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Discussion in the College Classroom: Getting your students engaged and participating in person and online. Jay R. Howard, 2015, Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 224 pp., \$38.00 (Hardcover).

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Discussion in the College Classroom: Getting your students engaged and participating in person and online. Jay R. Howard, 2015, Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 224 pp., \$38.00 (Hardcover).

**About the Author(s)**

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Discussion in the college classroom is an important and timely book for college level instructors who want to improve, revise, and deliver engaging courses across disciplines. The purpose of this work is to help college instructors understand the purpose behind fostering classroom discussions. Issues related to participation, classroom management, and class facilitation is discussed within this work. College instructors who teach face-to-face and online courses will find the content of this book useful. In the next section of this review, the reviewer provides a detailed overview of each chapter in the book and discusses the importance of this body of work to the field of higher education.

### **Overview of Chapters**

The author of this work begins the *Preface* by discussing the career path that paved the way for him to do research on instruction in teaching and learning. The author frames this book for faculty members who wish to find ways to facilitate more effective online and face-to-face learning for students. The preface is filled with anecdotes and is a pleasant and refreshing read. The rest of this work is divided into six key chapters focusing exclusively on implementing discussion into the college classroom.

### **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

*Why Bother with Classroom Discussion?* is written in an informal format to walk the reader through scenarios and thoughts about how students are able to adapt to doing classroom discussions. This chapter is especially poignant for instructors who work with students immediately out of high school. Often, high school students come out of K-12 classroom environments where classroom discussions are often not required. Discussion is looked at as a foreign exercise by many of these students. Therefore, working with students who have difficulty communicating about course concepts verbally are often given additional work by the instructor. College instructors must spend their time creating a rationale for why discussions in college classrooms are important. Also, they must spend time introducing classroom discussions to students. Getting students to essentially ‘buy in’ to a form of classroom instruction they are not accustomed to as real instruction, is the hardest task of implementing discussions in the classroom. In fact, this can be a daunting task. The author of this work does a great job on painting a realistic picture of what this entails. The main concepts discussed in this chapter include issues in organizing classroom instruction and the benefits of why classroom discussions are important.

## Chapter 2

*Is Anyone Really Paying Attention?* focuses on how faculty can restructure their classrooms in order to facilitate real classroom discussions. In this chapter, the author discusses different ways in which students participate and do not participate in classroom discussions. Typically, students avoid classroom instruction when faculty have an over reliance on traditional lectures. The author posits that restructuring a college classroom where discussions takes place, creates a more inclusive and active environment. In this chapter, different types of students that avoid classroom discussion are identified. This is an important way for instructors to understand the personality types of students that will emerge in the classroom. The author provides a key point for instructors to use when implementing organized classroom discussions and ways to identify how different personalities will emerge in the classroom; along with ways to manage different personality types. There is an array of strategies suggested in this chapter, such as giving students time to think, using positive reinforcement in the classroom, and asking open-ended questions. Also, using guided notes, and getting to know students; facilitates classroom discussions. All of these strategies are discussed in this chapter as ways to foster classroom discussions.

## Chapter 3

*The Challenge of Dominant Talkers* is one of the more important chapters in this book. It deals with managing discussions around students who become dominant talkers in the classroom. There are many different reasons why some students become an overpowering voice in the classroom. A student's age, gender, race, nationality status, class size, instructor's gender, class seating, course subject, and course level are all factors in whether students participate moderately in classroom discussions or dominate these discussions. Encouraging classroom discussions among quiet students and managing students who over talk are discussed in this chapter. The author also suggests that non-native English speakers have the most anxiety about classroom discussions and creating a safe environment for these students to participate is important. This chapter was particularly salient for college instructors who concern themselves with whether all students will have the opportunity to discuss topics within a classroom setting.

## Chapter 4

*Students' Differing Definitions of the Classroom* focuses on how students interpret or evaluate classrooms where discussions take place. This is a significant chapter since it focuses on how students evaluate equity in college classrooms. Reading this chapter, many questions surfaced, such as: (a) Will students rate a course with less value without the authoritative instructor front and center? (b) Will students view classes based on classroom discussions as not being a real class? (c) Are classrooms where students have agency and autonomy viewed as classes without merit or rigor? And (d) Are students really working in classrooms where discussions rather than rigorous note taking takes place? Thankfully, all of these questions were addressed in this particular chapter. In fact, this section offers many different suggestions for instructors to restructure the classroom alongside students. The author also posits that using the course syllabus and communicating clear expectations during the first few weeks of class is of critical importance. This helps students understand the nature and expectation of discussions within the college classroom.

### **Chapter 5**

*Making Online Discussion Work* focuses on synchronous and asynchronous classroom discussions online. The author defines online synchronous classroom discussions as the discussions that take place with all users or students online at one time. Asynchronous classroom discussion is just the opposite. Users and students log in at different times and engage in discussions during various times and days. Due the nature of online instruction, it is safe to say that most discussions would happen in an asynchronous environment where students can log on at various times. This section offers detailed suggestions on how to foster discussions in both environments. Also, this chapter focuses heavily on the differences between online vs. face-to-face discussion. This chapter also includes various strategies for fostering discussions, managing discussions, and facilitating discussions in an online environment. This section was particularly useful for college instructors who are transitioning from face-to-face to online courses.

### **Chapter 6**

*To Grade or Not to Grade? And Other Conundrums* is the final chapter in this book. This section focuses on assessment of discussions by online and face-to-face instructors. This chapter includes a discussion of whether instructors should assess discussions or allow students to self-assess or do group discussion assessments.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses**

This book presents a strong case for fostering, facilitating, and assessing classroom discussions both online and face-to-face. One of the main strengths of this book, are the many strategies outlined in this work for both new and existing instructors who want to incorporate discussions in the college classroom. College instructors will find it very easy to follow this book for ways to help them understand what they might encounter as they try to implement discussions into the college classroom.

The main weakness of this work was the final chapter on assessment. After reading this section, I expected to see a more concrete set of suggestions dealing with how to assess discussions face-to-face and online format including asynchronous or synchronous environments. There was little guidance in terms of whether instructors should use a checklist, rubric, or simply grant a grade based on students' posting to the discussion forum and/or responding to other students. This was never discussed within the context of this chapter. The authors spent the majority of this chapter discussing peer to peer evaluation and discussing whether discussion groups or online discussion postings should be graded. Additionally, there seems to be an overall assumption in this work that college level administrators are accepting of this type of instruction. I think that providing a little more rationale in the first chapter about getting administrators to accept this as a viable form of instruction is important.

### **Educational Implications**

The reviewer highly recommends this work for those who teach online and want to build a community of learners in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century classrooms. Twenty-first century classrooms focus on experiential learning, active classrooms, using technology, and hands-on learning. Instructors who want to create a more inclusive, active, and meaningful 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom environment through discussions, may find this book useful. Stakeholders, such as graduate students, college instructors, professors, and higher education administrators using this textbook as a guiding point will find it beneficial. More specifically, it is recommended that this book be required reading

for graduate students and graduate teaching assistants who are learning instructional strategies at the graduate and undergraduate levels. This is also a great book for those who want to facilitate a faculty teaching workshop through a university Center for Teaching platform. Additionally, this is a great textbook for face-to-face and online instructors across disciplines in higher education, who want to use classroom discussions to foster engagement among students. After reading this book, instructors will truly understand what it means to engage students in meaningful classroom interactions through classroom discussions.

#### **About the Author**

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