Peer and Self-Evaluation of Participation in Discussion

We often focus on presentation skills as oral communication skills, but students more frequently need to either lead or contribute to productive group discussions. Small group discussions can easily go off the rails when students indulge in off-topic talking, inadequate listening, and disrespectful behavior. The dynamic quality of class discussion presents challenges to faculty who would like to hold students accountable for the quality of their participation in these discussions.

Multhaup (2008) describes how to prepare students for substantive class discussions and suggests two strategies for evaluating student contributions to class discussion. Many of these strategies can be adapted for the online environment.

Establish ground rules for effective class discussion (first week of class)
Establish expectations for class discussions by facilitating a think-pair-share activity during the first week of the term.

- *Think.* Ask students to reflect silently on the characteristics of great class discussions they've experienced and identify things that undermine a good discussion.
- *Pair.* Students discuss their thoughts in pairs (not naming any specific courses, professors, or students).
- *Share.* Bring the class together as a group and ask pairs to discuss the highlights of their discussion.

Use the comments from the group discussion to identify some ground rules and expectations for individual participation in class discussion during the remainder of the term.

Adaptation for eLearning: Create a threaded discussion based on questions such as
- What kinds of contributions to an online discussion make the thread worth reading?
- What kinds of contributions help you learn course concepts?
- What kinds of contributions are not helpful?

Peer evaluation of the quality of participation in discussion
Require students to complete a Participation Survey 3 or 4 times during the term. Each student must complete the following three evaluation elements for every student in the class, including themselves:

1. [Student name]: needs to talk more / talks about the right amount / needs to talk less
2. [Student name] 6-point rating of the quality of contributions to discussions (1 = *unacceptable, added nothing to discussions,* 6 = *outstanding, comments in every class have been helpful*)
3. Open-ended comment about the student's role either as a discussion facilitator or participant

Compile the collective (anonymous) feedback for individual students and distribute this feedback to each student. If necessary, edit comments or add your own comments.

Adaptation for eLearning: Create a dropbox assignment or survey in eLearning in which students answer these questions. You can make completion of the feedback a graded assignment (completed/not completed), compile the feedback information for individual students, and distribute this feedback through the course email function or provide it as feedback in the dropbox.

If you ask students to facilitate discussion, gather peer feedback about this skill
After each facilitated discussion, members of a discussion group complete a peer feedback survey for the discussion leader. The peer feedback answers the following questions:

1. I was prepared for the discussion (true/false)
2. The discussion leader was organized and prepared (6-point rating scale)
3. The discussion leader asked good questions (6-point rating scale)
4. The discussion/activity helped increase my understanding (6-point rating scale)
5. Describe one thing the discussion leader did well
6. What might the discussion leader have done differently to make the discussion better?
7. Other comments (optional)
8. Overall evaluation of today's class (6-point rating scale)

Provide feedback several times during the term to enable students to improve their participation and discussion skills over time.

Resources:
Multhaup, K. S. (2008, Spring). Using class discussions to improve oral communication skills. *Teaching Tips* (APA Division 20 – Adult Development and Aging).

http://apadiv20.phhp.ufl.edu/Teachtips/TeachingTipsFeb08discussionB.pdf

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