**Strategies for Teaching College Composition**

***Facilitating Discussion***

Every teacher, from the novice to the most seasoned, faces a new challenge each semester: how to get students talking. Granted, some instructors have the knack of eliciting responses from their students nearly all the time, or at least it may seem so. The fact is, however, that even these naturals have faced the silent stares of twenty students, students who seem to say “entertain me” with every sigh they emit. Often, the silence of the students has nothing to do with the instructors. Perhaps the instructors are teaching an 8:00 a.m. class and everyone is just too tired, or maybe the chemistry isn’t right. Some days will flop, and, unfortunately, some semesters might, too. The instructors should not blame themselves.

On the other hand, plenty of exercises can help the instructors fill those silences with useful, lively discussion. When students speak in class, instructors are inevitably relieved and pleased, and they often see student participation as a sign of their own pedagogical success. The verbal students are often rewarded with higher grades, or at least the teacher’s approval, while the quiet students are sometimes viewed as slackers, uninterested, and uninteresting. These feelings are natural, but the instructors should guard against them. Sometimes the quieter students are better listeners and more thoughtful writers than their more chatty peers. The instructors should try to find a way to draw out the ideas of some of the reticent students, keeping in mind that they, too, have much to contribute.

This book will present specific ideas for generating discussion that correspond with individual chapters, but here are some more general suggestions:

* The instructors should have students write, write, and write some more. Not everything they write has to be a formal assignment evaluated by the instructors. If the instructors have a good question they want the students to discuss, or a provocative passage to which they want a response, the instructors should take five or ten minutes at the beginning of class and ask the students to write about it. The instructors should tell the students that they aren’t grading this writing, and that the students don’t have to worry about grammar and mechanics. The instructors should clarify that they just want the students to write something before discussion starts. After the time is up, the instructors should ask a student to discuss (or read) what he or she wrote. After five minutes of writing, the students will have considered the idea and have something concrete to say. This may be a good time to call on a quieter student who may feel more comfortable talking after she or he has had time to process the question.
* If this exercise works for the instructors, they can try extending it. After students have written for five minutes, the instructors could ask them to exchange what they wrote with a classmate. The students can write a response to their peer’s writing, engaging in a written “conversation” with another student. A student may then read his or her classmate’s writing and response aloud, and the class can respond to what they heard. (The instructors can participate in this exercise as well.)
* The instructors should let the students know that they value the quality of the students’ participation more than the quantity. Students who feel the need to weigh in on every question the instructors ask, regardless of whether they have something to say, are both annoying and intimidating.
* The instructors should begin the discussions with a casual activity, one that can easily involve all the students. The instructors should have the students brainstorm ideas, thesis statements, keywords, or phrases while they write them on the board.
* The instructors should ask the students to be as specific as possible whenever they participate in discussion. The instructors should ask the students to cite examples and page numbers when referring to the text and to quote from passages (in their writing or in another reading).
* The instructors should be patient and not be afraid of “long” silences; if the instructors wait long enough (and sometimes it will seem like hours), they can usually get a response from the students. If the instructors don’t wait and instead answer the question for the students, they may end up with the students expecting them to fill in the silence! If students are giving the instructors puzzled looks in response to a question, the instructors should rephrase the question or start with a simpler one that can lead into a more complex discussion.
* The instructors should try visual or auditory prompts for discussion. For example, each chapter of *COMP* opens with a photograph designed to prompt thought and discussion about the chapter’s content. The instructors could consider using these or other images, video clips, songs, and so on that relate to the topic they wish to explore in class. Many students find such prompts engaging and nonthreatening.

***In-Class Writing***

Writing can and should take place in different settings and for different purposes. As the authors mentioned above, in-class writing can help students think through their ideas and can promote informed and lively discussions. In addition, asking the students to write regularly in class gives them additional practice in writing on the spot. Ideally, everyone should have the chance to revise their work indefinitely, but this ideal goal is an elusive one. The students will write emails, exams, and reports throughout their college careers and beyond. The more writing they do, both formal and informal, the less intimidating it will be and the better they will do at it. The instructors should consider this analogy: when long- distance runners are training for a marathon, they do both long and short runs to prepare for the big event. The instructors don’t want their students writing a “marathon” (i.e. a longer, formal paper) without having done “short runs” as training.

***Group Work***

Group work is good for the instructors and good for the dynamics of the class as a whole. Such work gives students a more central role in the class and gives the instructors a break from having to facilitate an active discussion, while trying to include approximately fifteen to twenty- five students in meaningful ways. *COMP* and this IRM both contain several suggestions for specific activities that will work well in small groups. Although the numbers can vary, small groups usually consist of between three and five students, each group investigating a problem or question.

One question instructors often ask is whether they should assign students to specific groups or let the groups form organically. Often, the answer will depend on each class. In some classes, there is such a disparity between the quiet and verbal students that the instructors may choose to group the quieter students together and the more talkative ones together to make sure that all voices are heard. The instructors may also decide to separate students who are close friends in order to keep the extracurricular talk to a minimum. The instructors know their students best, and some trial and error will tell them what works best with their own style and the personalities of their students.