. Then have the class convene to share observations and conclusions and further refine their definitions of 'a feminist.' Students then rewrite their definitions at home or in the next class.

\* Use your own writing: mention in your comments on papers something the student said in class. It's a very flattering and encouraging thing to do; it encourages students to think their ideas matter.

### *Use visualization, drama*

Like writing, visual and dramatic techniques can help to elicit fuller, more thoughtful and creative discussion.

\* Use the blackboard (or have students use it) to create diagrams, visualizations of the problem or concept. E.g., Venn diagrams (those overlapping circles).

\* Bring in cartoons, films, or pictures to illustrate abstract ideas.

\* Make pictures: have students draw (in groups, preferably) the concepts represented in a text. Then they should compare their drawings. A good way to elicit both right brain and left brain strengths!

\* Enact a mini-drama to make your point. When I'm about to discuss style, I occasionally act out three ways of asking for a group's attention: "Shut up and pay attention!" "Hey, guys, listen up!" "Could we now please turn our attention to a new subject?"

\* Have your students try role-playing-the judge presiding over a case, a character in a short story. Preparation and subsequent discussion are important for the success of this technique.

\* Set up debates during which students argue out an issue and you, as debate judge, assign points.

\* Create academic panel presentations, as for a conference. Students prepare papers, read each other's in advance, act as respondents, etc. This helps students get a taste of a real academic world in which the writing they've been doing matters.