to become oneself for allowing things to get off track. Frequently, it seems to be a question of dealing with these situations. Here is a reminder: Part of the problem is the conversation when these things happen. Part of the problem is the conversation when these things happen. Part of the problem is the conversation when these things happen. Part of the problem is the conversation when these things happen. Part of the problem is the conversation when these things happen. Part of the problem is the conversation when these things happen. Part of the problem is the conversation when these things happen. Part of the problem is the conversation when these things happen. Part of the problem is the conversation when these things happen. Part of the problem is the conversation when these things happen. Part of the problem is the conversation when these things happen. Part of the problem is the conversation when these things happen. Part of the problem is the conversation when these things happen. Part of the problem is the conversation when these things happen. Part of the problem is the conversation when these things happen.
it is often possible to revive discussion and regain the sense of “controlled spontaneity” (Welty, 1989, p. 47) characteristic of good conversation.

This is not to say, however, that we regard discussion as a panacea for turning bored, disinterested, or hostile students into enthusiastic advocates for learning. Neither do we believe that simply talking about problems leads inevitably to students’ deciding to take action to address pressing social concerns. As we argued in Chapters One and Two, discussions, in general, tend to increase motivation, promote engagement with difficult material, and give people appreciation for what they can learn from one another and for what can be accomplished as a group. But we want to acknowledge that we have both been responsible for classes where discussion failed miserably, inducing boredom, resentment, and confusion. We have no magic formula to guarantee success, just some ideas that have proved useful to rejuvenate conversations that seem to be stuck.

Sometimes a discussion can be considered successful even if the original intentions of the leader go unrealized. When participants learn that a problem is more complex than they had thought or when their appreciation for existing differences is deepened, these can be counted as significant accomplishments, even though they might be different from the teacher’s anticipated outcomes. We can say unequivocally, however, that discussion fails when participants avoid similar dialogical encounters in the future or when they lose interest in the topics under consideration. If part of the point is to keep conversation going, to stimulate people to keep talking in the future, then discussions that inhibit this desire must be regarded as counterproductive and miseducational.

The question remains, what conditions inhibit dialogue and what measures can be taken to overcome them? This chapter and the next will focus on a variety of procedures to keep discussion moving and propose ways to make discussion a process of continuous discovery and mutual enlightenment. Getting students to view problems from a variety of perspectives and helping them frame these problems more critically and creatively helps keep discussion fresh. How teachers maintain the pace of the discussion, how they use questioning and listening to engage students in probing subject matter, and how they group students for instruction all affect how the discussion proceeds and how motivated the students are to participate in similar discussions in the future.

**Questioning**

To reiterate, an important focus of democratic discussion should be on getting as many people as possible deeply engaged in the conversation. Whatever the teacher says and does should facilitate and promote this level of engagement. As a number of commentators have pointed out, at the heart of sustaining an engaging discussion are the skills of questioning, listening, and responding (Christensen, 1991a, 1991b; Jacobson, 1984; Welty, 1989). Of the three, learning to question takes the most practice and skill (Freire, 1993; Bateman, 1990). Although it is certainly true that the kinds of questions one asks to begin a discussion set an important tone, it is equally true that subsequent questions asked by both the teacher and the students can provide a powerful impetus for sustaining discussion. Indeed, as Palmer (1998) has noted, how we ask questions can make the difference between a discussion that goes nowhere and one that turns into a “complex communal dialogue that bounces all around the room” (p. 154).

**Types of Questions**

Once the discussion is moving along, several kinds of questions are particularly helpful in maintaining momentum.

**Questions That Ask for More Evidence**

These questions are asked when participants state an opinion that seems unconnected to what's already been said or that someone else in the group thinks is erroneous, unsupported, or unjustified. The question should be asked as a simple request for more information, not as a challenge to the speaker's intelligence. Here are some examples:

How do you know that?
What data is that claim based on?
What does the author say that supports your argument?
Open Questions

How does your opinion relate to the group decision last week?

How does your opinion relate to the group decision last week?

Is there any evidence between what you've just said and where you were staying a moment ago?

Are there any examples of such questions?

Liking or expression of expression questions:

Thinking or expression questions

Who do you think many people should help lies in education-de-

What evidence would you give to someone who doubted your

Where did you find that view expressed in the text?
students to draw on their knowledge and experience to come up with plausible scenarios. Because such questions encourage highly creative responses, they can sometimes cause learners to veer off into unfamiliar and seemingly tangential realms. But with a group that is reluctant to take risks or that typically answers in a perfunctory, routinized manner, the hypothetical question can provoke flights of fancy that can take a group to a new level of engagement and understanding.

Here are some examples of hypothetical questions:

How might World War II have turned out if Hitler had not decided to attack the Soviet Union in 1941?

What might have happened to the career of Orson Welles if RKO Studios had not tampered with his second film, The Magnificent Ambersons?

In the video we just saw, how might the discussion have been different if the leader had refrained from lecturing the group?

If Shakespeare had intended Iago to be a tragic or more sympathetic figure, how might he have changed the narrative of Othello?

Cause-and-Effect Questions

Questions that provoke students to explore cause-and-effect linkages are fundamental to developing critical thought. Questions that ask students to consider the relationship between class size and academic achievement or to consider why downtown parking isves double on days when there’s a game at the stadium encourage them to investigate conventional wisdom. Asking the class-size question might prompt other questions concerning the discussion method itself, for example:

What is likely to be the effect of raising the average class size from twenty to thirty on the ability of learners to conduct interesting and engaging discussions?

How might halving our class size affect our discussion?

Summary and Synthesis Questions

Finally, one of the most valuable types of questions that teachers can ask invites students to summarize or synthesize what has been thought and said. These questions call on participants to identify important ideas and think about them in ways that will aid recall. For instance, the following questions are usually appropriate and illuminating:

What are the one or two most important ideas that emerged from this discussion?

What remains unresolved or contentious about this topic?

What do you understand better as a result of today’s discussion?

Based on our discussion today, what do we need to talk about next time if we’re to understand this issue better?

What key word or concept best captures our discussion today?

By skillfully mixing all the different kinds of questions outlined in this chapter, teachers can alter the pace and direction of conversation, keeping students alert and engaged. Although good teachers prepare questions beforehand to ensure variety and movement, they also readily change their plans as the actual discussion proceeds, abandoning prepared questions and formulating new ones on the spot.

The Case Against Teacher Questions

James Dillon (1994) begins his discussion about teacher questions with the following unambiguous injunction: “Do not put questions to students during a discussion” (p. 78). He claims that when teachers start asking questions, discussion turns into recitation, which inhibits student deliberation and exchange. Instead, he says, teachers should find other means to stimulate participation and thought. Dillon allows only two exceptions to this: (1) the initiating question posed at the beginning of a discussion to orient the participants and set the boundaries for the conversation and (2) the “self-perplexing question” that the teacher may raise once or twice during the course of a discussion out of “genuine wonderment” (p. 79). As an alternative to asking questions, Dillon urges teachers to develop a broad repertoire of responses to student comments and questions. This repertoire includes statements,
Participating in discussions requires some skills and strategies. Here are some tips on how to be an active participant in group discussions:

1. **Listen actively:** Pay attention to what others are saying. Avoid interrupting or dismissing others' contributions.
2. **Ask clarifying questions:** If you're unsure about something, ask for clarification. This shows you're engaged and interested in the topic.
3. **Contribute thoughtfully:** Share your thoughts and opinions, but do so in a way that adds value to the discussion. Avoid dominating the conversation.
4. **Use 'I' statements:** When expressing your opinions, use 'I' statements instead of 'you' statements. This helps prevent the conversation from turning into a personal attack.
5. **Summarize and paraphrase:** Reiterate and summarize what others have said. This helps ensure that everyone is on the same page.
6. **Stay respectful:** Maintain a respectful and professional tone. Avoid using derogatory language or making hurtful comments.

By following these tips, you can become a more effective participant in discussions and contribute to a productive learning environment.
Because listening is such an important part of successful discussion, you are going to engage in an active listening exercise to gain practice in attending closely to another person's message. You will be paired with another person for about ten minutes. One of you will assume the role of the speaker, and the other will serve as the listener. The speaker will have no more than five minutes to talk about something personal; then we will reverse roles for another five minutes. Although the speaker's words are important, the burden is on the listener to make this exercise successful. The listener doesn't just passively receive the words of the speaker; she must attend carefully to their meaning. This means she uses every resource at her disposal to show that her first priority is witnessing and understanding the speaker's words. Body language, eye contact, head nodding, paraphrasing of the speaker's meaning, and echoing the actual words are all part of the active listening process.

If you are the listener, you may ask questions to get clarification on key points, but please ask them sparingly. This activity can feel a little awkward, especially when you're just parroting another person's words. Echoing is OK, but don't take it to an extreme; try to keep your responses varied. Take this activity seriously, but try to enjoy it as well. Most of all, when it's your turn to be the listener, devote every ounce of your attention to the speaker's message. To listen this closely can be exhilarating and illuminating.

This exercise not only enhances communicative accuracy but also gives students valuable practice in empathizing with others and in simply accepting what is heard without imposing interpretations or making premature judgments. It follows closely the protocol for active listening developed by Gordon (1977) and others. As Palmer (1998) notes, it is sometimes tiring to listen to another person this attentively, but making the effort helps us catch the cues, shades of meaning, and emotions that we miss when not attending so carefully. This exercise is also a simple way to affirm others, to show them what they say and think matters a great deal. Of course, paired listening is very different from discussion in large groups, where participants must attend to many diverse voices, but it is a useful first step in practicing the kind of respectful listening that supports all good discussion.

Hearing the Subject

Palmer (1998, p. 98) reminds us of something that is easy to forget—the four turns to the value of listening well. "There are really three parties to the conversation," he says, "the teacher, the students, and the subject itself." Of these three parties, the subject is the most frequently neglected, but it too has a voice that "we must strain to hear... beyond all our interpretations." Although interpretive filtering is inevitable, Palmer advises that a text, a lecture, a film, or even a picture needs to be understood, at least initially, on its own terms. The tendency to jump to conclusions that fit personal experience or that address a currently pressing problem should be resisted to allow the relatively unfiltered message of the subject to come through.

One way to learn to listen to the subject is through an exercise similar to paired listening that puts the focus on the subject instead of another person. In this exercise, students "listen" to a text, film, or picture and try to paraphrase and echo as much of what they witness as possible. They try to "hear" the subject even if what they encounter at first seems quite incomprehensible. Here are the instructions:

You have done some active listening exercises that were intended to give you practice in comprehending what others are saying. Now I want you to try an exercise called “hearing the subject.” We sometimes read a text or view a film that is quickly dismissed because at first glance it doesn’t make much sense. But by giving that text or film another chance, by “listening” more closely to its meanings and forms of expression, we discover surprising and revealing dimensions to it.

Take about thirty minutes to witness one of the following: (1) a short scene from a twentieth-century existentialist play, Pirandello’s Six Characters in Search of an Author; (2) a twentieth-century abstract painting, Picasso’s Girl Before the Mirror; or (3) a brief surrealist film, Buñuel and Dalí’s Un chien andalou. Don’t be overwhelmed by the difficulties of making meaning out of the work you are perceiving; just listen to it as closely as you can. You might want to jot down some parts verbatim, paraphrase others, or recount images, shapes, colors, and textures. Please restrain the impulse to express emotion about the work being examined or to generate your own interpretation. Experience the work in as unmediated a fashion as possible—don’t try to make meaning out of it.

When the thirty minutes are up, join two other people who have been experiencing the same work. Share your perspectives on the experience of the work, but do this without any interpretational filters. What are the actual words,
When participants are encouraged to view their group and participate, it is expected that the group members will share their ideas and thoughts in a meaningful way. This process is facilitated by the discussion leader, who can guide the conversation towards specific topics or questions. In order to maintain a productive discussion, it is important to ensure that all participants feel comfortable expressing their views and ideas.

The goal of the discussion leader is to provide a structured environment that encourages open and honest communication. By facilitating the conversation, the leader can help participants to identify key issues and generate solutions. This approach is particularly effective when dealing with complex topics or issues that require a collaborative approach.

In conclusion, effective leadership is critical to the success of a discussion. By following these guidelines, leaders can help to create a positive and productive environment that encourages participation and engagement. This will ultimately lead to a more meaningful and productive discussion.
the student further or extending student-to-student interaction by leaving it to the other students to respond to the most recent set of remarks. Our preference is to focus on ways to extend student-to-student interaction, so we will not pursue the options available to the discussion leader who wants to prolong an interchange with a student. However, these options tend to complement what we have already said about teacher questions.

If you make the decision to extend student-to-student interaction, there are a variety of options available. One is to remain silent and to await responses from the other students. Another is to invite a student who you know has a contrasting view to present his or her ideas as a way of stimulating the whole group to confront conflicting perspectives. You might lead into this by saying, “I was talking to Karen during the break, and she had a very different view of how class size affects achievement because her definition of achievement is so different from Leroy’s. Karen, would you kindly talk about how your view differs from Leroy’s?”

A third option is to ask a question or raise an issue that is directly related to what was just said by a student. For example, if the student has made a claim about the effects of class size on academic achievement, you might ask the whole group, “What assumptions about achievement does this claim make? What if we defined achievement as one’s ability to participate in a discussion group? How might class size affect achievement then?”

Responding Without Questions

Dillon (1994) suggests that leaders can respond to comments in ways that do not involve questioning. One choice is simply to make declarative statements that reflect one’s honest opinion. These statements may contrast with what students have said, or they may complement student comments. Discussion leaders can also restate concisely what they have heard for the benefit of the group. On other occasions they may want to ask for clarification about what has been said or to point out how a recent contribution has cleared up some earlier difficulties. Still another response is to restate what two or more students have said to get these students to examine their disagreements more closely.

Dillon also emphasizes that teachers should create conditions that reveal the complexity of issues and praise students when they pose similar questions. They can comment specifically on how particular questions help the group probe the topic more deeply. Another approach is simply to invite all of the students to ask at the end of the session at least one question that the discussion has suggested to them. Still another option is to call on students to identify one question that remains unanswered about a topic to which the group has devoted a fair amount of study time. However this is done, discussion leaders should give a high priority to student questions.

Affirmation

Whatever course of action you take, it is a good idea to be as encouraging as possible when responding to student comments. Students take risks when they ask a question, volunteer an answer, introduce an argument, or venture a criticism, particularly if they don’t know what to expect of teachers or when they have limited experience as discussants. When teachers find ways to be hospitable and inviting, they lay the groundwork for good discussion later on. How much affirmation teachers should give students is an open question, one that continues to be sharply disputed. One extreme insists on “lavish affirmation” (Vella, 1995) as a response to all comments, regardless of their quality. The other, advocated by the Great Books Foundation (1991), advises discussion leaders to refrain from praise of any kind. Advocates of this view believe that the practice of affirming students leads to dependence on the instructor. In general, we lean toward affirmation, though to affirm every comment, regardless of its content or connection to the rest of the discussion, seems excessive. One way through this contradiction is to thank students routinely for the act of making a contribution but to differentiate those expressions from appreciative comments you make on the quality of a contribution.

Praise should be specific and concrete. Look at some examples of the kinds of affirmative responses we have found ourselves using in discussion. These responses tend not only to be concrete but also to foster continuity and momentum.

Your comment has made clear for me the dangers of overgeneralizing in this case.
In what different speakers are saying.

The body language (in a strictly conversational way) to show interest.

Here is where the examples in your conversation.

Make a comment that is incomplete, provoke the listener to a good or fitting.

Is it more likely for you to think that someone else is or are you interested.

Ask a question of a person that you are interested.

You are interested.

The way the conversation moves they are described.

Are they interested in the same way as you.

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Discussion as a Way of Teaching

Make a comment indicating that you found another person's ideas interesting or useful. Be specific as to why this was the case.
Contribute something that builds on or springs from what someone else has said. Be explicit about the way you are building on the other person's thoughts.
Make a comment that at least partly paraphrases a point someone has already made.
Make a summary observation that takes into account several people's contributions and that touches on a recurring theme in the discussion.
Ask a cause-and-effect question—for example, "Can you explain why you think it's true that if these things are in place, such and such a thing will occur?"
At an appropriate moment, ask the group for a minute's silence to slow the pace of conversation and give you and others time to think.
Find a way to express appreciation for the enlightenment you have gained from the discussion. Try to be specific about what it was that helped you understand something better.
Disagree with someone in a respectful and constructive way.

Chapter Six

Keeping Discussion Going Through Creative Grouping

It should be clear by now that we think teachers can do a lot to keep discussion going. Pacing the discussion to keep it from lagging and varying the format so that it doesn't become stale or perfunctory are two of the most important responsibilities teachers can assume. Changing pace and format helps accommodate the different learning styles of students and allows for the pursuit of a broader range of goals and objectives. Variety also imparts the sense that discussion should be experimental, a never-ending search for different ways to frame issues or analyze difficult problems.

In this chapter we describe a variety of simple strategies that teachers can employ to keep up the pace of discussions, maintain interest in the subject matter, and help participants view the subject and each other from diverse angles and perspectives.

Varying Group Size

Many of the options available to teachers for introducing variety relate to creative grouping. Some teachers prefer to keep discussions chiefly in a whole-class setting, usually with all the students gathered together in a circle or a U shape. There is nothing inherently wrong with whole-group discussions. They can be stimulating and productive, and they bear the distinct advantage of allowing the teacher to monitor the understanding and participation of all learners simultaneously. There are also many times when