

## *How Humans Learn*

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As our former colleague Josh Eyler demonstrates in his book, *How Humans Learn* (West Virginia UP, 2018), learning is an inherently social activity, and a sense of community – of belonging – enhances learning and is correlated with academic success. Class discussion is perhaps that most tried-and-true strategy for fostering social learning and belonging in the classroom. However, several years ago, I realized that I had just assumed that students would value peer engagement in class -- and that they would figure out how to do it effectively. I had not really explained to students why I'd structured my courses around discussion and collaborative inquiry; I never explicitly offered them strategies to connect their learning with what their peers were contributing in class discussions and in group projects. With this in mind, I have sought to figure out how to make these experiences maximally meaningful.

One such strategy: I explicitly connect small group discussions with upcoming assignments. Often in my courses, the first class meeting of the week opens in stable small groups. I explicitly frame these as a structured collaborative inquiry, in which a discussion leader introduces a question that will be the focus on an upcoming response paper. Their colleagues' become sources of ideas upon which they can draw. Group discussion leaders rotate each week. The leader is charged with posing a specific question about that day's assigned reading. This is to be a genuine question they have about the text – an open area of inquiry, confusion, or tentative insight and ideally, focused on a particular element or excerpt. Students talk about the assigned reading in the small groups, and then, each group leader reports out to the larger class. These report-outs shape the conversation that follows, and they offer me a clear sense of where the students are in their understanding of that day's text.

Nothing about this structure is particularly unique, but I think what comes next might be. Rather than leaving this discussion behind, group leaders are required to write a brief response paper in which they answer their once-open question. These essays must offer a clear, coherent claim and then support it with evidence from the text and the analysis from their group. Rather than just being a singular, isolated conversation, each discussion serves as a brainstorming session of sorts. This structure incentivizes listening, particular for the students in the discussion leader roles. In addition, these response papers are made publicly available to the other students. Together, the fifty brief response papers generate an archive, upon which everyone else might draw in subsequent assignments.



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