

Round-Table Student Discussions: Planning, Grading, and Training Students for Vibrant Classroom Discussions*Graham Dennis, Jenny Rallens, & Carl Warmouth*

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Important principles for leading a secondary discussion

I. The *why* of discussion

- A. There are no good answers to unasked questions
- B. Questioning as the *internal* structure of learning
- C. Making the internal structure external
- D. Questioning and investment

II. The *how* of discussion

- A. If a student is genuinely invested he or she will learn to develop good questions
- B. Questions as a rubric (how do we know that they are *tracking* and that they *get* it)
- C. Grading discussion: pitfalls and pathways
 1. Try to avoid letting the discussion be dominated by the “best” or most extroverted students
 2. Use your best students as a back up—try to give other students an opportunity to answer
 3. Make the normative expectation that you will be demanding investment as a normative part of discussion (all students will be expected to be involved)

Jenny Rallens, The Ambrose School**Introduction**

Most classical Christian upper schools expect their students to demonstrate skill in discussion, just as we expect them to have proficiency in other arts like writing, speaking, painting, music, mathematics, etc. However, we don't start by asking our students to play Beethoven, read Milton, paint a self-portrait, solve a calculus problem, or deliver an oration—rather we teach them scales, phonics, principles of shading, simple arithmetic, and sentence structure and gradually progress from these foundations. Similarly, discussions in any classroom can be enlivened and deepened by isolating and exercising skills of discussion, much like a concert cellist needs to practice scales or a volleyball player might drill overhand serves.

What skills do students need to participate in excellent discussions?

Participating in a classroom conversation seems straightforward—what could be easier than talking? However, when we contemplate the best group conversations at any level (high school, college, adult), it grows quickly apparent that they are complex works of art and etiquette. In optimal discussions, participants are able to read, summarize, synthesize, take notes, evaluate the validity and truth of arguments and statements, make relevant connections with tangential subjects or books, organize a rapid flow of information coming from multiple perspectives, support assertions from texts or other authorities, listen well, recall points made earlier in the discussion or in their readings/lectures, speak articulately and graciously, bring Scripture to bear on the topic, use sound logic, ask thoughtful questions, and make personal application of the topic—all with patience, winsomeness, and humility while at the same time learning the subject matter of whatever class they are in (history, literature, science, etc.). While many students are eventually able to develop some of these discussion skills with enough trial and error, I have found that isolating and practicing the building blocks of discussion leads to vastly improved academic discussions.

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The eight building blocks of discussion

There are eight skill areas that can be isolated and practiced to build better discussions: 1) etiquette, 2) text analysis, 3) support, 4) active listening, 5) synthesis, 6) refutation, 7) evaluation, 8) application. All of these building blocks are taught via discussion exercises lead by a teacher who is mapping the conversation onto the classroom whiteboard as the students are speaking.

1. **Etiquette:** In etiquette drills, students are trained to be comfortable, kind, and articulate when speaking, to have appropriate listening posture, and to enjoy conversation.
2. **Text Analysis:** In the focus on text analysis, students are trained A) to share their understanding of what a text is saying on literal and metaphorical levels, and B) their insights and interpretations of the text.
3. **Support:** In support drills, students learn to support claims with A) a specific detail, B) a quote or C) a commonplace. Students also learn to distinguish between adding new topics to a discussion question versus adding support for an existing topic.
4. **Listening:** Students learn to listen by focused training on A) note taking, B) mapping, C) evaluating, D) building on what someone else has said, and E) asking a question.
5. **Synthesis:** Students learn to make connections in a discussion by focused practice on A) making connections to other texts, history, Scripture, etc, B) using synthesis as a tool to unpack meaning within a single text, and C) using synthesis to unpack meaning across the subjects.
6. **Refutation:** Students learn to make connections in a discussion by focused practice on A) refuting a topic by itself, B) refuting a topic by refuting its support (or lack thereof), and C) logical fallacy drills.
7. **Evaluation:** Discussion is one of the primary ways in which students learn to discern the worldview of an author and hold it to the plumb line of Scripture by A) Finding good and evil within a text based on cause and effect, B) finding a text's worldview, and C) evaluating the text's worldview in light of relevant Scripture.
8. **Application:** Students learn to see the topic under discussion in their own world and lives by learning to A) make connections between the discussion and the real world and B) specifically discussing how to personally apply wisdom gained from the discussion.

Carl Warmouth, Trinity Classical School

- I. Why encourage classroom discussions?
 - A. Discussions work with the frame of the student and cut with the grain.
 1. Consider logic level characteristics.
 2. Your students would rather talk to each other than to you.
- II. Develop effective discussion questions.
- III. Implement the Socratic method
 - A. Instructor leads through lectures.
 1. Develop questions before the lecture.
 2. Teach, train, bless, and curse.
 - B. Make use of Socratic circles.
- IV. How to effectively grade discussions
 - A. Use objective judgment.
 - B. Use subjective judgment.