Facilitating Discussions That Work

Date: January 16, 2012  
Location: 1279 Anthony Hall  
Speaker: Dr. Rique Campa, Associate Dean, The Graduate School and Professor, Fisheries and Wildlife; Julie Rojewski, Interim Director, Teaching Assistant Programs  
Sponsoring Program: Graduate School  
Core Competency Area: Teaching Strategies in Agriculture and Natural Resources

Introduction
Discussions provide an opportunity to engage the students in an experiential learning process, gauge student understanding, encourage peer learning, and promote higher order thinking. Discussions, however, can also be daunting for both students and the instructor. They can be difficult to manage, contentious, and exclude students who are hesitant communicators. The challenge for instructors is to use discussion as a method to actively encourage participation and synthesis of information by all students. Particularly for students in agriculture and natural resources, because they are training for positions in management, academia, or the non-profit sphere, they will need to interact with people and discussions help the adage “practice makes perfect.”

Reflections
Personally, because I aspire to teach higher order thinking, discussion methods lend themselves to synthesis. But, it requires a bit of training and planning on the part of the instructor to stimulate discussion and lead students to “uncovering the information” themselves. The examples and techniques that Rique and Julie used in this seminar will be particularly useful to the interactive courses in agriculture and natural resources:

Interpretive Questions
One method that Rique and Julie proposed was the use of interpretive questions which, when well planned and directed, can facilitate students’ interpretation of material and transcendence of the basic “facts.” Characteristics of these include:
- Explaining content or meaning
- Ambiguous, open to broad interpretation
- No one answer
- Interesting, piques the interest of the students

Rique and Julie emphasized that it was important that you are aware of what type of interpretive question you are using because they have different strengths and uses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Interpretive</th>
<th>Factual (basic knowledge)</th>
<th>Evaluative (synthesize)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic (general)</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusive</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For example, starting a discussion with a fact question will likely deter students from answering because if they do not know the exact, correct answer, they cannot contribute; if they are unsure as to whether they know the correct answer, they’re likely hesitant to contribute. Either way, your question is likely to be hung out to dry. Rather, starting with an interpretative question that doesn’t have one answer, allows students to comment and share what they know and are thinking about. This is much more likely to stimulate discussion. If necessary, from there, you can bring a tangential discussion back to the main topic with a factual question. Supportive questions are useful to draw other hesitant students into the conversation by building off a previous comment from another student. Probing questions ask students to take the discussion a bit deeper on an important subject that may have been cursorily discussed. Conclusive questions ask students to synthesize the information discussed and come to some sort of decision.

Using these questions in class is a good practice method for what the students can expect to see on an exam, if that is your desired assessment method. But, one failing that Rique noted is common for instructors is that they don’t have clear learning objectives and that they are not well aligned with the questions they develop. Julie put together a very helpful outline to structure a class discussion around an overarching teaching objective with tangible teaching goals and, consequently, directed interpretive questions.

**Small Group Discussion, then Large Group Discussion**

From personal experience as a student, I know that it can be scary to answer questions in a large group setting. It’s much more approachable to discuss a topic with one or two other students for 10 minutes then present what we’ve discussed to the greater group. Using small groups to start a larger group discussion breaks the ice and often students who wouldn’t be apt to do so, will speak in front of the larger group because they are speaking on behalf of others.

**Don’t Grade Participation**

Grading can make a daunting task all the more daunting…and potentially unattainable. There’s a great risk for some students to participating in a discussion but adding a grading component makes it all the more important and makes students feel as though they must have a perfect answer before they speak. Giving participation credit, on the other hand, is a simple way to encourage participation but acknowledging that you are just looking for a response, not a “right” answer. This method assures students that all perspectives are valuable.

**Name Tents**

In a large class, it’s sometimes impossible to learn every student’s name. Using name tents, where each student comes to class with their name written on a folded note card, makes it easier for an instructor to engage with students by name. It’s useful to be able to call on hesitant or distracted students to engage them in the discussion. It’s also a helpful way to limit responses from dominant talkers by asking someone from the other side of the room to answer a follow-up question.

**Think-Pair-Share**

Think-Pair-Share is a structured way to allow students to gather their own thoughts on an issue, discuss them with a neighbor, and then share them with the greater group. Rique and Julie suggested having a highly structured task to complete before class so that students can start off class with tangible material to discuss with each other and the rest of the group.
Conclusions

This seminar was a seamless discussion. It was quite a feat to aspire to as a discussion facilitator. I am so new to the process of teaching that leading a discussion so well seems like quite a daunting task. Rique and Julie just made it seem so easy and simple! As a student who was shy to speak in front of and as a part of large discussion groups, I know that it will take me time and practice to be able to apply these tools and techniques in such a well integrated manner. My first chance to practice is the course that I’m TAing this semester. It is a small lecture-based discussion class for upper level undergrads in fisheries and wildlife or policy. I will attempt to use some of these techniques in the lectures that I lead and also to engage students in the discussions presented by other lecturers.