

Notes on Discussion Protocols (Asynchronous Activity)

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A thought I kept returning to: to what degree is familiarity with a particular protocol important to its effectiveness? If students are grappling with understanding the structure itself, it strikes me initially as likely to be less useful as a structure. I've had this experience myself when encountering a confusingly complicated set of directives involving frequent shifts in rules and reorganizations. Repeating a structure so that it becomes familiar to students may lead to that structure being much more effective than it was the first time. So while a first trial run might be awkward and less than great, that wouldn't necessarily mean that particular protocol wouldn't be effective if used more often.

At the same time, the converse may be true: the value of a particular protocol might be more on the metacognitive level than in its actual application. That is, it might suggest more things broadly about teaching and learning as a one-off performance than it might be recurrently pedagogically useful. It feels important to foreground both possibilities in making decisions about how to put these into practice.

A few notes on specific protocols:

Structured Go-Arounds

This one is the one I intend to use most in my teaching next semester. I'm hoping to use this structure to get students to respond to readings with mini-presentations at top of class, so we can get a lot on the table right away, and salient and central ideas for students can be acknowledged immediately. This feels like it will help avoid a problem of the most assertive students' opinions becoming de facto dominant.

Listing Ideas

I use this one already, and will definitely keep doing so. I like starting somewhere super basic in a discussion and have students define a term or concept, or list examples, and continue until they completely run out of steam. But it's interesting to think about other places to deploy this one.

Fishbowls

This one strikes me as promising in that it asks students to be both inside and outside a discussion at once and reflect on what makes one approach better than another. I'd like to try this with a larger class, to help them understand the shape and effect of their own participation in a discussion rather than not taking agency over that dimension.

Final Word

The complexity of this one and the shifting emphasis is interesting. I'm not sure it would work well for me in practice, but it would be very interesting to try it experimentally and see how it shapes the conversation.

Socratic Seminar

I especially like the step of brainstorming what makes a good discussion first, then using that as a rubric for the discussion itself. It could be helpful to do that on the first day of a new course and keep referring back to it as a grounding set of principles.

Looking at Student Work

This was particularly interesting to read because it struck me as 'crit lite.' This strongly resembled the basic format of an art/writing critique, but was described outside an art context, which I'm not sure I've ever encountered before. The format as described here does not include what I consider a fundamentally important element: inviting the student whose work is being looked at, after remaining otherwise silent throughout, and only if they choose, to ask questions at the end. (But not to make comments or respond to criticisms.)