Tips for Leading Class Discussion (Ryan Wepler)

1. **Ask follow-up questions** – In order to ensure that students engage fully with both the material and one another, you will want to push them to expand upon or clarify their answers. The difficulty of your follow-up questions will vary with each student, as you don’t want to frighten timid students away from participating. Good follow up questions will usually do one (or more) of the following:
   a. Challenge a student to elaborate on his or her answer
   b. Ask a student to relate a comment back to previous ideas in the discussion
   c. Ask a student to respond to a potential counterargument
   d. Request a clarification for a vague or unclear idea

2. **Make the conversation flow through you** – Making yourself the center of discussion will allow you to clarify students’ answers and summarize the progress of ideas (often by writing them on the board). It also keeps the conversation flowing smoothly and gives students a sense of what to expect in each discussion.

3. **Try to get everyone to participate** – Though the burden to participate is ultimately on the students (they are, after all, adults), you should do your best to welcome everyone into the class discussion. Often just letting students hear their own voices in class will give them the confidence to participate. Tips for getting timid students involved include:
   a. Asking easier questions to shy students
   b. Asking non-talkers to read passages to the class
   c. Making the least participatory student report the results of group work back to the class

4. **Ask focused questions** – Though it may summarize most clearly what you want to cover, a broad question like “How does Shakespeare construct the nature of suffering in King Lear?” is unlikely to produce a productive response (if it produces any response at all). A more productive way to approach this topic is with a series of focused questions about specific moments, lines, or scenes in the play.

5. **Move on when student interest wanes or a topic becomes exhausted** – Though it can be difficult to cut students off, nothing is more boring for students than watching a few students continue to debate an issue that they feel has already been resolved. Use your position as the discussion leader to introduce the next topic. Occasionally, you will have to cut off a productive discussion simply because of time constraints.

6. **Do not ignore doubtful or incorrect answers** – While we may feel like we are putting students on the spot when we correct their wrong answers, it is important to make sure both the student and the class understand that the answer is incorrect or, at least, doubtful. Gentle ways of correcting wrong answers include asking the student to respond to an objection or to ask the class how they would respond to that student’s answer.

7. **Display enthusiasm and interest in the material** – Enthusiasm moves easily from one person to another. If you do not seem interested in the material, students will wonder why they should be. Occasionally, students will even criticize the usefulness of a course
text in class discussion. It is important that you not agree with the student and that you clearly articulate the usefulness of the text.

8. When no one is participating – Students fail to participate for a variety of reasons: fatigue, befuddlement, lack of interest, &c. Here are some tips for days when students don’t seem to want to participate:
   a. Wait it out. Students will often produce answers if given time.
   b. Give your initial question a more specific focus
   c. Shift to an in class writing assignment. Once students have written their ideas down, they will have more to say when the discussion reconvenes.