

Valuing “Half-Formed” Thoughts in Class Discussions

Students love to participate in good class discussions, and we know that well-run discussions can help students learn from one another and help them practice speaking in front of others. As Joan Retallack and Juliana Spahr explain, “the collaborative making of meaning that is possible in a classroom is at its most productive and enlivening in an intertextual, conversational milieu.” But how do we set up the conditions for a productive, lively discussion? Of course, students need to prepare thoughtfully before coming to class in order to participate. Furthermore, we should set [ground rules](#) for respectful discourse. In this particular teaching tip, however, I want to spotlight the most important technique that I use for getting a good discussion to happen during class: valuing “half-formed” thoughts.

On the first day of class and in my syllabus, I share with my students R. Keith Sawyer’s idea that the “best learning takes place when learners articulate their own unformed and still-developing understanding and continue to articulate it through the process of learning.” I tell them the story of how in contemporary American society, we tend to allow people in power like professors or CEOs to think out-loud, but that those with less power like students and employees rarely get the chance to talk out their ideas. Instead, the latter usually must compose their contribution to a discussion *in toto* before they risk sharing it for fear of judgment or worse. I then explain that our class provides a chance for all of us to practice thinking out-loud and making meaning together.

Most of the time, I can hear a gasp of realization of this truth and a rustle of excitement as they begin to realize that it will be okay for them to try out their ill-formed questions and even half-baked notions in class. I then take it as my job to help students clarify their questions and thinking and, when appropriate, offer a mini-lecture regarding points of fact or get other students to build on one another’s ideas. Admittedly, this strategy produces messy conversations that sometimes don’t have clear conclusions. I warn my students about this and reassure them by saying that solving real problems requires experimentation, false starts, failures and risk. We use class discussions to figure out the subtleties of a problem and try out possible approaches. I say that each of us has chances to practice producing linear, fully-formed arguments in our essay writing. In class, however, we have a precious opportunity to think out-loud together, one that, if practiced now, will serve them well in group settings in the future.

Now, how do I make sure that everyone participates in a discussion? I have many tips for that. And I am sure that you have many more. Another time...

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