Agenda for Facilitating Classroom Discussion in the Social Sciences and the Humanities
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Workshop Goals
1. Introduce and model effective strategies to facilitate classroom discussions in the social sciences and the humanities
2. Share experiences, knowledge and resources related to facilitating classroom discussions
3. Identify student learning goals for and attributes of productive classroom discussions
4. Reflect on alignment between student learning goals and discussion facilitation strategies

⇒ Related handout: Active Learning Continuum (gray)

Brainstorming: Student Learning Goals
Focus question: What are your goals as an instructor for student learning in classroom discussions?

⇒ Related handouts: Bloom’s Taxonomy (salmon), Setting Goals handout (salmon), Selected Classroom Assessment Techniques (salmon)

Think-Pair-Share: What Makes for a Good Discussion?
Focus Question: What activities make for a “good” (productive, stimulating, challenging, informative) classroom discussion?

⇒ Related handouts: What Makes for a Good Discussion? (blue), Different Types of Discussion Activities (blue), How to Use Discussion Questions Effectively (blue)

Debate: Evaluating Discussion – To Grade or Not To Grade
Focus Question: What are effective methods for evaluating students’ performance in classroom discussions?

⇒ Related handouts: Evaluating Discussion Handout (canary)

Jigsaw: Dealing with Difficult Classroom Situations
Focus Question: How can we as instructors negotiate common discussion facilitation challenges?

⇒ Related handouts: Facilitation Challenges: Jigsaw Activity (lavender)

Minute Paper: Unanswered Questions/Challenges
On an index card, please take one minute to answer the following question: Do you have any lingering questions or do you foresee any challenges unique to your teaching context?

Seminar Evaluation
How can you incorporate active learning into your classroom?

The following list summarizes some of the many approaches.

- **Clarification Pauses**: This simple technique fosters "active listening." Throughout a lecture, particularly after stating an important point or defining a key concept, stop presenting and allow students time to think about the information. After waiting, ask if anyone needs to have anything clarified. Ask students to review their notes and ask questions about what they've written so far.

- **Writing Activities such as the "Minute Paper"**: At an appropriate point in the lecture, ask the students to take out a blank sheet of paper. Then, state the topic or question you want students to address. For example, "Today, we discussed emancipation and equal rights. List as many key events and figures as you can remember. You have two minutes — go!"

- **Self-Assessment**: Students receive a quiz (typically ungraded) or a checklist of ideas to determine their understanding of the subject. Concept inventories or similar tools may be used at the beginning of a semester or the chapter to help students identify misconceptions.

- **Large-Group Discussion**: Students discuss a topic in class based on a reading, video, or problem. The instructor may prepare a list of questions to facilitate the discussion.

- **Think-Pair-Share**: Have students work individually on a problem or reflect on a passage. Students then compare their responses with a partner and synthesize a joint solution to share with the entire class.

- **Cooperative Groups in Class (Informal Groups, Triad Groups, etc.)**: Pose a question for each cooperative group while you circulate around the room answering questions, asking further questions, and keeping the groups on task. After allowing time for group discussion, ask students to share their discussion points with the rest of the class.

- **Peer Review**: Students are asked to complete an individual homework assignment or short paper. On the day the assignment is due, students submit one copy to the instructor to be graded and one copy to their partner. Each student then takes their partner's work and, depending on the nature of the assignment, gives critical feedback, and corrects mistakes in content and/or grammar.

- **Group Evaluations**: Similar to peer review, students may evaluate group presentations or documents to assess the quality of the content and delivery of information.

- **Brainstorming**: Introduce a topic or problem and then ask for student input. Give students a minute to write down their ideas, and then record them on the board. An example for an introductory political science class would be, "As a member of the minority in Congress, what options are available to you to block a piece of legislation?"

- **Case Studies**: Use real-life stories that describe what happened to a community, family, school, industry, or individual to prompt students to integrate their classroom knowledge with their knowledge of real-world situations, actions, and consequences.

- **Hands-on Technology**: Students use technology such as simulation programs to get a deeper understanding of course concepts. For instance, students might use simulation software to design a simple device or use a statistical package for regression analysis.

- **Interactive Lecture**: Instructor breaks up the lecture at least once per class for an activity that lets all students work directly with the material. Students might observe and interpret features of images, interpret graphs, make calculation and estimates, etc.

- **Active Review Sessions (Games or Simulations)**: The instructor poses questions and the students work on them in groups or individually. Students are asked to show their responses to the class and discuss any differences.

- **Role Playing**: Here students are asked to "act out" a part or a position to get a better idea of the concepts and theories being discussed. Role-playing exercises can range from the simple to the complex.

- **Jigsaw Discussion**: In this technique, a general topic is divided into smaller, interrelated pieces (e.g., a puzzle is divided into pieces). Each member of a team is assigned to read and become an expert on a different topic. After each person has become an expert on their piece of the puzzle, they teach the other team members about that puzzle piece. Finally, after each person has finished teaching, the puzzle has been reassembled, and everyone on the team knows something important about every piece of the puzzle.

- **Inquiry Learning**: Students use an investigative process to discover concepts for themselves. After the instructor identifies an idea or concept for mastery, a question is posed that asks students to make observations, pose hypotheses, and speculate on conclusions. Then students share their thoughts and tie the activity back to the main idea/concept.

- **Forum Theater**: Use theater to depict a situation and then have students enter into the sketch to act out possible solutions. Students watching a sketch on dysfunctional teams, might brainstorm possible suggestions for how to improve the team environment. Ask for volunteers to act out the updated scene.

- **Experiential Learning**: Plan site visits that allow students to see and experience applications of theories and concepts discussed in the class.

**Sources**


Active Learning Techniques

Simple

Pause for reflection

Large-Group Discussion

Think-Pair-Share

Self-Assessment

Informal Groups

Triad Groups

Group Evaluations

Peer Review

Interactive Lecture

Hands-on Technology

Brainstorming

Case Studies

Active Review Sessions (Games or Simulations)

Role playing

Jigsaw Discussion

Inquiry Learning

Experiential Learning (site visits)

Forum Theater

Complex

Techniques that are circled were modeled in the "Facilitating Classroom Discussions in the Social Sciences & Humanities" workshop.

This spectrum arranges active learning techniques by complexity and classroom time commitment.

Prepared by Chris O'Neal and Tershia Pinder-Grover, Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Prep:</th>
<th>In class time:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Application cards</td>
<td>After teaching about an important theory, principle, or procedure, ask students to write down at least one real-world application for what they have just learned to determine how well they can transfer their learning.</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approximate analogies</td>
<td>To find out whether students understand the relationship between two concepts, they complete the second half of an analogy—A is to B as X is to Y—for which their instructor has supplied the first half (A is to B).</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Background knowledge probe</td>
<td>Before introducing an important new concept, subject, or topic, students respond to questions that will probe their existing knowledge of that concept, subject or topic.</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Categorizing Grid</td>
<td>Students receive a grid that contains 2 or 3 important categories along with a list of scrambled items. Students have to sort the terms into the correct categories of the grid in a limited amount of time.</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept Maps</td>
<td>Students produce diagrams or drawings that show and name the connections between major concepts and other concepts, facts, or principles that they have learned. Very useful in courses requiring conceptual learning.</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept Questions</td>
<td>Instructors ask ungraded multiple choice questions to students, in order to test students' understanding of key concepts. Often, these are done with Hand Voting (or clickers).</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Content, form and function outlines</td>
<td>Or the what, how and why (WHW) outline; students analyze the content (what), form (how) and function (why) of a given message, writing brief notes answering WHW.</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
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<tr>
<td>Defining Features Matrix</td>
<td>Students categorize concepts according to the presence or absence of important defining features.</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Directed paraphrasing</td>
<td>Ask students to write a layman’s “translation” of something they have just learned—geared to a specific individual or audience—to assess their ability to comprehend and transfer concepts.</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focused listing</td>
<td>In a given time period, students write down as many ideas that are closely related to a single important term, name, or concept. Works well in classes of any size and is useful in courses in which a large amount of new information is regularly introduced.</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goal ranking/matching</td>
<td>Used in the first week of class; students list the learning goals they hope to achieve through the course and rank the relative importance of those goals.</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hand Voting (or Clickers)</td>
<td>Students signal their votes by raising a specified number of fingers. If technology is available, personal response systems (clickers) can be used instead for anonymous voting.</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Invented Dialogues</td>
<td>Students create a dialogue (with known quotes or invented ones) to synthesize knowledge of issues, personalities, and historical periods on the form of a structured conversation.</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Memory matrix</td>
<td>Students fill in cells of a two-dimensional diagram for which the instructor has provided labels. For example, in a music course, labels might consist of periods (Baroque, Classical) by countries (Germany, France, Britain); students enter composers in cells to demonstrate their ability to remember and classify key concepts.</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minute paper</td>
<td>During the last few minutes of the class period, ask students to answer on a half-sheet of paper: “What is the most important point you learned today?” and, “What point remains least clear to you?” The purpose is to elicit data about students’ comprehension of a particular class session.</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muddiest Point</td>
<td>Ask students to jot down a quick response to one question: “What was the muddiest point in _____?” the focus could be a lecture, a discussion, homework, a play, or a film.</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misconception/preconception check</td>
<td>Students respond to a questionnaire that elicits information about students’ ideas and beliefs that may hinder or block further learning.</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-Sentence summary</td>
<td>Students summarize knowledge of a topic by constructing a single sentence that answers the questions, “Who does what to whom, when, where, how and why?” The purpose is to have students select only the defining features of an idea.</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paper or Project</td>
<td>Prompt students to think through the elements of a problem or academic paper: topic,</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td></td>
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Research on Best Practices in College Teaching

CRLT, 2011
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Time required</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prospectus</td>
<td>purpose, audience, major questions to answer, basic organization, time and resources needed.</td>
<td>In class: High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro and Con Grid</td>
<td>Students jot down a quick list of pros and cons (advantages/disadvantages, benefits/costs) of an issue of concern.</td>
<td>Prep: Low In class time: Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Recognition Task</td>
<td>Present students with a few examples of common problem types. The students’ task is to recognize and identify the particular type of problem each example represents</td>
<td>Prep: Medium In class time: Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student generated test questions</td>
<td>Allow students to write test questions and model answers for specified topics, in a format consistent with course exams. This will give students the opportunity to evaluate the course topics, reflect on what they understand, and consider what good test questions might be.</td>
<td>Prep: Medium In class time: High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What's the principle?</td>
<td>Prompts students to keep track of the steps they take in solving a problem.</td>
<td>Prep: Low In class: Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word Journal</td>
<td>First students summarize a short text in a single word. Second the student writes a paragraph explaining why he or she chose the word to summarize the text.</td>
<td>Prep: Low to Medium In class time: Medium/High</td>
</tr>
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Bloom's Taxonomy Wheel

Taken from http://tiny.cc/pocmpw
Evaluating Discussion – To Grade or Not To Grade?

The “Not-to-Grade” Approach
Some professors say they don’t grade in-class discussion because it will inhibit students and add pressure to the group. Others argue that participation worth only 5-10% of the final grade is not worth the effort.

- One approach is to make participation the norm. For example, many professors set the expectation that participation is expected and is necessary from day one. When something is assigned, all the students know they had better read it because they will be expected to discuss it.
- A good way to reinforce this is to be unpredictable. One day, you might start at one side of the room and ask those students to discuss in turn the facts of the reading. On another day, start in reverse order. If a student does not participate, talk to them individually early in the term. Day in and day out, if you establish this as the mode of learning in the class, students get used to it.

The Graded Approach
The benefits of grading participation include encouraging equal participation by all and providing an alternative to standard tests or paper evaluations. Here are some grading variations:

Teacher Assigns Grade:
- Twice each semester, notify students of their participation grade and explain the basis for the grade.
- Put a tick mark next to student names on your printed roster each time they speak. They’ll notice you doing this and it will increase the quantity of the responses (but not always the quality…)
- Require a written product from student group activities and grade it. For example, a professor might have the students do three to four projects a semester, in which students are assigned to a different group for each project. Once teams have been formed, they write their names on a card. The group then is required to present or discuss their findings, the professor puts a grade on the card and returns it to them.

Peers Assign Grade:
- To get around complaints that “one or two of us did all the work,” require group members to grade one another. For example, let each student in the group distribute 100 points across the group. Have each student describe in writing the strengths and weaknesses of each person in their group.
- Groups can be required to keep a log of their activities; at the end of the project, each student writes a paragraph reporting who did what, which is used to determine their individual grades.

Students Self-Evaluate:
- Professor passes around a copy of the class list and students place a check, plus, or minus next to their name after a discussion. This helps students to monitor their own participation in discussion.
- At various intervals during the term, students can write up a description of what they feel they have contributed to discussions in class, and set goals for themselves for improvement in future classes.

The Indirect Approach
Discussions can be evaluated indirectly through exam questions and written assignments. Whether one gives an explicit participation grade or not, every teacher wants to encourage students to listen and to think.

- One of the best ways to do this is to make exam questions or written assignments reflect class discussions and activities. If you don’t, discussions can feel like throw-away activities to the students.
- For example, three questions on your exam can specifically mention something from class discussion and ask students to respond.
- Or, ask students to evaluate a class discussion as part of a formal, graded writing assignment. The discussion can then be the “material” or evidence they’ll need to use to make an argument in their paper.

The Bottom Line on Evaluating Discussion: If you don’t directly grade student participation in discussion or a product of the discussions, you should at the minimum try to include the same content that was covered in discussions in whatever you use to assess student learning – tests, homework, written assignments, etc.

[Adapted by Tim Green for CRLT GSITO Fall 2012 from materials by Joan Middendorf and Alan Kalish, Teaching Resources Center, Indiana University]
Setting Goals for Discussion

My ideal discussion section ...

- Fosters a sense of...
- Explores ...
- Encourages students to ...
- Challenges students by ...

In my ideal discussion section ...

My students will learn:

1.  
2.  
3. 

My students will gain the following skills:

1.  
2.  
3. 

I will learn:

1.  
2.  
3. 

I will gain the following skills:

1.  
2.  
3.
Different Types of Discussion Activities

1. **Quizzing Discussion:** In this type of discussion you are responsible for leading and guiding the students through the material. This type of discussion is most useful as a check to see if the class knows the material, or as a way to set expectations for an exam (where they would know what to study based on the types of questions you were asking).

2. **Roundtable Discussion:** In this type of discussion the GSI serves as a facilitator for the discussion. Instead of asking students to recall specific material, in a roundtable discussion the GSI encourages students to share what they think about a certain topic and explore why they believe what they do. In a roundtable discussion the main goal of the facilitator is to get many different people to share their perspectives.

3. **Brainstorming Discussion:** In this activity the GSI will usually serve as the recorder of information. In this model the GSI poses a question(s) to the group and the various answers get listed on the board or overhead. This model works well when there are many different types of responses.

4. **Debate Discussion:** In this type of discussion the GSI frames an issue for the class then encourages students to defend one or the other position. The goal of a debate discussion is to get students to work through a complex issue in some detail. It also helps them to consider diverse viewpoints. The GSI’s role in the debate is limited.

5. **Fishbowl Discussion:** In this activity one group sits in the middle of a circle and discusses a topic (the fish). While they do this the students sitting in the outer circle watch silently (the bowl). The fishbowl is useful when you want to give voice to a particular group in the class, or when you want others to work on their listening skills. Make sure you take time at the end for members in the “bowl” to comment on what they observed.

6. **Think, Pair, Share Discussion:** Give students a topic to think or write about for a couple of minutes. Next, ask them to pair up and give them another few minutes to discuss their views with one-another. You can then ask the pairs of students to share some of their views with the entire group. This activity forces all students to speak and allows them a chance to articulate their ideas several times before sharing them with a larger group.

7. **Free-Write or Minute Paper Discussion:** In this type of discussion the GSI asks students to take a couple of minutes to reflect on a certain topic. Afterwards, ask people to explain or elaborate on what they wrote. This type of activity can be useful to invigorate a discussion that is lagging or to encourage students who might not speak up in larger groups.
What Makes for a Good or Bad Discussion?

Think back to some of your own experiences as a student and/or as an instructor. What made for the most memorable discussions? What were some of the things that derailed conversation or left discussion participants feeling frustrated?

In pairs, I would like you to discuss the two questions listed below and record a few of your answers using the numbered spaces. In just a couple of minutes we will return to the larger group to share answers and discuss some of the ways you can help facilitate good discussion as well as some things you might try to avoid.

What are things that promote really good discussion?

1. 

2. 

3. 

What are some things that can hinder discussion?

1. 

2. 

3.
How to Use Discussion Questions Effectively

Start with Open-Ended Questions – these types of questions help begin a discussion because they encourage multiple viewpoints. They also tend to invite students to share their opinions, which can generate additional topics or define crucial issues. “What struck you as most successful/problematic about the characters in Little Women?”

Ask Questions with Multiple Answers – this is the most straightforward method of encouraging student participation because it removes the students’ fear of answering incorrectly. Instead of asking, “Why is the ending of Little Women a good one?” ask, “What are other ways in which Louisa May Alcott might have ended Little Women?” While this type of question does not ask students to recall details from the ending of the book, it does promote critical thinking because it forces them to put together an argument that the details of the book will support.

Utilize Follow-Up Questions – when students respond with an answer that is very brief or short, don’t miss the opportunity to ask a follow-up question: “Can you tell me more?” or “Why do you say that?” or “How did you come to that conclusion?”

Know Which Types of Questions Do What – certain types of questions will elicit different responses from your students. Identify the purpose of your question and plan to ask it at an appropriate time. For example, introductory questions may ask students to recall factual material or comprehend difficult ideas in the reading while higher-order questions may ask students to apply, analyze, synthesize, or evaluate the material.

Relate the Material to Students’ Lives – often it can be advantageous to ask questions that are only loosely related to the topic at hand. Consider asking questions that will encourage students to relate on a more personal level: “How does Holden Caulfield appeal to a contemporary audience? Did any of you relate to his struggles?” or “Did this character remind you of anybody you know?”

Ask About the Content, Not the Participant – instead of saying, “Does anybody have any questions?”, “Does everyone understand?” or “Does everyone see how I came to this conclusion?” try to frame this question in language that doesn’t single out the student for his/her lack of comprehension. Instead try, “What is the most difficult part of understanding this concept?” or “Could someone rephrase what I just said?” or “What were other possibilities people were considering when I shared this analysis with you?” Asking students to rephrase reminds them that nobody has a perfect understanding of the concept and that often there is no single “right” way to look at an argument or interpretation.

Use Small Groups—pair students or group them in threes or fours, and let them discuss a question or topic. This encourages participation from all students, even those who may be hesitant speaking up in a whole-class discussion.

Pause after Asking a Question—allow 10 to 20 seconds wait time after asking a question that requires higher-level skills (such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation). For a complicated question, you might also ask students to rephrase the question in their own words before responding.

Decentralize—encourage students to talk to and respond to one another. Use a “rotating chair” model in which students call on each other instead of you calling on them.

Compiled by Lauren V. Kachorek with help from Kirsten Olds, CRLT, 2009.
Facilitation Challenges: Jigsaw Activity

Directions:

Your table group will be assigned one of the following facilitation challenges to discuss in depth. Next, you will break into new groups with other GSIs who have not thought through the same facilitation challenge in detail and share the highlights of what your original group discussed. Last, we will reform as a large group and engage in a brief discussion.

Facilitation Challenge #A: The Discussion Monopolizer

You have a student who is an enthusiastic, active participant. As the class goes on, this student talks so much that the other students (and you, the instructor) become annoyed.

- Would you do anything about this situation? If yes, what could you do?
- How does your decision to intervene (or not intervene) reflect your goals for leading discussions?

Facilitation Challenge #B: My Dog Ate the Coursepack!

You begin your lesson plan and notice that participation is unusually low. It soon becomes clear that only a few students have completed the reading and are able to engage in discussion.

- Would you do anything about this situation? If yes, what could you do?
- How does your decision to intervene (or not intervene) reflect your goals for leading discussions?

Facilitation Challenge #C: The Meltdown

Your class is engaged in an energetic discussion following an activity based on a controversial topic. One student makes a comment that offends another student. They exchange heated words back and forth until both end with their arms crossed. They are visibly upset, but say nothing for the remainder of the class session.

- Would you do anything about this situation? If yes, what could you do?
- How does your decision to intervene (or not intervene) reflect your goals for leading discussions?

Facilitation Challenges: Jigsaw Activity

Facilitation Challenge #D: Missing the Mark While Having Fun

Your students have prepared group presentations filled with popular movie clips and discussions based on personal anecdotes. All of your students are clearly enjoying the presentations and are actively participating. You are concerned, however, that your students are not incorporating the presentations with the learning goals of this session.

- Would you do anything about this situation? If yes, what could you do?
- How does your decision to intervene (or not intervene) reflect your goals for leading discussions?

Facilitation Challenge #E: The Silent Group

You have a small number of students in your discussion section who have perfect attendance but do not participate, even in small group activities. You know from one-on-one interactions that some of these students are painfully shy, and others are self-conscious about their abilities with English as a second or third language.

- Would you do anything about this situation? If yes, what could you do?
- How does your decision to intervene (or not intervene) reflect your goals for leading discussions?

Facilitation Challenge #F: A Diamond in the Rough

One of your students is an exceptional writer and thinker. She has a natural curiosity and submits homework assignments that you consider to be of exceptional quality. However, she does not contribute in class discussions.

- Would you do anything about this situation? If yes, what could you do?
- How does your decision to intervene (or not intervene) reflect your goals for leading discussions?

Discussion Challenge #G: The Teacher Centered Classroom

You have posed several discussion questions to your students, and find that they always look directly at you while giving answers. As the discussion goes on, you feel you are having several one-on-one interactions rather than a group discussion.

- Would you do anything about this situation? If yes, what could you do?
- How does your decision to intervene (or not intervene) reflect your goals for leading discussions?
Facilitation Challenges: Jigsaw Activity

DIRECTIONS

1. Your table group will be assigned one facilitation challenge to discuss in depth.
   a. Match the letter on your table with the letter on the Facilitation Challenges: Jigsaw worksheet to determine which challenge to discuss.
   b. Make sure everyone has a chance to contribute his or her thoughts. Feel free to draw on past experiences.

2. Next, break into new groups with other GSIs who have not thought through the same facilitation challenge in detail.
   a. This is the JIGSAW! Look at the number on your index card and move to the table with the number.
   b. At this table, briefly share the highlights discussed from your group. This way, everyone will hear a summary of each facilitation challenge.
   c. Please keep your highlights brief so that everyone has a chance to share.

3. Last we will reform as a large group and engage in a brief discussion.
   a. What was useful about this activity?
   b. Could you see yourself using this active learning technique in your classroom? Under what circumstances?