

The Art of Discussing Well – Some Tips

By Professor Laurie M. Wood | January 2015

Discussion, whether in a lecture or seminar format, enhances the learning experience of all participants by enabling each person to articulate concepts (demonstrating and reinforcing content mastery) and clarify difficult material by asking questions. For some of us, however, it's not always clear what's expected in a discussion. Here are some pointers for how to participate:

1. **THINK** of questions **as you read** for class and write them down so that you can ask them at the beginning of class: What's the most confusing theme? What is the most important idea? Is there something that you didn't catch during lecture, discussion? You can jump in when I say, "are there any questions about the reading or lecture this week?"
2. **LISTEN**: I usually ask 2 kinds of questions: **factual** ones that you can probably answer from the reading (e.g. Where did slavery occur in the Atlantic world?) and **thematic** questions that are a little tougher but have more answers and leeway (e.g. Why would some colonists support independence from Britain while others opposed it?). Listen for each kind of question and be ready to answer them. You can almost always answer **factual** questions directly from the reading: use them to demonstrate your preparedness for class! **Thematic** questions are open-ended and rarely have one right answer: use them to think creatively out loud!
3. **STOP** me or another discussant if we go too fast. Say, "can you explain this more?" Or, "I hear you saying X. Is that correct?" Or, "we've been using the term Y a lot. What do we mean by Y?" You don't have to say whether you're confused: just stop and ask for clarification.
4. **RESPOND** to what other people say by **commenting** or **adding** another question. You'll often start by saying "yes, but..." For example, if we were talking about republicanism vs. democracy, you could say said, "**Yes**, I see that there's a difference, **but** don't they both have citizens who vote?" You can also respond by saying, "**Yes**, I think they're similar, **but** how does federalism fit with these two ideas?" You might also say, "I also wondered about X...how does that change our perspective?" This strategy is useful because it helps raise new and important issues that may not have come up yet.