



## Discussion: It's All about the Details

Sometimes it's good to revisit an instructional standby. Discussion is a staple in most teachers' repertoire of strategies, but it frequently disappoints. So few students are willing to participate and they tend to be the same ones. The students who do contribute often do so tentatively, blandly, and pretty much without anything that sounds like interest or conviction. On some days it's just easier to present the material.

When describing the problems with discussion, most faculty start as we have—with all that students do poorly. It's also very good to remind ourselves that all too often faculty are part of the problem. Our principal offense? We talk too much.

A chapter in the book referenced below offers six pointers—all aimed at helping us control how much we contribute while at the same time we improve the overall climate for discussion in a class.

**Learn to draw out contributions**—Ask a question and wait. Do not fill the silence with your opinions and views, thinking that your comments will prime the pump and get the class going. Rather, this action demonstrates that if students don't speak, you will. Students will happily wait you out. Instead, you should wait and while waiting, look confident. Establish eye contact with whomever might be looking. Offer encouragement and let the question stand. If you feel as though the silence may be the death of you, ask a question about the question.

**Learn to withdraw and attend to managing the discussion**—Because we are leaders in the classroom and experts to boot, and because we regulate and control the flow of communication, we easily fall into being in charge of the discussion as well. "However, in the interest of fostering

discussion, it will be better if much of the time you refrain from doing so, for nothing suppresses potentially fruitful discussion as quickly or as thoroughly as professors who hold the floor and treat student contributions as springboards for their own comments." (p. 60)

**Learn to hold back your own thoughts**—Often the answers that students give to open-ended questions are not very good. The ideas are stated without a lot of clarity, the opinion is not supported with much evidence, or the viewpoint is not logically coherent. Teachers are very motivated to correct and improve those answers—that's our job! But what this action conveys is that only fully developed, clearly stated answers are welcome. The climate for discussion is improved when a teacher asks the student to explain something in more detail or when the teacher defers to the rest of the class, asking, for example, "Is there anything anyone would like Sarah to clarify?" (p. 61) Wrong answers, illogical conclusions, and poorly supported positions can all be addressed subsequently when it is the teacher's turn to present material. Students do not learn to correct and improve their answers if the teacher always does it for them.

**Learn to slow down the pace**—We are used to discussing topics with our colleagues. They know the material, have already thought a lot about it, and can answer questions quickly. We want conversations in class to clip along at a similar pace—there's always lots of material the class needs to get through. "We would do well to pause and reflect on the fact that it takes time for students to formulate answers to questions of any complexity, and that

their thinking does not come forward in smoothly flowing units of speech." (p. 61) If the question is a good, thought-provoking one, ask it—maybe even write it on the board and tell students you will wait 30 seconds before calling on anyone. The author suggests waiting a few seconds after a student has spoken before saying anything. Often that space empowers the student to continue, to clarify or to add more.

**Learn to be open and accepting in manner**—The advice here is to hold back on judgments, especially those that agree or disagree with a view expressed by a student. Respond with interest but with a certain neutrality. Research is clear that praise does encourage students to contribute, but praise can backfire. If a first response gets a "super answer" from the teacher, the rest of the class thinks that student has gotten a right answer and there is no need to think further. Outstanding answers can be noted and praised subsequently.

**Keep discussions productive**—Discussions are made productive when

PAGE 4

### *In This Issue*

Discouraging Over Participators . . . . .	2
Hurtful Student Comments . . . . .	2
Tips for Cheap Trips: Short-term Travel Courses on a Shoestring . . . . .	3
Discussions with Structure . . . . .	4
Hard Courses and Student Ratings: The Facts . . . . .	5
Student Attention Spans . . . . .	6

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- Write directly to the audience, remembering that this is a newsLETTER.
- Keep the article short; generally between 2 and 3 double-spaced pages.
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## Discouraging Over Participators

By Nicholas F. Skinner, King's University College, The University of Western Ontario  
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Over the years I have had considerable success in encouraging student participation in my senior seminars. As advised in this newsletter, I have a discussion early in the course about those characteristics that make discussion effective.

Last semester, however, I was blessed by the presence of identical twins—I'll call them Harv and Marv—who were embroiled in the most intense case of sibling rivalry I have encountered in three-and-a-half decades of university teaching. Each had a seemingly compulsive need to make a comment; offer an opinion; or, most often, contradict whatever it was his brother had just said. These unnervingly frequent interruptions were disruptive and annoying for everyone, and it was not long

before my students—first individually and eventually en masse—complained to me. I responded, again trying several of the non-verbal and verbal suggestions that have appeared in this publication. My attempts to quell the verbal tide fell on deaf ears.

I was at a loss as to what to try next, until one day the students took matters into their own hands. As soon as Harv or Marv opened his mouth, one of his classmates tossed two pennies directly at him (a different student each time). Finally, after several repetitions of being so targeted, Marv asked, "What are you guys doing?" The response, in chorus: "**You both have so much to say, we figured this was the only way we could get our two cents in!**"

Happily, the twins took this admonition graciously, and the class proceeded smoothly thereafter, leaving me thoroughly grateful for this clever demonstration of student ingenuity. ♥

## Hurtful Student Comments

By Glenn Hartz, The Ohio State University  
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At most places now, students are given the opportunity to evaluate instructors at the end of each class. Along with standardized items, students are invited to offer open-ended narrative comments on the course and instructor. Sometimes the comments are nice; sometimes negative but constructive; sometimes negative and destructive.

Some students will go out of their way to make you look bad. If there are relatively few such comments, the professional consequences aren't all that bad unless a draconian administrator uses them to justify sanctions against you. The personal consequences often are more serious. You wonder where you went wrong. You dream of retirement.

But the *pedagogical* consequences are dramatic. Such comments take aim at the very soul of teaching. They haunt you dur-

ing the teaching day—make you hesitate to take risks in your interactions with students. You pull back from challenging the students in the way they need to be challenged if they are to learn how to think analytically and critically.

They make us worse teachers by intimidation. The effects are insidious and often beyond our conscious awareness. We drop paper assignments and essay sections on exams—multiple-choice exams are so much easier to grade, and then there's that all too convenient test bank from the textbook company. "Education" goes on because texts are read and taught, answers selected, and grades assigned. But real learning—the kind that involves interaction with a tough-minded opponent or starts with a sheet of blank paper and requires the student to write—is bypassed. The hurtful comments did their share to make it so.

I just thought someone had to say that. ♥

# Tips for Cheap Trips: Short-term Travel Courses on a Shoestring

By Susan Mooney and Karen Talentino,  
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“Nothing was routine, and I had to think about each step I took, both figuratively and literally. I was freed from my regular responsibilities, and I was able to focus on learning all of the time.” The kind of learning this student describes is what we strive to foster each January when we take up to 26 sophomores on a 12-day camping trip to the Everglades. Although research clearly demonstrates the power of travel to create lasting learning experiences, cost (as well as personal circumstances) prevents many students from participating in traditional long-term study abroad programs. At Stonehill College, we’ve harnessed the power of *short-term* travel to offer such students the opportunity for “out of the ordinary” learning experiences. We’d like to share practical tips for *affordably* implementing a short-term travel experience.

Short-term travel courses are experiential learning programs that take place at a location other than a traditional campus classroom. Learning objectives relate to both the travel experience itself and the disciplinary content of the course and often involve pedagogies such as service learning and community-based research. Length of travel can be from two to 10 days, or even longer. The distance traveled is not as important as the fact that each student is taken out of his/her normal routine and comfort zone.

The Everglades trip involves a team-taught interdisciplinary course in a learning community, titled “Ethics and Ecology in Action: Restoring the Everglades.” This camping trip gives students an opportunity to apply knowledge

from two disciplinary courses, science and ethics, to a real-life ecological disaster area.

## Tips for Cheap Trips

1. In the early planning stages, **publicize the trip** to faculty, staff, and administrators who may have suggestions or contacts regarding transportation, housing, or local resources. By doing this, we discovered that one of Stonehill’s trustees, a senior administrator at a rental car company, was willing to provide us complimentary vans.

2. The cost of **accommodations** can be diminished by camping in public campgrounds or staying in college dorms or research stations. Contact local nonprofit organizations that may have space available for rent or donation. Local alums may allow students to sleep in a basement or camp on the lawn. By staying in public campgrounds, we rarely exceed \$80 per night in accommodation costs for our entire group of 30 people.

3. To reduce **transportation** costs, consider driving to your destination, using campus vans or buses. To get the best group rates on airlines, reserve as early as possible and schedule the trip to avoid holiday pricing. Consider working directly with airlines to secure the best fare. We’ve had the greatest luck with AirTran and JetBlue.

4. Contact **local experts** to assist with programming. Rangers at national and state parks, graduate students at local colleges, and staff from historical societies and other cultural groups are usually enthusiastic about giving talks and/or tours. Be sure to ask for educational and group discounts everywhere you go. Talk with other educational groups that have

taken similar trips, to learn about the best opportunities.

5. **Restaurants** are expensive, so integrate food shopping and preparation into the course expectations. Use food warehouses, and plan your menu carefully, keeping student dietary restrictions in mind. We budget \$10 per diem but rarely spend that much. Our dinners are almost entirely vegetarian, including pasta, soup, cheese burritos, and more pasta. Lunches are always peanut butter and jelly on bagels, and breakfasts include instant oatmeal, bagels, and muffins. We keep jars of pretzels and breakfast bars for snacks and stop for fresh fruit at local farmers’ markets.

6. Ask students to supply their own **camping supplies**, and encourage borrowing rather than purchasing. Build up a college supply of tents, sleeping bags, and other equipment.

7. **Offer in-kind exchange for services.** Contact academic institutions near your destination to see if they are interested in exchanging accommodations, transportation, or programming. We are pursuing funding to develop and manage a network for small colleges that want to collaborate on educational trips.

8. **Strategize** about long-term funding for travel courses. Work with your development and grants offices to identify potential donors and foundations. At Stonehill, the cost of the trip is built into a student’s term bill and financial aid is available to help cover the added costs associated with these courses. Contact us for copies of the documents and procedures that we have developed that keep the travel courses affordable for most students.

Through careful planning and implementation, we believe this type of experiential learning can become part of the education of nearly every student at our (or your) college. Step outside of your routine and imagine what type of travel experience will extend and expand your students’ learning. 🍀

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## Discussions with Structure

Students find discussions disillusioning just about as often as faculty do. In the analysis referenced below, students objected when a few fellow classmates dominated the discussion; when the discussion wandered off topic, making it difficult to ascertain main points; and when students participated just for the sake of participating.

Problems such as these can be prevented or significantly reduced when discussions are structured—at least that was one of the conclusions reached in the study being highlighted here. A set of guidelines used in this analysis offers a concrete way to provide structure.

**Use a modular approach to topical coverage to force integration of topical ideas and concepts.** The point here is simply that discussions should have designated themes or topics. The focus should be more specific than the generic “Let’s talk about the readings” or “It’s time to discuss the material presented in class yesterday.”

**Develop a very limited set of discussion questions that do not have “known answers.”** Three or four questions (possibly distributed prior to the discussion or introduced at its beginning) can do much to focus and direct a discussion. If the questions are regularly returned to throughout the discussion, they effectively keep the discussion from drifting too far off topic.

**Allow sufficient time for discussion to develop.** This is an inherent advantage of online discussion. Students have time to review, think about, and prepare contributions. No face-to-face discussion can allow that much time, but in-class discussions can be slowed down. Students can be challenged to think about what others have said. They can be asked to summarize or indicate where they think the discussion is leading.

**Set student expectations for instructor guidance and feedback.** “It is essential that students take the lead role in the evolution of a discussion; the instructor must limit his or her involvement in the discussion to a role as facilitator and provocateur and should do so only after other students decline the opportunity.” (p. 124)

**Establish a reward system that encourages interaction and peer critique.** Students are motivated to participate if contributions to a discussion “count.” Instructors need to devise manageable grading systems and ones that make quality stipulations.

**Provide additional participation incentive through assessment.** In this case, the instructor followed in-class discussion exercises with a take-home essay exam that used themes and “lessons” from the discussion. Knowing that they will be using discussion content in an exam provides a powerful incentive for students to

get involved in the exchange of ideas.

This analysis also includes a helpful comparison and contrast of online and face-to-face discussions. The author concludes, “The choice between online and face-to-face discussion exercises rests more on the instructor’s goals with regards to communication skills and rapport in the learning community.” (p. 128) Online exchanges do a better job of developing critical thinking skills. They teach students how to make and support points in writing. For the instructor, the permanence of the record expedites the grading process. Rather than trying to keep track of who said what and at the same time facilitate the discussion, an instructor can review the record and more thoughtfully assess individual contributions. But in-class discussions are better at building instructor-student rapport, and they develop essential oral communication skills such as being able to “think on one’s feet.” No doubt in most professional contexts, students will be having discussions in both kinds of formats.

### Reference

Sautter, P. (2007). Designing discussion activities to achieve desired learning outcomes: Choices using mode of delivery and structure. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 29 (2), 122–131. ♥

### DISCUSSIONS FROM PAGE 1

teachers begin them with a clear idea of what they hope to accomplish. Is the purpose of this discussion to clarify understanding? Is it to pose problems addressed by principles presented previously? Is it to encourage students to think critically about views expressed in the reading? Is it to expose and explore a range of different viewpoints? Discussions are also made productive when teachers keep them on track. Contributions can sidetrack discussions, sometimes to the benefit of the discussion, but then those discussions need to be

brought back to the main topic under consideration. And discussions are made productive when they are interesting and informed exchanges. In the beginning, in the interest of creating a climate for exchange, students may be allowed to say what they think, but generally across discussions, unsupported views and poorly informed opinions should be constructively challenged.

“It can be a messy and frustrating business, this class discussion. . . . It is so much easier to tell students what you know and think, to retreat to the more controlled world of the lecture. Keep it always in

mind that discussion can do more to stimulate students’ minds and interests than any other form of teaching we know, and that under the surface much more learning is taking place than we may think.” (p. 63)

### Reference

Laing, D. “Nurturing Discussion in the Classroom.” In Smith, K., (ed) *Teaching, Learning, Assessing: A Guide for Effective Teaching at College and University*. Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 2007. [ordering information by emailing: [info@mosaic-press.com](mailto:info@mosaic-press.com)] ♥

## Hard Courses and Student Ratings: The Facts

Regrettably, some myths about student ratings persist. One of the most erroneous claims is that if you teach a “hard” course, one where the content challenges students and the workload is heavy, students will rate that course lower. The assumption is that students “like” and therefore rate higher courses that are easy and do not challenge them.

This belief is not supported by research on the topic. The article below contains references to five such studies, all of which found no statistically significant correlations between course difficulty and student ratings.

This new study replicates these findings yet again; only, in this case, the researcher looked specifically at engineering courses (they have a reputation for being especially difficult). The data were collected at two very different types of institutions, from many different types of engineering courses, and then those engineering courses were compared with courses and instructors in math, science, and humanities. Student rat-

ings of workload and overall instructor performance were not correlated at either institution (Spearman’s  $\rho = 0.068$ ). Of this finding, the researcher writes, “The results of the present study indicate that for the real-world purpose of attempting to determine reasons for poor evaluations or to focus efforts to improve evaluations, student perceptions of higher course workloads are not simply associated with poorer student evaluations of instructor performance.” (p. 75)

So, the way to win at the ratings game is not by teaching a Mickey Mouse course. Instead, this study found (as has been documented by much other research as well) strong correlations (0.7 to 0.899) between course ratings and certain other course and instructor characteristics. Evaluation items “dealing with general areas of organization and preparation, teacher/student interactions, and teaching methods that help students stay attentive and learning were easily and strongly associated with the overall instructor performance item, across differ-

ent populations of engineering students from different campus cultures and across different disciplines within a given campus culture.” (p. 75) Focusing efforts to improve in these areas are much more likely to result in better ratings and, even more important, in more effective learning experiences for students.

As this article notes, student evaluation of teaching effectiveness may well be the most thoroughly studied of all forms of personnel evaluation. We have such good empirical evidence on so many aspects of the practice. But the information about and use of ratings continues to languish far behind what we should know and be doing.

### Reference

Dee, K. C. (2007, January). Student perceptions of high course workloads are not associated with poor student evaluations of instructor performance. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 69–78. ♥

## The Teacher Midwife

The midwife is still my favorite metaphor for teaching. I’ve written about it before in the newsletter—lots of years ago now—but it continues to influence the way I think about teaching. I don’t think there’s a metaphor that more aptly captures the complexity, power, and richness of the dynamic relationship between teachers, students, and learning. The metaphor is not original with me, and although I have read some quibbles in the literature as to who first proposed it, I first encountered it in a 1986 *Harvard*

*Educational Review* essay by William Ayer. Here’s some of my current thinking about how the midwife mirrors all that a good teacher should be.

The teacher midwife is there at the birth of learning. She has attended many other births, been with many other students as they have gone through the arduous process of learning. It is a joyful, exciting event, but not without pain—sometimes the pain is long and intense, causing the learner to despair and lose hope. But the midwife understands. She knows that

sometimes progress is slow. She also knows how much more pain lies ahead and what the learner might try to ease the discomfort and expedite the process. The midwife offers encouragement; her presence is reassuring.

Although most births are similar, no two are identical, in the same way that student learning follows patterns but is always unique. Sometimes problems arise. The midwife knows what to do. She is

PAGE 6 ♥

### Tell Us Your Story

Did the tragic events at Virginia Tech prompt any changes at your campus? Do you have new crisis management procedures, or have you implemented any other new policies? If so, we’d like to know. We will share the stories of three campuses in an online seminar titled “One Year After Virginia Tech” that will be offered at no cost in mid-April. Share your story by writing to [editor@magnapubs.com](mailto:editor@magnapubs.com)

## Student Attention Spans

Have you heard that advice about chunking content in 10- to 15-minute blocks because that's about as long as students can attend to material in class? It's a widely touted statistic and given the behaviors indicative of inattentiveness observed in class, most faculty haven't questioned it. But Karen Wilson and James H. Korn did. They got to wondering how researchers made that determination. "What was the dependent measure, and how did researchers measure attention during a lecture without influencing the lecture itself as well as students' attention?" (p. 85)

They began by tracking down the sources, starting with some well-known books that include this attention span statistic. What they found was quite surprising: "It turns out that the research concerned attention only indirectly or not at all and that several frequently cited sources were not empirical studies, but secondary sources or personal observations." (p. 87)

For example, some of the research cited as documenting the statistic looked at

how many notes students took throughout a lecture—assuming that fewer notes meant lower levels of attentiveness. But the most recent study in this group found that although the amount of notes did decline across the period, student retention of the material did not.

A number of authors report on the decline in attention based on observation—in some cases, their own, and in others, that of independent judges. In the best of these studies, observers noted a low level of attentiveness at the beginning of the lecture and again sometime between 10 and 18 minutes into the lecture. However, this study suffers from several significant methodological flaws.

Finally, some researchers looked at retention of the material, assuming that if retention is low, students are not paying attention. This research does document that students do not retain a lot of lecture material, between 40 percent and 46 percent in one study. They were tested on content recall immediately after listening to and taking notes on a lecture. But, surprisingly, retention of content was pretty

much stable across lecture periods of different lengths.

None of this says that students listen well in class. For most of us, that would be a hard sell. But it does challenge a widely touted statistic. Wilson and Korn don't believe that their inquiry excuses faculty from developing ways to keep students attentive and focused on course content. They also believe that individual differences are relevant when considering how well students are listening. And they think that what students have in their notes is more important than how many of them they are taking.

### Reference

Wilson, K. and Korn, J. H. (2007). Attention during lectures: Beyond ten minutes. *Teaching of Psychology*, 34 (2), 85–89. ♥

### THE TEACHING MIDWIFE

FROM PAGE 5

prepared, not with a script, but with knowledge, a wealth of previous experience, and resources she can summon. It is when problems emerge that the midwife's presence is most needed and appreciated.

The birthing event joins midwife and mother in a shared quest. Midwives are not the ones giving birth any more than teachers are there to do the learning for a student. What the student is struggling to learn the teacher already knows. But midwives still struggle. They strive to figure out the best way to help, support, guide, and encourage the mother. Birth and learning require both teacher and mother to expend effort. They work together, but they tackle the problem in different ways.

When the understanding does finally

arrive, credit for having given birth goes to the learner. Just like the midwife's, the teacher's job now is to share the joy and wonder. I once heard a midwife say, "I've lost track how many births I've attended, but I know that when it's over and the babe is there in the mother's arms, my heart still leaps for joy." How like teachers who savor those moments when understanding settles over a student—it is as if the light of a new day has dawned. ♥

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