



Just Right:

How to Generate Better Classroom Discussion

by Graham Stanton

About the Author

Graham D. Stanton is lecturer in practical theology at Ridley College in Melbourne, Australia, and director of the Ridley Centre for Children's and Youth Ministry.

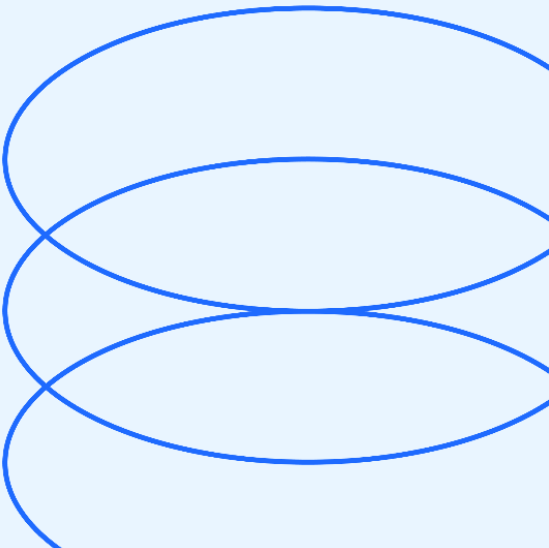
About Logos for Education

Logos is the most advanced platform for studying God's Word and accessing scholarly resources: anytime, anywhere, and all in one place—for life. Our academic solutions support your students with textbook delivery and a custom resource library delivered through your LMS. Learn how we can support your school’s mission at logos.com/education.

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Questions in the zone of proximal development	4
Questions to spark thought	6
Make easy questions more difficult	8
Make difficult questions easier	12
Questions that are just right	18

Introduction



Introduction

There are still ten more minutes until the end of class. For the past thirty minutes, you have strained to start a group discussion on the assigned reading. And for the past thirty minutes, you have watched your students shift and blink uncomfortably as you pose questions, then suggest conclusions, then push new questions, each more rhetorical than the last. All the while, you are trying to avoid eye contact with the overachiever in the front row who is ready to fill the silence with another download of their latest hobby horse. Finally, time's up, and you squeeze out a smile as you tell the students you are looking forward to seeing them next week, knowing that they know that you know that neither of you is relishing that prospect.

Back in your office, you reflect again on how you were the one doing most of the talking for that precious hour of time when all of the students are together. Perhaps you mumble something about student attention spans these days, or the rising dearth of intellectual curiosity. But could it be a problem in the approach.

There's an art to asking questions in class that will generate fruitful discussion. Questions that are most likely to generate better classroom discussion questions need to be neither too easy nor too difficult to answer. Like Goldilocks's porridge, they need to be "just right."

Questions in the zone of proximal development



The technical term for just-right questions is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD is a pedagogical concept developed by Russian child psychologist Lev Vygotsky. In its simplest construction, what falls between “what I can do” and “what I can’t do” is “what I can do *with help*.” That’s the ZPD. What a student can already do is the zone of *actual* development. The zone of *proximal* development covers those things that a student can learn or achieve “under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers.”¹

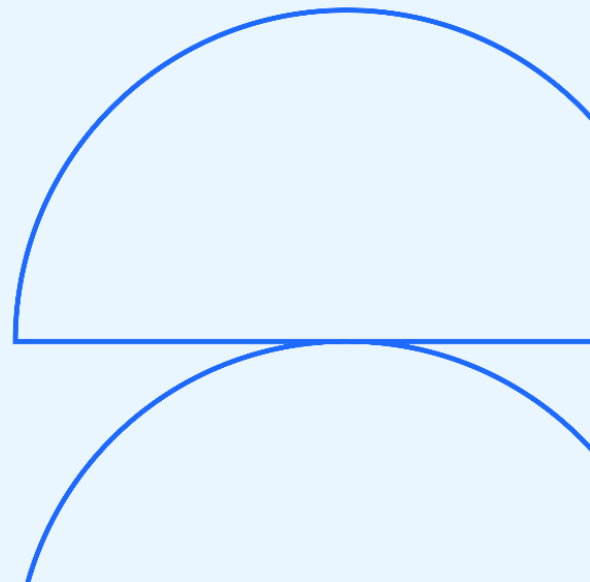
If a discussion question is too easy, there’s likely to be no discussion: “What did Zacchaeus do in order to be able to see Jesus because he was so short? Anyone, anyone?” Easy questions can be like asking a firefighter to blow out a candle. Students are likely to be thinking, “If I answer and get it right, there’s no great accomplishment. But if I answer and get it wrong, I’ll be doubly embarrassed. Then again, if it seems obvious but you’re asking anyway, there must be a trick!” So it’s safer to say nothing. Discussion questions in the zone of actual development do not generate good discussion or promote learning.

Conversely, if a discussion question is too difficult—e.g., “How does the Cappadocian formulation of the Trinity anticipate and resolve the ontological tensions in contemporary process theology?”—most students will be left struggling to understand the terms, let alone express the relations between them. The stunned silence is inevitably broken by the one conscientious student who has done all of the advanced pre-reading. But while she and the professor enjoy a lively *tête-à-tête*, the rest of the class will be checking out and scrolling through social media. Discussion questions beyond the zone of proximal development do not generate good discussion or promote learning, either.

Questions in the ZPD are neither too easy nor too difficult, they’re just right. Asking better discussion questions means taking easy questions and making them harder, and taking difficult questions and making them easier.

¹ Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Harvard University Press, 1978), 86.

Questions to spark thought



Before crafting questions that will fill your class time with lively and robust discussion, you must ask yourself the “why” question: *Why do you want better discussion times in your class?* Simply wanting to break up long stretches of monologue is not a bad goal. A well-timed discussion question can be a moment's respite for student attention spans and create enough stimulus to sustain them for the remainder of the lecture.

But there's more to a good discussion than providing mental respite. In fact, a good discussion ought to be something that promotes more mental activity, not less.

I regularly begin new classes with this quotation: “Memory is the residue of thought.”

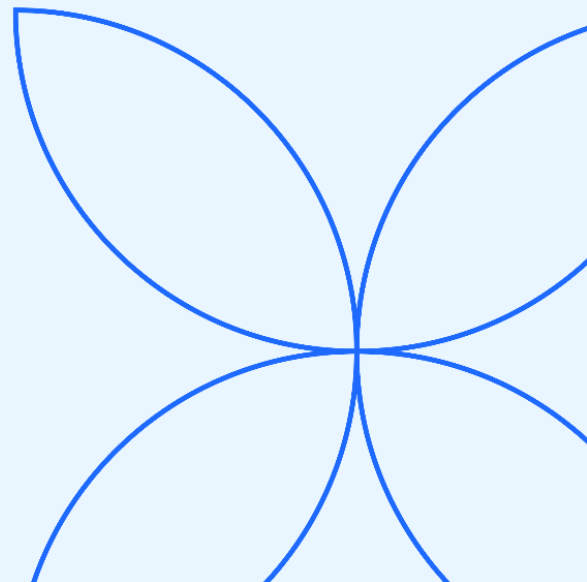
The quote comes from Daniel Willingham's best-selling book, *Why Don't Students Like School?*² As professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, Willingham researches the application of cognitive psychology to K-16 education.

This memorable line about memory is a cognitive principle underlying chapter 3, titled, “Why Do Students Remember Everything That's on Television and Forget Everything I Say?” We remember what we think about. The message I want to communicate to my students is that the aim of my class is not for them to write down everything I say—I promise to give them a copy of all the presentation slides that contain important content (and if they're wanting content, there are more than enough readings to work through). The aim of the class is to get students to think. The more they think about the ideas I want to raise, the more they will remember those ideas.

A well-crafted discussion question helps students *think*. A just-right question challenges them just enough to get their mental gears turning without overloading them.

² Daniel T. Willingham, *Why Don't Students Like School?: A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom* (Jossey-Bass, 2021), 58, 66, 87.

**Make easy
questions
more difficult**



Adding difficulty to easy questions does not necessarily require making the question more complicated or more technical. The “ease” that we are trying to overcome here is not a matter of technical detail or subject matter expertise. *We want to avoid students giving an answer that does not require any thought.* How can we add just enough friction to spark thinking without leaving half the class scratching their heads in confusion? Two tips for making easy questions more difficult is:

1. Increase the restrictions on answers.
2. Require students to work together to formulate their response.

1. Increase the restrictions

Ironically, structure aids creativity. Though we might assume that imposing a strict structure on a creative task would stifle artistic expression, the opposite is often true. The rules of a sonnet³ did not restrict Shakespeare, Donne, or Browning! While the aim of a class discussion isn't to produce literary masterpieces, the analogy holds: Adding restriction to a question can aid discussion.

Here are a few examples:

Get poetic

Instead of just asking students to share their thoughts about a particular topic, add the requirement that they express their response in poetry. Any kind of poetic structure could work here—a limerick, a haiku, an acrostic. My favorite is to write their answer in four lines where the first and third lines have eight syllables, and the second and fourth lines have six syllables. (If you want to get extra-demanding, you can ask them to use an ABAB rhyming structure.) Divide the class into six groups. Each group has to summarize a chapter of Ephesians in an 8-6-8-6 syllable poem. The advantage of this particular structure comes at the end, when the class sings the result together to the tune of the hymn “Amazing Grace!”⁴

Set strict limits

If poetry requires more creativity than you think your class can muster, a simple alternative is to set a strict word limit for a response. You decide the word limit in advance. You might have them summarize the message of each chapter of Ephesians in, say, twenty-five words. Not twenty-six words. Not twenty-four words. Twenty-five. A small class could hear each summary in turn, or students could share with one another in small groups.

³ The rules of a sonnet are: two quatrains and a sestet in iambic pentameter with a ABBA ABBA CDEDCE/CDCDCD rhyming scheme.

⁴ Alternative tunes that fit this structure include the theme song to *Gilligan's Island* and the Australian National Anthem.

Having seeded the discussion with either of these activities, one of these follow-up questions can be used to extend the conversation:

- What similarities and/or differences do you notice in each of the summaries?
- What has been left out (or added or re-interpreted) in order to fit the imposed structure?
- What do you think has been overemphasized or underemphasized in the creative expressions, and why?

2. Require interdependence

When is a discussion not a discussion? When it's a series of disconnected contributions from individuals who aren't listening to or interested in each other! Students rightly complain about discussion tasks that are little more than an opportunity for individuals to take turns at imposing their ill-informed opinions on the rest of the class. Beyond giving opportunity for students to articulate their own ideas, a good discussion enables students to develop skills in interacting with others in a considered way.

Adding a dimension of interdependence can make easy questions more difficult. Rather than simply putting their own ideas into words, students will need to take account of what others are saying and respond accordingly. Here are some ways to do that:

Repeat and respond

This is a discussion structure that requires students to listen closely to others before adding their own contribution to the conversation. In groups of six to eight, the first student shares an idea in response to a discussion prompt (say, "What place should age-separated ministries such as a youth group have in the life of a local church?"). Before the next student shares her thoughts on that question, she must first re-express the idea that has previously been spoken. Then, she can add to the conversation by expressing agreement or disagreement, or by adding a new thought, or by asking a related question. The next student has to articulate both prior ideas, and then respond. The fourth student summarizes the first three contributions before responding, and so on.

As the conversation moves forward, rather than repeating what each person has said, students can summarize or restructure the conversation to capture the big ideas that are driving the conversation forward. This kind of discussion develops students' ability to capture others' ideas while holding a developing conversation in mind.

You may want to add the requirement that the previous must speakers agree that their points have been adequately represented before the next person can add her thoughts to the conversation. You could move sequentially around a circle or draw names out of a hat to see

who must speak next. Or students could be free to jump in whenever they choose, with the proviso that no student can speak again before every other student has made a contribution.

Reconstructed reading

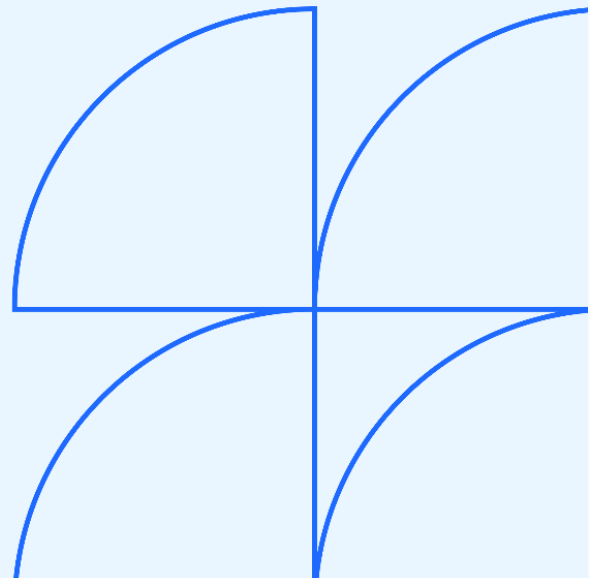
Giving students an extract to read and discuss is a good way to prompt discussion. Rather than trading in ignorance, the reading prompt provides some common material for the class to interact with. An in-class discussion is often limited to giving students short extracts (of one or two paragraphs) to respond to. Longer sections of text, such as a whole chapter or article, can take up too much time in class (and needs to account for a variety of reading speeds). Setting a longer reading as a homework task is one solution, but it can have mixed results depending on which students actually complete the reading.

One way to get a group to discuss a longer reading in class is to break a longer section into short pieces, give the students one piece each, and get them to arrange the text into the correct order. They must work together to make sense of the whole argument.

Individually, each student is given time to read her extract and summarize the material. In the group, students take turns summarizing the content of their section and listen out for points of connection. (It can often be obvious where the beginning and end of an article is.) From there, students need to listen to the progression of ideas in order to work out their logical order.

You could choose to break up the article according to paragraph breaks, or just divide it into equal length portions of text, starting and ending mid-sentence. Either way, this activity requires students to make sense of a written text, summarize it for others, and pay attention to how those ideas interact with the ideas shared by others. By the time the group has reconstructed the original article, they will have spent a decent amount of time thinking about the content and are more likely to remember it.

Make difficult questions easier



Just as easy questions aren't made more difficult by adding complexity and deeper content knowledge, the reverse is also true: Difficult questions do not need to dumb down the content or simplify the learning outcomes to be made easier to respond to. Discussion questions often fail to generate discussion because they have too many barriers of entry. Students can have all the content knowledge they need in order to respond to a discussion question, but they need help to think clearly enough to make sense of the raw material.

Three ways to make difficult questions easier are:

1. **Take baby steps** by breaking a discussion task into smaller discrete units.
2. **Require silence** as you create an environment that enables reflective students to contribute without getting overwhelmed by the more talkative ones.
3. Enlist students' bodies to **add movement** to the thinking process.

1. Take baby steps

Conducting an open discussion requires students to do a number of things at once:

- Understand what they think about the topic
- Decide what they want to share about their understanding
- Choose words to articulate what they want to share

The mental and emotional load involved to do all of those things is often the reason why students clam up when it comes to a group discussion. Breaking discussion questions into discrete steps can make the difficult task of sharing ideas more manageable.

Think-pair-share

Think on your own. Talk to a partner. Share the outcome of your discussion. This is a staple of the class discussion kit. It makes difficult questions easier. First, it gives students time to think on their own and come up with a response to the question being asked. This can be especially useful for less confident students or those requiring extra processing time. You could use this task at the beginning of a class after giving students a homework assignment to write some thoughts down on a particular topic or question. When it comes to sharing their ideas with others, the first step is as easy as reading out what they've already written, and doing that with just one other person.

The pairs could simply receive the contribution from each other, or they could work together to synthesize their respective ideas into a singular response. The "share" stage could be the opportunity for one member of each pair to contribute her synthesized response, or you could pose a more general question for each pair to share "one thing that was interesting out of your conversation." Setting the sharing task at the beginning of the "pair" conversation keeps those

discussions on track and enables students to prepare what they will share with the whole class.

1-2-4-8

1-2-4-8 is an extension on think-pair-share, where the students think on their own, then talk together in pairs, then the pairs join together to discuss a group of four, then groups of four join into groups of eight.⁵ At each stage, the group has to agree on one statement that they want to bring to the next conversation. In pairs, students have to synthesize their individual ideas into one statement. In the group of four, one student from each pair shares her idea, and the group of four has to synthesize those two ideas into one statement. In the group of eight, one student from each group of four has to share her idea, and so on.

Beyond just providing an opportunity for individuals to share ideas in progressively larger forums, this discussion activity enables students to develop skills in abstraction and refinement by taking core concepts from multiple contributions and refining them into a succinct statement.

2. Require silence

For students who are internal processors, an open class discussion can be a nightmare scenario. While they may be paying attention to the conversation and thinking carefully about how to respond, by the time they're ready to contribute the discussion may have moved on to an entirely different line of thinking. Genuine discussion is often hindered by being conducted in a forum that only allows certain personality types to contribute freely while leaving others behind. Many students are reluctant to contribute to a group discussion from fear of stumbling over their words as soon as they're in the spotlight.

Overcoming this anxiety is one of the contributions of the “think” stage of the previous discussion technique: Students get time to formulate their ideas on their own before sharing them with others. Methods of silent discussion are extensions on this idea that conduct a whole interaction in silence.

Chalk Talk

A Chalk Talk invites a class to contribute to a conversation by writing their thoughts on a poster.⁶ Place four poster-sized sheets of paper on tables around the room, with a pile of markers at each table. On each sheet, write a discussion topic or question for students to respond to. Set a time limit (five, ten, or fifteen minutes) and ask students to move around the room and add their thoughts in writing on each sheet of paper. Encourage students to write ideas, expand on others' thoughts, add comments, ask questions, answer questions,

⁵ Beyond eight, it's up to you, and the size of your class, as to how far you take it!

⁶ Ron Ritchhart, Mark Church, and Karin Morrison, *Making Thinking Visible: How to Promote Engagement, Understanding, and Independence for All Learners* (Jossey-Bass, 2011), 78–83.

expand on questions, underline important ideas, draw lines to connect different thoughts, etc. Have multiple markers at each table to allow more than one person to write at a time. Encourage students to move around to each table. Individuals could either remain at one table for a while or bounce from one table to the next, returning to previous tables to see how the conversation has developed. Alternatively, you could assign groups to spend five minutes at one table and then rotate around to review and add to the thoughts of other groups.

There must be absolute silence! Make sure that there aren't any quiet conversations going on between some members of the class—have them write down their conversation on the posters.

When the time is up, invite the class to stand around each table and share what they notice, or what stands out to them from what has been written down. You can respond to any unanswered questions or use those questions as the basis of the next class activity. Alternatively, you could give each poster to a small group of students and invite them to summarize what has been written, impose a structure to the contributions, and offer their own conclusions or interpretation of the discussion.

Like other "visible thinking" activities,⁷ the Chalk Talk leaves behind an artifact of the class discussion that can be referred to later. You might want to stick each poster to the wall for the following few weeks. Or bring the poster out again at a later date to check in with how students' understanding may have developed over time.

A sticky note for your thoughts

Another method of silent discussion invites students to write their thoughts on sticky notes and then to work as a group to sort their individual thoughts into a coherent whole.

Give students a pile of sticky notes and a marker pen. Ask them to write down as many ideas as they can think of in response to your discussion prompt. For a discussion on the key themes of the book of Romans, you could ask students to write down as many distinct theological themes that are raised in Romans as they can think of, writing one theme (with verse references) on each sticky note. Give students a set period of time to get as many of their thoughts down on separate sticky notes as they can.

Then invite students to post their ideas on a wall or a poster, and to work together to rearrange the sticky notes into a meaningful structure. Notes with the same idea can be stuck on top of one another; notes with similar ideas can be stuck next to each other. Using a poster or a whiteboard as the background enables students to draw connecting lines or add other labels that will help to make sense of the overall construction.

⁷ Ritchhart et al., *Making Thinking Visible*, 37–39.

Giving students time on their own to brainstorm their initial thoughts is a version of the “baby steps” method of breaking the discussion activity into smaller tasks. Reflective thinkers and less confident students will have time to formulate their ideas and make more substantial contributions to the group discussion simply by sticking a note to a page.

3. Add movement

Requiring people to move around the room can help to lighten the mental and emotional load of answering a class discussion question. Adding some movement is also a great way to get some oxygen into students lungs and relieve the lethargy of an after-lunch or late-afternoon class.

Polarity line

Choose a topic or a statement that lends itself to a spectrum of responses, such as, “How important is it to identify the author of the book of Hebrews?” or “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement, ‘Spiritual disciplines are essential for Christian maturity?’” Invite students to embody their response by standing in a line stretching across the room, with those in the affirmative on one side, those on the negative on the other, and those somewhere in between choosing an appropriate place on the spectrum.

This discussion activity can help overcome “group think,” where discussion of a controversial topic can quickly become dominated by the opinion of those who speak up first. Once students are arranged across the room, ask them to talk with others who are nearby. This will help them articulate their reasons for the position they’ve taken. You can also allow students to move around if they decide to change their position.

You can then choose to start with those on the extreme ends of the line—or with those in the middle.

42: An activity for collective upvoting

Trying to capture the key takeaway messages from a conference or a class can be difficult, especially when there’s quite a large group of people involved. Asking individuals to share their thoughts in a plenary can be time-consuming and extended. And opening the floor will favor those who have the confidence to speak in a large group, but not necessarily those who have the wisdom to articulate significant ideas. 42 is an activity that enables large groups to hear individual reflections and allow the “best” ideas to surface.⁸

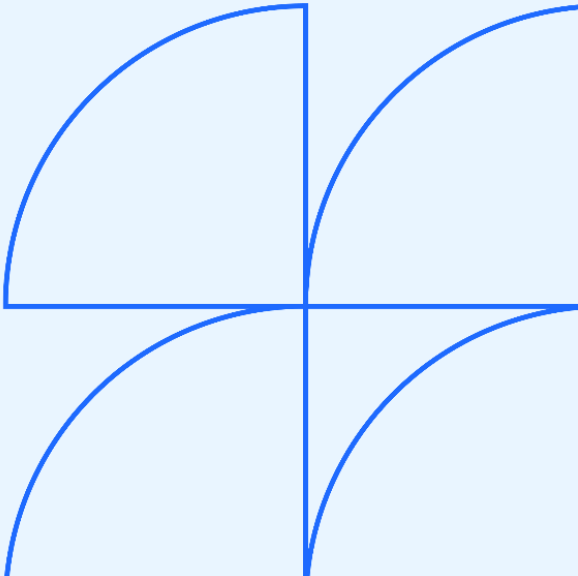
⁸ I first encountered this activity at a closing session of the conference of the Association of Youth Ministry Educators in Dallas, Texas. I can’t remember whether it was called 42 or 56 or some other multiple of votes and rounds, but the gist is the same.

Give everyone an index card and ask them to write their response to a set question. An example of a set question might be: Ask everyone to share the big idea that they are taking from the class discussion, or a key question that they have—but their response must be one that other members of the class can read and evaluate. Then the class swaps cards with each other. Moving around the room, have them swap cards with as many different people as they can within a minute or so. When the time is up, everyone gets in pairs and reads the content of both index cards. Each pair group has seven votes to distribute among the two cards to indicate which statement they most agree with (or resonate with, or enjoy, etc). If one card has an idea the pair clearly prefer, they can give all seven votes to that card and none to the other. If the two ideas are of relatively equal merit, they can give four to one and three to the other, and so on. It's best to ask people to use tally marks and to write them on the back of the card (so the next people to read them don't also see the previous scores). After the first round of voting, there's another round of swapping cards, reading in pairs, and assigning votes out of seven. The activity is called 42 because you need six rounds of assigning up to seven votes to have a maximum possible score of forty-two.⁹

At the conclusion of the sixth round of voting, everyone tallies up the total score for each card. Those with the highest combined votes are read out for the whole group.

⁹ Forty-two is also the meaning of life, the universe, and everything, according to Douglas Adams's classic, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979).

Questions that are just right



For better discussion, seminary professors need to question their questions. Am I asking questions that are too easy—questions not likely to stimulate thought, and perhaps even likely to stymie discussion by seeming too obvious? Am I asking questions that are too difficult—requiring too many mental steps all at once, or with obstacles to contributing that restrict full student participation?

With so many great online resources available for our students (everything that [Logos for Education](#) provides!), the primary goal of our classroom time is to engage students in thought-provoking discussions about all the readily available content. Remember, memory is the residue of thought. Preparing well, so that easy questions can be made more difficult and difficult questions can be made easier, is critical for generating better classroom discussion, promoting deeper thought, and leading to richer understanding and greater retention.