

# Written Conversations

Classroom discussion is a core teaching method in the theology classroom. Discussion allows the students to respond to topics or texts, to seek clarification, to express their own understandings, and to relate topics to their own lived experience. Most teachers make use of several techniques for generating discussion.

## Options for Class Discussion

Whole-class discussion is usually led by the teacher. The teacher asks a question and an individual student replies. Often the teacher demonstrates active listening, summarizing the student's view and then asking another student to respond. Student comments are usually directed to the teacher, and the teacher offers feedback, but sometimes a student responds directly to another student. Picture the scene: many students remain silent, listening to the comments of others; their body language may express disagreement, impatience, or downright exasperation! Some of the students may be formulating their thoughts about the first point while the discussion moves forward to the second and third point. Others may not even be listening. One or two students may dominate the discussion, and sometimes the teacher does most of the talking!

Teachers know that large-group discussion can be effective: questions thrown out to the class encourage the students to think about what they have heard or read. Whole-class discussion can break up a lecture without consuming too much time, and it can expose the class to the thinking of those who are verbal, quick to form opinions, and eager to share their views.

Then there is the small-group discussion. This technique can be more time-consuming and sometimes involves rearranging chairs, desks, and backpacks. Often the teacher provides written questions, assigns roles within the small groups, and circulates among groups to make sure the students are on task. After the small groups have met, they may share findings or discussion points with the class. Again picture the small group you've observed. Some of the students remain silent while others dominate. Often no one in the group has the skill or confidence to ask follow-up questions, so views are expressed but never probed. Some groups go off-topic after less than a minute; others sit mute waiting for the next task.

Many teachers make excellent use of small-group discussion, especially if they have been attentive to group dynamics and have provided good questions. Quiet students are often willing to share their views in a small group of four to six peers. Assignments that result in a product, such as a list of characteristics, are especially effective for small groups.

Finally, there is the share-with-your-neighbor approach. The teacher asks a simple question, and the students turn to someone seated nearby to exchange views. This very quick technique can feel spontaneous and helps to break up a class without introducing a time-consuming activity. It doesn't allow quiet or uninterested students to sit out the discussion, thus engaging everyone. Some of the students may feel put on the spot, especially if they require thinking time or are seated near students they don't know.

Each of these techniques for introducing discussion, encouraging further thought, and allowing expression of divergent views can be used effectively. Each should be part of every teacher's repertoire—and undoubtedly each is familiar to theology teachers.



## Writing Instead of Speaking

Here's another technique you may not have thought of: asking students to dialogue with each other in writing. Ask pairs of students to write a series of simultaneous notes to one another in response to a particular question or to an exercise the class has done. Each student writes a statement, and then exchanges papers with a partner. Each reads the other's statement and responds to it. You may determine the length of the statements, the time allotted for each statement, and the number of exchanges.

Like whole-class discussion, this technique invites deeper thought and exposes the students to each other's views. Like small-group discussion, it may seem less intimidating to quiet students, and like sharing-with-your-neighbor, it requires everyone in the class to voice an opinion. The students involved in written conversation benefit in several ways:

- They get to know other students individually.
- They learn to listen to another's ideas.
- They practice responding to others' views.
- They may develop skill at persuasion.
- They experience being heard.
- They receive feedback on their own thinking.

## Planning Written Conversation

You may want to consider several points as you plan to use written conversations.

### How Will You Pair the Students?

Assigning partners gives students less autonomy but allows you to meet students' individual needs. Consider the class dynamic. Are there students who could benefit from being paired with a skilled writer? with an extrovert? with a critical thinker? with someone whose views provide a strong foil? with a student who stays on task? with someone who is not a close friend? Do all of your students already know one another, are they all new to your school, or will most know some classmates but not others? The answers to these kinds of questions will help you to determine whether to assign pairs or to allow the students to choose their own partners, and whether partnerships will last for the semester, change with each assignment, or be sustained for a fixed number of exercises.

### How Will You Generate Topics for Writing?

Consider taking different approaches for different sessions. You can tap the students for topics for introductory exercises where students get to know one another. Small groups could create questions that reflect different levels of critical thinking. Of course you will often want to steer the students to emphasize a certain point, and questions you generate yourself are best suited for that. Also consider open-ended exchanges, where students simply respond to a class exercise with no specific question to answer.



## What Parameters Will You Set?

Decide on the logistics of the exercise, taking in to account the nature of the topic and questions. How much time will you allow for students to write, or will you leave the time open-ended? Will you suggest a range for the number of sentences each partner must write? Will papers be exchanged once, twice, or more often? Will you allow the students to discuss their written exchanges once they have finished writing? How will partners share insights with the class? Will you ask for a summary or for one interesting point? Will the students restate their own views, or share those of their partners?

Written conversation is one more tool in the teacher's discussion-generating toolbox. Students may enjoy the novelty of discussing ideas in a nonstandard way. You may find that they take to this method easily, because texting is their primary way of communicating with one another when not face-to-face. And they may even appreciate taking a break to write during a long school day that is dominated by talk.

