

## From Class Work to Field Work: Tools for Engaging Students in Dialogue and Reflection

### Engaging Students in Dialogue

**Four Corners:** Best used to introduce a concept that could be approached in different ways based on personal experiences, philosophies, likes, etc. Post four possibilities on four sheets of flip chart paper, in 4 corners of the room. Ask students to go to the corner that best represents them and discuss with others why they traveled to that corner. Following small group discussions, have a member of each group summarize the group's perspective in a large group discussion. The activity gives students a chance to explore the concept from a personal to a more general level and to learn more about varied perspectives on a given topic.

**Think, Pair, Share:** This strategy is used to introduce a new concept or to draw out ideas from a previous reading assignment or field-based experience. Develop a question to stimulate students' thinking, and ask them to spend 2 – 3 minutes individually thinking and about and answering the question. Following this, have students discuss their responses with a partner, and then share a collective response in small groups or with the whole group. This activity is a welcome one for students who prefer to think quietly before participating in a discussion and tends to give them more of an opportunity to share their responses. It also shows the power of moving from individual thinking to whole group sharing. "Think, pair, share" can be used effectively in larger classes as a strategy for engaging students in discussion without too much transition time.

**Metaphors:** Divide students in pairs or small groups and ask them to develop a metaphor for a given concept. Metaphors may be discussed verbally, or may be recorded on flip chart paper, with or without drawing and graphics. Have groups share their metaphors with the larger group, using the collective metaphors to generate a broader discussion of the topic. Metaphors stimulate creative thinking and discussion, encourage the identification of common themes, and draw on the strengths of learners whose strengths lie in the creative realm.

**Cooperative group learning:** Cooperative groups provide a more structured way to get small groups to complete tasks or activities. Specific roles are assigned to aid in task completion and relationship building, including: facilitator, recorder, reporter, time keeper. The facilitator guides the group through the task, the recorder keeps notes, the reporter reports out afterwards to the large group, and the time keeper keeps people on task. Group membership may be planned in advance to ensure that students with varied strengths and skills are involved. Cooperative groups with consistent membership may be used over time for the purpose of having groups complete a long-term assignment or project. If used in this way, tasks should be rotated to ensure equal participation and distribution of responsibilities. Students may need to be instructed in the finer aspects of cooperative group learning, such as observing norms, providing time to process the work, etc.

**Creative activities:** In addition to the use of metaphors, try other creative activities, such as getting groups to respond to questions through role plays, creative drama, "craft projects," story

telling, etc. Questions to be used as prompts for these activities should try to draw out critical learning objectives. Each of these taps into different learner styles and often results in the generation of creative ideas, increased motivation, and fun!

**Gallery walk:** After completing an activity in which groups have recorded their answers on flip chart paper (e.g., the Metaphor activity), have each group post its responses on the wall. Use a “counting off” system to divide students into mixed groups in which one member from each of the previous groups is represented in each new group. Have groups move from member of each posting to the next, allowing about 3 minutes for the viewing of each piece in the “gallery.” Ask groups to write down their responses to each piece. Conversations should be limited to the option of asking the original “author” to clarify points being illustrated. At the conclusion of the activity, invite the entire group to discuss common themes as well as differences among the pieces represented in the gallery.

**Jigsaw reading and discussion:** Identify a relatively short piece of reading that can be broken down into 3 – 5 parts. Break students into the same number of groups and have each group read and discuss one part. You may wish to provide a prompting question that applies across the readings. Groups are then asked to share a summary of their discussion with the group as a whole so that the class gains an understanding of the entire reading. Alternatively, ask each group to not only summarize the piece that they read, but to pose additional questions to the large group that will deepen the large group discussion.

**K-W-L (i.e., Know, Want to know, Learn):** The K-W-L is used to introduce students to a topic and to help the instructor identify what students do and don’t know as they begin the study of the topic. The class is asked to brainstorm ideas around the following questions:

**K:** What do you already **know** about this topic?

**W:** What do you **want** to know?

**L** (following more information given over on or two class sessions): What did you **learn** about the topic?

**Last word:** This activity is used to explore individual responses to a short reading assignment, which may be pre-assigned or assigned during the class. Following the reading opportunity, students are asked to identify four or five points that are meaningful to them. In small groups, students take turns reading their favorite marked selection. Following the reading by one student, each of the other students in the group offers a comment about what the passage means to them. No one is allowed to comment on individual comments, but the original reader gets the “last word.” Time needs to be allotted so that each participant has a chance to read his/her selection. The activity is an excellent one for creating equal participation and promoting listening skills. As a variation, students may be allowed to ask one clarifying question per comment.

**Questions for others:** Following a reading assignment or lecture, break the class into groups of 4 – 5 each and assign each group a sub-topic for discussion. Ask groups to discuss their particular topic in more detail and to write down 3 - 4 questions to pass on to the next group for discussion. Questions may be passed around until all groups have had a chance to respond to all questions. One extension of this activity is to have the first group write its questions on a piece of flip chart paper, and have each subsequent group answer the questions by writing on the

corresponding paper. This activity helps to extend initial learning and makes students accountable for generating broader questions about a given topic.

**Whip around:** “Whip arounds” are best used at the beginning or the end of a class to generate a quick sense of what has been learned through a previous lecture or reading assignment, or to summarize the learning that has occurred during a whole class. Pose a question and ask each student to respond quickly to that question until all students have had a chance to give an answer. Students should be given the right to “pass” if they are not ready to answer; however, the goal is to have everyone participate. As an alternative, create a whip around in which each person must build upon the previous person’s idea as they answer your question.

### **Encouraging Reflection**

**Journal writing:** Journal writing offers many possibilities for encouraging reflection. Students may be asked to keep a semester long journal in which they are asked to link classroom and experiential learning by responding to prompts posed by the instructor, addressing goals that they have set for themselves, or linking specific course concepts to their experiences in the field. Completed journal entries invite specific feedback from the instructor. They may also be shared with other students at the beginning or end of class in order to identify common themes evident across students’ experiences.

**Discussion prompts:** Prompts can be used in a variety of ways to help students make connections between their class work and field work. Prompts or “essential questions” can be posed prior to class on-line, during class as the focus of small group discussions, or as an “exit strategy” in which students spend the last five minutes of class responding in writing to the prompt.

**Structured problem-solving:** This approach involves setting aside time in class for students to work in small groups to address challenges and questions arising in their field experiences. Time may be structured so that each student has at least one opportunity throughout the semester to present a challenge to his/her small group and to engage in a group problem solving process with peers. This activity works best when the instructor identifies and teaches a problem-solving protocol that the group can use to address each case study.

**Research briefs:** Students are asked to create “research briefs” in which they explore research related to their field work. Research briefs might also be presented as annotated bibliographies or abstracts, and can be shared with peers in small groups and/or electronically.

**Poster sessions:** Provide time near the end of the semester for students to present their field work through a “poster session” or “research fair.” It works well to split the class into two groups and to provide time for each half to display their work while other half of the class and the instructor view the work.

**The “so what—now what?” prompt:** Journal writing, class discussions and the research fair all provide ideal formats in which to ask students to reflect on the “so what” question of their field work/research. Students may think about the implications of their work in relation to themselves, the content of the class, stakeholders, or the field as a whole. In addition, they may be asked to reflect on the “now what?” aspects of their research, i.e., the “next steps” that they or others may decide to take as a result of engagement in the initial research or field work.

**Observations:** Ideally, instructors will have the opportunity to observe each student in the field one or more times during the semester. Prior to observations, students may be asked to identify things that they would like the instructor to focus on during the observation, and/or to identify ways in which the instructor is likely to see connections between their field work and class work. Alternatives to instructor observations include structured peer observations, and observations by mentors, both of which may be summarized in writing for the instructor’s review.