

# Methods used by university teachers to support meaningful discussion in the classroom

M. Karm, A. Sarv, E. Voolaid, and M. Miliste, *University of Tartu*

**ABSTRACT:** Classroom discussions support deeper understanding of the content domain and develop independent thinking skills. In a skillfully directed discussion, different opinions of students become apparent and the students learn to appreciate and accept those differences (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). However, university teachers may be hesitant in using discussions in the classroom, as it might seem an ineffective teaching method (time consuming, more preparation, less control) (Cashin, 2011). According to Bain (2004), regardless of the discussion format, it is important to ask good questions to initiate the discussion. Teacher's initial questions play a major role in determining how well the students will be involved. Teachers' style of asking questions and giving feedback can support students' autonomy and motivation (Reeve & Jang, 2006).

University teachers use various activities and question types to guide discussions in the classroom; however, it is unclear which activities really support discussions and help to achieve the expected learning outcomes. The aim of this research was to find out what kind of methods university teachers use to activate discussions. Two research questions were raised: What kind of learning activities do university teachers use to support discussions in the classroom? What type of questions do university teachers ask to support student discussions?

The study is based on twelve video-recorded seminars of four university teachers from the fields of humanities and social sciences. Video recording was used because previous research (Hativa, Barak, & Simhi, 2001) has found that even experienced teachers are not always aware what kind of teaching methods and activities they use. Kane, Sandretto and Heath (2002) also recognize the need to observe the actual teaching practices of teachers in order to give sense to teaching and learning at the university.

Seminars are analysed through discourse analysis, paying special attention to the tasks used in the seminars and the student-teacher interaction. The analysis of video recordings has revealed that well-designed and authentic tasks support active discussions and interaction in the classroom. The structure of seminars and agreements with students play an important role in supporting students' active participation.

## REFERENCES

- Bain, K. (2004). *What the best college teachers do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brookfield, S.D., and Preskill, S. (2005). *Discussion as a way of teaching: tools and techniques for university teachers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cashin, W.E (2011). *Effective Classroom Discussions*. IDEA Paper No. 49. Manhattan, KS: The IDEA Center, 1-5. [http://ideaedu.org/sites/default/files/IDEA\\_Paper\\_49.pdf](http://ideaedu.org/sites/default/files/IDEA_Paper_49.pdf)
- Hativa, N., Barak, R., and Simhi, E. (2001). Exemplary university teachers: Knowledge and beliefs regarding effective teaching dimensions and strategies. *Journal of Higher Education*, 72, (6), 699-729.
- Kane, R., Sandretto, S., and Heath, C. (2002). Telling half the story: A critical review of research on the teaching beliefs and practices of university academics. *Review of educational research*, 72, (2), 177-228.
- Reeve, J., and Jang, H. (2006). What Teachers Say and Do to Support Students' Autonomy During a Learning Activity. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 98, (1), 209-218.