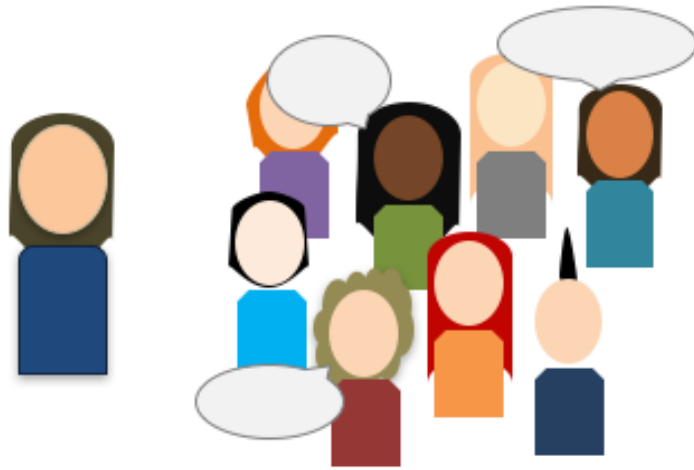


Active Discussions with Class Visitors



Inviting guests to your small classes for discussions with students is a unique active learning activity to add a change of pace to your class routine. I make the activity more challenging by asking students to prepare for the guest's visit by submitting a written question based on a class reading. This ensures that students will engage in an active and informed discussion with the visitor.

Students' Written Questions

I ask students to submit a written question based on a class reading that discusses the theme for the visitor's discussion. I also request that the guest reads the article before the visit. Students prepare their question in the following three-paragraph format and submit it to me by e-mail as a graded assignment prior to the guest's visit:

1. The first paragraph provides background information from the reading to set up the student's question. The student should provide quotes and other ideas from the reading to frame their question.
2. The second paragraph discusses why the student is interested in this issue. How is it related to their personal experience or interests?
3. The third paragraph poses the student's question.

After I receive all of the students' questions, I organize them in a Word document that I forward to the guest a few days before their visit. I categorize the questions according to topics with headers to provide a coherent structure to the list and to the discussion. The guest has a chance to read the questions and plan responses before the visit if desired. In my experience, class visitors appreciate having an opportunity to do some advance preparation before their visit rather than facing the class without any knowledge of the questions that will be asked.

Conducting the Visit

Guest visits should be about an hour in length. More than that can be tiring for both the class and the visitor. A lot can be accomplished in this period of time (or less!) if the discussion is organized into the following two parts:

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1) Discuss Students' Written Questions

After introducing the class visitor and asking them to tell us some basic information about their background, I turn to the students' written questions. I sit with the visitor at the front of the class and read individual student questions aloud. The visitor then answers each question. (I also inform the visitor which student asked which question.) I do this for each of the questions until the visitor has answered all of the questions. I normally do not read all three paragraphs of each student's question since that would be too time-consuming. Rather, I summarize relevant points from each student's question to keep the discussion moving quickly. If the class has more than ten students, I pick representative questions from each topic area and ask only those questions. I inform the class before the visit that we will not be able to answer all of their written questions so that individual students are not disappointed if their question is not chosen.

2) Open the Floor for Other Questions

After the class visitor answers the students' written questions, I open the floor for other questions that students have for the visitor. I tell students ahead of time that if we run out of time for their written question, they may ask it during the open question period if they wish. I also require students to think of at least one additional question to ask during the open discussion period if I call on them. The additional question can be related to the reading, or it can be on another topic of interest to the student that the visitor would be able to address.

Topics for Guest Visits

I have invited class visitors to my cross-cultural communications course and my sociolinguistics course to discuss topics related to language and culture. My goal is to show students that the topics we cover are genuinely relevant in the "real world" – they are not just topics discussed in textbooks! I believe the best topics and readings are ones of a general nature that students find fun and interesting to discuss. I avoid topics that are overly narrow or technical because students are unlikely to have a genuine interest in engaging with visitors to learn more about them.

Choosing Class Visitors

I prefer to invite faculty members and graduate students for class visits because they are comfortable talking with students and understand classroom practices. They are familiar with reading academic articles and responding to them in class discussions, and it is easy for them to understand the goals of this type of exercise and answer students' questions.

It is not necessary to invite someone directly from your field, but class visitors should be from disciplines related to your field so that they will be able to answer questions about the theme that you choose. For example, I have invited not just linguists to my classes but also instructors of foreign languages. All of my class visitors specialize in language in some manner, which enables them to comment on language-related issues in a meaningful way.

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Tips

1. This learning activity is most appropriate for small classes of about fifteen students or less. In larger classes, the number of written questions to organize and discuss during the guest's visit would become overwhelming for both the instructor and the visitor.
2. Set up class visits so that visitors do not have to prepare a talk to deliver to the class. Rather, they should simply join the class in a discussion to answer student questions.
3. The reading chosen for the discussion should be short so that the visitor can read it quickly before the visit.
4. I give students a list of everyone's questions before the start of the visit so that they can keep track of the discussion topics more easily. Rather than giving the class a handout with everyone's full three-paragraph written assignment, I just provide the paragraph that states each student's question.
5. Student participation in guest visits should be a graded activity to motivate students to participate actively. I evaluate students on the quality of their written question and their participation in the discussion with the visitor.

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