

Discussion Activities & Tips

With small changes to your teaching, you can take advantage of the benefits that multilingual students bring to your class. Nearly half of Mason students are multilingual, and they have different levels of fluency. However, the strategies below are designed to help you support both multilingual and other students.

FAQ: How can I encourage ML/Int'l students to participate more during class?¹

"Students who come from primarily lecture-based classroom cultures may not immediately understand the value of participating in class discussions, so it can be helpful to explain why you think discussions are important and what you expect students to gain from the experience. Even when international students are eager to participate, they often express frustration that conversations move too quickly or the language is too informal for them to understand and contribute in a meaningful way. Here are some activities and tips to address participation and discussion." (Skipper).

- **Make a list of expectations WITH your students**
Ask students to write two or three specific things they expect themselves and their peers to do in order to create an engaging discussion. Let them share their thoughts with one or two peers before choosing one to share with the whole class. Find a way to save the thoughts shared in the large group and use them as the class' expectations on discussion and participation.
- **Provide questions ahead of class if possible**
With more time to think about the class content using questions, students can better prepare their comments and feel more confident to participate in class discussions. Use the questions as jumping-off points for the class discussion.
- **Think-Pair-Share**
Give students a few minutes to consider a thought or question. Put them in pairs or small groups to discuss their thought or question. This set-up is typically less intimidating for the students to speak up and share their thoughts, so require that each student speaks (or allows time for their peer to speak).
- **Encourage different ways for students to contribute to the class discussion beyond speaking**
Students can bring relevant questions, artifacts etc related to the class' content and share those with the whole class in-person or via an online platform. This allows them to contribute even though they may not speak as much during large-group discussions.
- **Use a gallery-wall or writing activity to provide alternative ways to participate**
Display different passages or questions from the class text around the classroom. Students then move around the room reading the passage/question and write a brief comment about it in their notebooks. If you would like to see their notes, provide post-it notes for students to write on and stick next to the passage or question.
- **Reflect on the role culture and personality play in participation and discussion**
Through a write-up or think-pair-share, ask students to talk about how participation and discussion looked like in classes at their previous schools. How were they expected to contribute to the class? Could they ask questions during class time, or were they expected to ask them in a different venue? How do they personally prefer to participate in the class: lecture, small-group discussions, writing? This [presentation](#) offers some information to discuss.
- **Paraphrase what you understand**
As you listen to students' ideas during class, paraphrase what you understand and let them clarify as needed. This encourages more back-and-forth exchanges while allowing you to model how to clarify meaning during a conversation.
- **Avoid using too many colloquial or informal expressions²**

¹ Skipper, K. *Helping Multilingual/International (ML/Int'l) Students Succeed: Frequently Asked Questions*.

² Skipper. *Helping Multilingual/International (ML/Int'l) Students Succeed*.

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Informal or colloquial expressions can confuse multilingual students resulting in less participation.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

COLLECTIVELY SETTING DISCUSSION NORMS (~20 MIN)

1. Ask the students to think about the last time they had a discussion that went well. Ask them to explain some things that made this discussion productive for them. Make a list of their responses on the board. (5-7min)
2. Ask the students to think about what they expect people to do in a discussion. What behaviors do they expect others to do when discussing? Add their responses to the list. (5-7min)
3. Ask each student to look at the list on the board and choose three to four things they would like to INDIVIDUALLY do during the next discussion. Ask them to write down those four things. They will keep the list during the discussion (3 min).
 - a. Follow-up: After the discussion, ask the students to reflect on and grade how they did in applying their list in the discussion. Collect their lists after they have reflected and self-graded.
4. (In place of 3): Ask the students to work as a class and decide four things from the discussion list that they are all going to do during discussion. Circle those four things. (3 min)
 - a. Follow-up: After the discussion, ask each student to get a piece of paper and write down two grades: one for themselves (Individual Grade) and one for the class (Class Grade). The grades show how well the students think they did in doing the four things in their discussion norms list.
 - b. If you are grading discussion, you can aggregate the class grades, then use the average class grade and aggregate that with each student's individual grade.

“Both domestic and international students with higher rates of intercultural collaboration show higher abilities in critical thinking, leadership, empathy, and a host of other skills. Of course, these benefits don’t come about automatically—group work [and discussion] should be strategically structured. It is important to create a classroom environment where students feel safe to express their opinions and make mistakes...In some cultures, students are expected to keep quiet in class; asking questions might be seen as disrespectful or embarrassing to the professor.” - Skipper Helping Multilingual/International Students Succeed: Frequently Asked Questions

ACKNOWLEDGING CULTURE & PERSONALITY IN DISCUSSION (~50 MIN)

1. Ask the students to choose two of the questions below and write a response. (5-7 min)

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- a. Think about the last time you had a terrible discussion. What happened to make this discussion unhelpful/stressful for you? What could have made this discussion more comfortable for you?

“We can say the classes [in Thailand] are teacher-centered because when we walk into the classroom, we expect that today the teacher will tell us. We just listen, just like the lecture, to the teacher, to what they want to tell. It’s like that. But it doesn’t mean it’s like that all the time because sometimes the teacher does ask the question but it’s like we were trained not to be active in the classroom, so not much discussion.” – student (Zawacki et al, 2007)

- b. During class discussions, what are some things you prefer NOT to do? Can you explain why you prefer NOT to do those things?

- c. During class discussions, what are some things you prefer to do? Can you explain why you prefer to do those things?

2. Ask students to sit in pairs and share their responses. Remind them that they can share as much or as little as they want. (5-7 min)

3. Ask each pair to join with another pair and discuss the following question: How do our personalities and cultural background influence how

we participate in discussions and how we view discussions? (7-10 min)

4. Ask each group of four to join another group of four and summarize what they discussed in their groups about personality and culture. Then, ask the students to discuss this question: If personality and culture influence how we participate and view discussion, what can we do individually and as a group to help each other discuss? Write at least 10 specific actions. (10-15min)
5. Get back in large group format and ask the students to share their top 3 actions from the group list they created. Write their actions on the board and inform them that these actions will become the class discussion norms. You can also allow them to modify the actions before they are officially accepted as the class norms. (7-10 min)
 - a. Follow-up: display the list of norms at the beginning of each discussion to remind the students about the expected behavior. Give them 1 minute to review the norms and even decide which ones they will intentionally practice in the discussion.
 - b. At the end of each discussion, give the students 1 minute to review how they followed the norms individually and as a class. Let them write down one norm they would like to improve in the next round of discussions.
6. (In place of 5): Collect the lists from step 4 above and inform the students that you will review this list and post the most common actions. These actions will become the class discussion norms.

CREATING & DISCUSSING QUESTIONS ABOUT TEXTS (~60 min)

1. Ask students to look at the text they read and find one place in the text that stood out to them. Explain to them that they need to choose a place in the text that was interesting, surprising, and/or challenging to them perhaps because they disagree with or want to expand on the information in that text. (5 min)
2. Ask students to get into pairs and share their place in the text. They need to explain why this place was interesting, surprising, and/or challenging to them. (5-7 min)

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3. Ask students to come up with two discussion questions they would like to ask the class about the text and bring those questions back to the class large group.
 - a. Expanded: If your students are still learning how to ask open-ended questions, you can address this here. Give them time to create their questions, then have a large group conversation or presentation on open vs closed questions. Keep the conversation/presentation brief focusing on helping students understand how to turn their questions into open-ended ones. Then ask your students to review and revise their questions.
4. Collect the questions by writing them on the board, having the students post them on your class web-page, or some other preferred method. (7-10min)
5. Allow for a discussion to proceed (40min). In the large group, students can choose one question and ask the pair that brought it forward to explain why they asked it. What in the text prompted them to ask the question? (Discussion can also happen in smaller groups after the pair has explained the question).
 - a. Follow-up: You might be unable to discuss all the questions in-person. Consider saving one or two of them for online discussions after the class discussion. Quieter students and those who did not get to share their points could use this avenue to contribute their thoughts.

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Other Recommendations and Teaching Resources

 <p>Apply Today</p>	<p>Nelson, J. (2017). "1st 5 minutes of class: Getting students engaged." <i>Innovation of Teaching and Learning</i>, (9). Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.13021/G8itlcp.9.2017.1871</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "3 Ways to Make an Active Learner out of a Passive Observer." Retrieved from https://journals.gmu.edu/index.php/ITLCP/article/view/1871/1289 • "Four Reasons to Start Class with a Question." Retrieved from https://journals.gmu.edu/index.php/ITLCP/article/view/1871/1290 <p>Reid, S. E. "Engaging students in discussion". Retrieved from https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/knowledge-center/student-engagement-classroom-managment/engaging-students-in-discussion/</p> <p>Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning, GMU (n.d). "Reframing students' roles in collaborative learning" Retrieved from https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/knowledge-center/student-engagement-classroom-managment/collaborative-learning/</p> <p>Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning, GMU (n.d). "Tips for facilitating learning in student groups". Retrieved from https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/knowledge-center/student-engagement-classroom-managment/collaborative-learning/</p> <p>Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning, GMU (n.d). "Classroom assessment techniques" Retrieved from https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/knowledge-center/student-engagement-classroom-managment/classroom-assessment-techniques-cats/</p> <p>Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning, GMU. "Online discussions" Retrieved from https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/knowledge-center/online-teaching/digital-teaching-tips/online-discussions/</p>
 <p>Listen Today</p>	<p>Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning, GMU (n.d). "Collaborative Learning" [Video] Retrieved on Aug. 7th 2019 from https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/knowledge-center/student-engagement-classroom-managment/collaborative-learning/</p> <p>Perez, A. & Stachowiak, B. (2016, September 22). "Bridging the culture gap." <i>Teacing in Higher Ed Podcast</i>. Retrieved from https://teachinginhighered.com/podcast/bridging-culture-gap/</p> <p>Haras, C. & Stachowiak, B. (2018, June 28). "Reflecting on our teaching." <i>Teaching in Higher Ed Podcast</i>. Podcast retrieved from https://teachinginhighered.com/podcast/reflecting-on-our-teaching/</p>

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	Teaching in higher ed. (n.d). Cultural competence. Retrieved from https://teachinginhighered.com/podcast-category/cultural-competence/
 <p>Read Today</p>	<p>Eby, K., Jaconbsen, S.K, Lukes, L., Zhang, Z., Reid, E.S. & Jensen, A. (2017). "Students' Experiences in Mason's Active Learning Classrooms." <i>Innovation in Teaching and Learning</i>. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.13021/G8itlcp.9.2017.1915</p> <p>Ericson, R. (2018). "Adapting Active Learning Techniques for Traditional Classroom Settings." <i>Innovation in Teaching and Learning</i>. Retrieved from: https://journals.gmu.edu/index.php/ITLCP/article/view/2150</p> <p>Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning, GMU. "Active learning". Retrieved from: https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/knowledge-center/student-engagement-classroom-managment/active-learning/</p> <p>"Mason impact: Creating engaged students and well-rounded scholars prepared to act." (2018, March 8). <i>Center for Teaching and Learning: Faculty Conversations</i>. Retrieved from https://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/programs/stearns-center-opportunities/faculty-conversations/</p> <p>Zawacki, T., Habib, A., Hajabbasi, E. Antram, A., & Das, A. (2007). Valuing written accent: International voices in the U.S. academy. Retrieved from https://writtenaccents.gmu.edu/research-findings/critical-thinking/</p>

Do you have other resources to share? Send them to stearns@gmu.edu