**Stand or Sit: Facilitating class discussions in larger, lower-level courses**

**Abstract**

Class discussions are excellent pedagogical strategies but, having students voice their opinions can be challenging. The challenge of engagement is often worse in larger classes and among more junior students who have not developed to the skills of voicing their opinions in class. In this session, I will discuss and demonstrate my “stand/sit” strategy, a small twist to typical discussions, that I use to encourage discussions in a larger, lower-level course.

**Keywords**

Class discussion, active learning, student participation

**Introduction**

In this session, participants will participate in and quickly learn my “stand/sit” strategy for encouraging whole-group class discussions. Whole-class discussions can be particularly challenging in larger classes because students will rely on a few students who are always willing to participate. Facilitating discussion in lower-level courses is also challenging because students have not developed the skills needed to synthesize information, form and opinion, and then express those thoughts. Thus, the combination of a larger, lower-level course may discourage use of entirely discussion-based classes. “Stand/sit” is a simple method of posing yes/no questions and having students stand if they agree (yes) and sit if the disagree (no). I use this strategy in

the *Business and Management Responsibility* course. Stand/sit can be used to facilitate any class discussion, in perhaps, any course but is particularly useful in classes that are designed to be discussion based such as business ethics.

**Theoretical Foundation**

Discussion is a useful classroom strategy. Within the category of “active learning,” discussions are believed to improve student engagement, reflection, and critical thinking by requiring students to synthesize information, apply personal examples, and develop informed opinions. Because of the benefits of class discussion, many have discussed appropriate strategies for assessing and evaluating student contributions (Mainkar, 2008) and strategies for facilitating discussion in both face-to-face and online platforms (Comer & Lenaghan, 2012). When facilitating discussions, instructors must prepare thoughtful questions and provide the students the tools they need to provide meaningful contributions. There are also many considerations about methods to include shy or less-vocal students such as allowing moments for personal reflection or time to work in pairs or small groups (Ewens, 1986). All these strategies to encourage class discussion suggest the much effort is needed to effectively facilitate class discussion both for the instructor and the student. The basic goal of all these efforts, however, is simple: to get students to speak.

At times, despite the best efforts, motivating students to speak is a challenge, particularly when you want a whole-class discussion. While pairs and small groups are important, whole-class discussions help to solidify topics for the entire class and bring out ideas and opinions from the small groups to the whole class. It’s disappointing, however, when lively small group discussions turn to complete silence when it’s time to discuss as a class. As a brand-new assistant professor, I was particularly challenged because my experience with class discussions were mostly for my honors thesis cohort (15 students) and my doctoral seminars (5-10 students). When I adapted similar strategies of beginning class with open-ended, thought-provoking questions to my class of 25-35 students, I was surprised to find that I was not met with engaged, critical discussion. I was met with silence. Painful silence. I was surprised because I used all the “right” strategies of preparing, asking appropriate questions, and I gave them time to work in groups to organize their thoughts.

I soon learned that the larger class size allowed my students to engage a type of social loafing in which the more talkative students would offer their opinions to minimize the silence. After a few weeks, I adopted a stand/sit strategy to encourage participation. Somewhat aligned with strategy of “cold calls” (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2006), I began using provocative questions and statements that were framed as yes/no.

The yes/no frame of the question was challenging to decide on because typical strategies for “good” discussion questions were to always begin with an open-ended question that has no right answer (Ewens, 1986). To my surprise, instead of shutting down the discussion quickly because students simply select yes or no, using yes/no phrasing forces students to choose. They can only sit or stand which means their literal body position represents their answer to the question. The signaling response of standing or sitting becomes equivalent to raising their hand (facilitating a quasi-cold call). Also, the physical movement forces them to (perhaps very quickly) begin to craft a rational for their response. Because they are either standing or sitting, they are prepared to be called on to articulate their thoughts/opinions.

**Learning Objectives for Students**

1. Formulate opinions based on course materials
2. Take responsibility for class engagement
3. Observe various opinions of classmates
4. Support their opinions

**Exercise Overview**

1. Ask students to stand
2. Post a Yes/No question or statement
   1. Although phrased as yes/no, this question or statement should still be ambiguous and have no correct answer. This exercise is not meant to simply test students’ memory of the course readings.
3. Ask those who agree (Yes) to remain standing. Those who disagree (No), sit down.
4. Assess the proportion of the class that is standing vs. sitting.
   1. This is important for students to recognize commonalities and differences in the opinions of their peers
5. Call on students who are standing and ask why they agree with the statement.
6. Call on students who are sitting and ask why they disagree with the statement.
7. Summarize student opinions and ask next question.

I usually use this discussion format at the end of the class after my students have done some work answering questions in small groups. This strategy could also be used at the beginning of the class, but I find that lower-level students are not used to forming opinions based on course materials before class. So, this worked better when they had time to warm up and spent most of the class doing an activity or small group discussion. Also, given that students must stand, I find it provides a surge of energy at the end of class.

The only material required is a way to project questions at the front of the classroom (i.e., projector screen, writing on board). The length of time varies, depending on the number of questions and the discussion could last 2 minutes or 20. It is important to remember that many students are standing so the activity should not go on too long. I also found that as certain responses resulted in longer, more engaged discussions, the students naturally sat down as they began to fatigue from standing.

It was also interesting to ask contradicting or building questions sequentially. This allows the discussion to develop step-by-step and allows the instructor to use the opinions to previous statements to question and challenge current discussions.

**Session Description**

1. Opening introduction/discussion (5 minutes)
   1. Introduction to the session and how this session was born from my discussions falling flat my first semester and inviting participants to share their experiences with discussions in class or entirely-discussion based classes.
   2. Identify reasons why discussion is difficult for larger classes and for lower-level students (freshman/sophomores).
2. Class simulation (10 minutes)
   1. Transition to simulation to demonstrate the difference between “traditional” discussion questions and the “stand/sit” method.
      1. Traditional: How do you think students feel about class discussions?
      2. Stand/sit: Students believe class discussion and fun and engaging.
   2. After demonstrating the difference in the style of questions, we will complete another exercise with questions/topics I used in my course.
      1. Traditional: How do you personally feel about sweatshops?
      2. Sit/stand: Sweatshops only exploit workers.
   3. I will also demonstrate alternative variations to questions.
      1. There is too much corporate money in US politics.
      2. What if: The NRA wants to give $5 million to a super PAC to run ads for conservative candidates in the southeast. **Should that funding be limited?**
      3. What if: Patagonia offered $20 million to support a candidate who make climate change the number one issue on their campaign platform. **Should that funding be limited?**
3. Debrief (10 minutes)
   1. Did you feel different being in “a class” with the open-ended question versus the Y/N question? How so?
   2. What did you feel?
   3. Discussion from participants if they believe the standing is exactly the reason for more engagement.
4. Open discussion for facilitating discussion (5 minutes)
   1. My strategy is certainly one of many. Given the belief that class-based discussions are beneficial, it would be useful for the session participants to offer ideas and concerns that we can discuss as a group to improve the discussion in our own classes.

**References**

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