



Classroom Discussion

The words, in the order you would say them: three openings, a closing for when the period is gone, a second pass two weeks later, and one redirect line.

College and high school.

The activity most often used, and the one most likely to run through you one student at a time. What follows is the words, in the order you would say them. Bracketed text is yours to fill in. Pick the opening that fits the time you have left, then take the closing and the one redirect line.

*The failure is documented rather than suspected. An analysis of 36 airline crew debriefs found instructors talking more than the crews and rarely allowing silence. Dieckmann and colleagues coded real debriefings into four interaction patterns, and only one, which they call the **net**, involves participants referring to each other at all. The others run through the instructor like spokes. Every script below is written to get students talking to each other instead.*

Opening 1. Write before anyone speaks

Three minutes, silent. The cheapest fix for the spoke problem, because everyone then has something to say and you can call on anyone without ambushing them.

“Before anybody says anything out loud, three minutes, and write. One sentence on what happened. One sentence on why it happened, and I do not want a reason that is about somebody’s personality. One sentence on what surprised you. This is not graded and you will keep it, but you are going to read from it in a minute.”

“Time. [Name], read me your second sentence. Just the sentence, no preface.”

Opening 2. Vent, bounded and announced as bounded

Five minutes. Wedig puts this first on purpose: students decompress, and the complaints they raise become the agenda for the analysis that follows. Write the recurring ones on the board as they come.

“Five minutes to complain, and I mean five. Tell me what was unfair, what was rigged, what you could not get anybody to listen to. I am writing these on the board and I am not answering any of them yet.”

“That is time. Look at the board. Four of you said some version of the same thing [point to it]. We are going to spend the rest of the period on why that happened, and I do not think the answer is that anybody in this room was unreasonable.”

Opening 3. Step out of role, out loud

Thirty seconds each, so about seven minutes in a class of fifteen. Use it whenever students argued positions they find objectionable. It changes the register of everything after it.

“Before we analyze anything: your own name, the role you played, and one thing you actually think that your role could not say. Thirty seconds each. I will start.”

Shaw and Switky note that simulations can be emotionally intense and that instructors should help students step out of role and recognize that their opponents are classmates. That is as close as political science comes to a stated norm here. There is no accepted model for this and no evidence base for any version of it.

The closing. Five minutes, standing, when the period is gone

Use it when the simulation ran long, which it will. Do not sit back down. The standing is part of it, because it signals that this is not a new activity and nobody starts packing.

“Stay standing, this takes five minutes and it is the most important five minutes of the day. Three questions, one sentence each, and I am going around the room so you do not have to volunteer.

First: name one moment when somebody in this room moved you off a position. Not a good speech, a moment you actually changed. [Go around.]

Second: one thing you will do differently next time. [Go around.]

Third: one sentence on what this session got wrong about how [the institution] really works. You will have noticed something. [Go around.]”

The second pass. Two weeks later

Ten to twenty minutes of a later class, after the papers are back. Wedig recommends reusing the simulation as a case study; this is the cheapest version. It also gives you a second pass at the students who said nothing the first time.

“Two weeks ago [person] held out on [issue] until the last ten minutes and then traded it. That has a name, and it is in the reading for today. [Name it.] I want to compare what happened in this room to what happened in [the real case], and I want you to tell me where the comparison breaks down, because it will. You have the advantage over the authors here: you have actually been in the room.”

The one line to have ready

When a student starts criticizing another student’s conduct rather than their argument:

“Hold on. You are describing what [the delegation] did. Tell me what the person sitting there had been instructed to do, and then tell me whether you would have done differently.”