TA TIP SHEETS

TEACHING ASSISTANT’S Guide to the Role of Questions in Class Discussions

The information below was adapted from the UVic TA Manual (the full version can be found at http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/servicesprograms/taprod/documents/UVicTAManual.pdf). Not all suggestions below may be applicable in all departments on campus. Please use the information as a guide only.

Questions can be used to generate discussion, breathe new life into a discussion, or increase the intensity by focusing on specific issues. Questions can be used to encourage students who are less aggressive in responding and thus spread the level of participation amongst the group.

Useful Questioning Strategies

- Ask only one question at a time.
- It is helpful to vary the types of questions to match the variety of personalities and learning styles within the group.
- Wait for answers. Students need time to think before they answer.
- Use a variety of probing and explaining questions: Factual questions (specific information, who, when, where, what?); Divergent questions (no right or wrong answers necessarily); Probing questions (build on student's response); Higher order questions (more analysis from the student).

Start a Seminar by

- Asking a provocative question – perhaps based on a short description of a theory.
- Posing a question that is based on a common experience of the group.
- "Brainstorming" an issue, i.e. ask the students for ideas to be discussed.
- Dividing the group into subgroups and organizing a debate over issues of concern to the class.

Problem Questions from Students

Dr. Maryellen Weimer, Editor of The Teaching Professor, suggests the following techniques for fielding problem questions from students:

- The question you can’t understand
  - Ask the student to repeat or rephrase the question. Don't imply that you think it's a silly or stupid question. If you continue not to comprehend, enlist the aid of the class, or apologize to the student and suggest you need to tackle the question after class.
- **The question that is irrelevant**
  o Recognize the intrinsic value of the question when responding to the student, but don't get the class off track by answering it now. If you can legitimately consider it later in the course, tell the student when to expect an answer. You get even more points on that day if you can look at the student and say, "Remember that question you asked about heat transfer in cast iron?"
- **The question you can’t answer**
  o It's tempting to fake it to satisfy the student with fine-sounding terms and vocal authority.
  o You set an example when you return to class with reference materials that contain the answer.
- **The question that is obvious**
  o Take, for example, the student who asks a question you spent fifteen minutes answering in class yesterday and the student was in class. Is it right to take valuable class time to answer for one person in class what 86% of everybody else present already knows?
  o Consider alternative ways in which you might address this but recognizing that it is still a valid question. Ridicule only discourages others from asking more relevant questions.

**Questions that challenge your authority**

- Stay calm! Give the student as honest and reasoned answer to the question as you can.
- Frequently such questions reflect a much deeper opinion of the way things happen in the academic world.
- Politely decline the opportunity to debate.
- Reschedule the discussion outside of class time.
- Playing out teacher-student altercations in public should be avoided.
- Assert your authority in a calm and respectful way. Restate your position and the policy or rationale that supports it. Tell the student that there are alternative avenues to explore (e.g. ombudsperson, professor or chair) but you will not be using class time to discuss it further.