Discussion Protocols

Purpose: Discussion protocols are structured frameworks for facilitating conversations that give all students the opportunity to participate, reflect, and engage thoughtfully. This resource equips instructors with tools to promote active participation, focused listening, and critical thinking through guided dialogue.

Strategies and Steps for Implementation

1. **Small Group Breakout Room Discussion**

   a. Share discussion prompts and instructions on a slide and in the Zoom chat.

   b. Use a shared platform for students to document learning (i.e. Zoom Whiteboard, Padlet, Google Docs and Slides, Canvas discussion boards).

   c. **Have Students Choose Their Role in the Group**

      i. **Facilitator:** Asks the group the essential question and ensures that each member has an opportunity to speak.

      ii. **Recorder:** Takes notes on key takeaways and helps manage time by signaling the group about how much time is left.

      iii. **Reporter:** Shares key takeaways during the whole class discussion.

2. **Circle of Voices Discussion Protocol** (from Brookfield and Preskill's Book, [Discussion as a Way of Teaching](#))

   a. Start with 1 minute of silent reflection about the question.

   b. Each person gives a 1 sentence response with no interruptions allowed (for this exercise we will ask notetakers/reporters 1-2 sentence responses).

   c. Move into open conversation, but only talk about what somebody else said.

3. **Setting Expectations through Community Agreements**

   a. We will collectively source community agreement in addition to the **Four Agreements** from Glenn Singleton's [Courageous Conversations](#):

1. Stay engaged
2. Speak your truth
3. Accept and expect discomfort
4. Accept and expect a lack of closure

4. **As Your Facilitator:**

   a. I will step in if the agreements are not upheld.

   b. I will support further questioning if needed.

   c. I will take notes to document and support next steps.

   d. I will seek to foster a space for repair and growth.

   e. I will serve as a thoughtful facilitator and partner.

5. **Circular Response Discussion Protocol** (from Brookfield's Resource Packet, [Discussion as a Way of Teaching](#))

   a. One person starts and the following person responds to them (can build upon, agree or disagree, and clarify).

   b. After everyone has spoken, move into an open conversation.

6. **Prompts for Learner-Centered Instruction**

   a. **Prior Knowledge:** Have you experienced this before?

   b. **Appreciative Inquiry:** What is a time when you felt appreciated?

   c. **Self-Reflection:** What would you do in this situation?

Instructor Planning Guide

1. **Before Class**

   a. Select 1–2 discussion protocols that match your learning goals.

    b. Create clear prompts and post them in advance (Canvas, slides, or chat).

    c. Assign or allow students to choose breakout roles (Facilitator, Recorder, and Reporter).

    d. Set up collaborative tools (Padlet, Google Docs and Slides, Zoom Whiteboard, and Canvas discussion boards).

    e. Communicate expectations and agreements during the first session.

2. **During Class**

    a. Review discussion purpose and protocol instructions.

    b. Place students in breakout groups (3–4 is ideal).

    c. Monitor timing and group progress.

    d. Provide support to groups as needed and clarify expectations.

    e. Use prompts to guide debriefs and whole class reflections.

3. **End of Class**

    a. Review notes from shared documents.

    b. Summarize and share key takeaways with students.

    c. Reflect on what worked and adjust protocols as needed.

Instructor Checklist

☐ Choose protocols aligned with course goals

☐ Prepare discussion prompts in advance

☐ Set up shared platforms for documentation

☐ Assign or clarify group roles and establish or revisit community agreements

☐ Monitor time and provide group support

☐ Debrief with a whole-class share back

☐ Reflect on student input and adjust future sessions

Resource [Looking at Student Thinking Protocol](#) (Harvard Project Zero)