

Circular questioning

In response to questions from students, instead of answering yourself, try sending the question back with: 'If you were to ask..... for a response to that question, what do you think it would be?' Fill in the gap with the name of a person in the group, a fellow teacher - or better still - a public figure or key theorist in the subject area.

Final years

Have more advanced and experienced students - perhaps those in their final year – collaborate to teach students in earlier years. Train and support them to do this.

Notes

As one student to take notes for the whole group: summarising the main points discussed. Duplicate these notes and pass them round at the next session. This improves students' record of discussions and leaves most free to listen and join in.

Court of enquiry

Set debates up as formal courts of enquiry. Use formal procedures such as having opposing sides, calling witnesses, cross-examining witnesses, making a final ruling, etc.

Energise

When the discussion gets slow, set a brief task or question for pairs to work on before moving on: e.g. 'What do you want to discuss next?', 'What conclusions have you drawn so far?', 'What questions do you still have?'. It is almost impossible for students to stay quiet and it almost always generates new content and energy.

Offerings

At the start of a session, check out what students have brought with them. What have they read? What questions do they have? What would they like to tell others?

Selective reading

Try setting a very small piece of selected reading which is a minimum for students to participate in a follow-up discussion activity. This could occur during, or before the session. This works well because you have a reassurance that all students have engaged in key reading.

Setting

Hold the session somewhere with an atmosphere different to a classroom and more conducive to free social interaction. E.g. outdoors, café.

Problems

Give problems/scenarios to groups who then solve them and explain their solution to other groups who have had sight of the problem/scenario but have not seriously tackled it.

Rounds

A round simply involves everyone in the group sitting in a circle, in turn going round, saying something on a particular theme. It might be, 'Questions I would like to have answered', 'Things I find difficult', 'Something I will take away with me from this discussion', 'What I now want to go and work on', etc.

Agenda

Clarify the agenda for the session at the start. Display the agenda on the board, refer to it, and use it to move onto new topics. Change it as the session progresses. You might also ask students to develop the agenda with you.

Teachers' role play

Two or more teachers discuss a famous debate or controversy in the subject, taking the roles and arguments of the key protagonists. Allow students to ask questions, like a TV studio debate with an audience.

Circular interviewing

The group sits in a circle and each student in turn interviews the person sitting opposite them (either about the topic in general, or about work specially prepared by the student e.g. some reading). The interviewing rotates so that both interviewer and interviewee roles move one place to the left until everyone has both interviewed and been interviewed.

Furniture

Rearrange the furniture: try a circle or a horseshoe shape, clusters for small groups, circles or a fishbowl (concentric circles). Suggest students rearrange the furniture as they like it, including where you sit and what you sit on. Change the layout half way through the class and see if it makes a difference.

Role play discussions

Ask students to take the role of different people such as politicians, public figures or theorists, in a case study or debate. They prepare both content and personal style. Have opposing characters in the role play.

Case study

Get groups to devise case studies for other groups to work on. Discuss solutions in the whole class after groups have worked on each other's case studies. In longer sessions there may be time for students to devise the case studies in the session.

Poster tours

It helps groups working together on a task to use a board or paper to record their ideas. Having to produce a poster of the outcomes of the discussion also focuses attention on a clear goal. Posters could include a design or proposal, a list of pros and cons, or the main features of a discussion. Groups can then display and explain their posters to other groups in the plenary. Poster can be specially quick and effective means of sharing experimental and laboratory work where different groups have been undertaking different experiments. Once the posters are displayed, students simply tour them.

Audience assessment

After a session: Assess participants' contributions to a session, as well as your own contributions. Did student prepare well? Did they join in constructively? Did they even turn up? You could ask students to answer these questions anonymously about others in their group. They can be very tough on their peers who do not work hard or are obstructive.

Line up

Establish a continuum of beliefs or attitudes.

e.g. 'Intelligence is determined by:

<- Natural ability ----- Environment ->'

Ask students to line up across the room according to where on the continuum they think they stand. Get them to negotiate with those either side of them to make sure they are in the right place on the continuum in relation to those around them. This guarantees personal involvement.

Buzz groups

Buzz groups are small groups of two or three students formed quickly to discuss a topic for a short period. In a pair it is almost impossible for a student to stay silent and once students have spoken 'in private' they are much more likely to speak afterwards 'in public' to the whole group. Buzz groups are very useful to get things going. The sound of ten pairs buzzing is very energising compared with one person speaking in a group of 20. Threes are likely to keep on task for longer without being distracted.

Syndicates

In larger groups, set up groups of 4-6 students to work in parallel on the same problem, task or question. Circulate round the groups. Then convene a whole group plenary to which the syndicate groups report. This method can be useful for coping with larger groups.

Brainstorms

Brainstorming is a technique for creative problem-solving. It involves a manageable sized group of up to 12 students rapidly sharing and recording a list of ideas without stopping to discuss, elaborate or criticise them. Once the list has been generated, the group then go back through them to see if there are any ideas worth pursuing. Brainstorming is most effective when the creative thinking and analysis stages are clearly separate.

Pyramids

Pyramid groups, also known as snowball groups, involve student working alone, then in pairs, then in groups of four or six, and finally as a whole group in a plenary. Pyramids are very effective at generating discussion and involving everyone in the process, even in a larger class.

Working alone may first involve a short reading or thinking about a question. In pairs student may then share and compare thoughts. In fours they then agree a series of points from their shared discussions. Finally, they present one or two top points to the whole group.

Think – Pair – Share

Working alone first, students may do a short reading or think about a question and jot down some notes.

In pairs student may then share and compare thoughts/notes.

They can then be asked to share their ideas with the rest of the group.

