

Discussion Sections: Techniques for Responding

There are many good ways to respond to students' remarks; no one should be used exclusively. The objective of this quick-sheet is to help teachers expand their responsive repertoire.

At the heart of responding strategies is this: all students want to know that they have been heard. You don't have to agree always with what a student has said, but it's a good idea to acknowledge in some way that you have heard and understood them.

The three building blocks of good discussion are: *questioning, listening, and responding*. The key to good responses is *LISTENING* well. If you can actually hear (i.e., grasp the underlying meaning of) what the student has said, and even think about why he/she might be saying it, you are likely to be able to respond well.

Given this, here are some strategies you may wish to employ:

CONFIRM/ENCOURAGE

- Compliment the student: "Nice thought." "Good comment." "Right on the mark!" or simply, "Yes!" Alternatively, simply nod and say "mmm-hmmmm."
- Restate what the student has said, either in the language the student has used, or in the language of the course or field of study. If your objective over the course of the semester is help students to acquire a new vocabulary or new concepts, restating in the language of the course or field will help them to translate their own language into this new language.
- Write the students' ideas on the board. (Some teachers organize the board by putting student ideas next to agenda items.) If you do this, be certain that you are able to capture the idea quickly in a word or two. Don't write down every word, or you will soon run out of room and will slow the discussion down to a crawl. Students might want to take a picture of the board before you erase it to move on or end the session. You can always preempt this by taking a photo for them and e-mailing it to the entire group after class.

PROVIDE FEEDBACK

- Say what you are thinking. If you think that a student made a wonderful comment, say so. If you are thinking that this is one in a series of comments about a particular topic, say so, in order that students will see where the conversation is going. If you think the comment is off-topic, ask the student how it ties in with what has been said previously. (Be careful not to be sarcastic here; this is a real question and there may be an interesting link you haven't foreseen.)
- Emphasize for students any comments that they should notice. For example, say, "That's a good point," or "John's idea is central to an understanding of the subject," or "Yes, that really helps us tie together parts A and B."
- Correct an incorrect statement – kindly and matter-of-factly. Don't let important misinformation go by: other students may not know that it's incorrect and the whole classroom could walk out with the wrong idea.
- If you don't understand what a student has said, ask for clarification! If, after the second time through it, you still don't understand, ask other students to help you.
- Link comments, noting carefully how what student X has said reflects student Y's earlier comments.
- Comment on the student's comment, extending your own information or understanding of the issues at hand.

CHALLENGE/ENGAGE

- Ask the student a follow-up question or series of questions, asking them to further refine their thinking. "What do you mean when you say...?" "Could you take that a step further?" "How would you define that term?" "Is this linked to what Jennie said earlier?" "How does what you just said connect with what we have been talking about?"
- Engage in a dialogue with that student for a few minutes. Agree, disagree, ask further questions, comment, explore with him or her. This works well if what you are talking about is important for everyone to hear, and if you are teaching students how to think in this subject area.

INVOLVE OTHER STUDENTS

- Say nothing! Look around the room for further comments. (Do this after having shown your interest while the student was speaking by eye contact with the student and body language showing attention, e.g., by leaning forward, smiling, frowning, looking quizzical.) Your silence will enable others to comment or engage with the ideas. Silence can last comfortably for much longer than most people think, and it usually results in some very interesting thoughts. This is a good way to get students to talk with other students.
- Ask other students what they think about what has been said, or ask if they have anything to add to what has been said. Don't assume that the first answer is sufficient, nor that the fastest answer is the best answer.

Adapted from materials provided by Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning (bokcenter.harvard.edu)