

**From:** [Center for Faculty Innovation](#)  
**To:** ["TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU"](mailto:TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU)  
**Subject:** Teaching Toolbox: Facilitating Dialogues, Not Monologues  
**Date:** Thursday, September 14, 2017 8:54:00 AM

---

## **Teaching Toolbox: Facilitating Dialogues, Not Monologues** **by Emily O. Gravett**

Last year, I offered a [CFI workshop](#) on “Beyond Monologues: Fostering Authentic In-Class Discussion among Students.” While participants had many important questions related to discussion (e.g., how to grade participation, manage dominant talkers, provide a space for students who are shy or introverted, etc.), this workshop focused primarily on another problem I’ve observed in small classrooms over the years: students tend to respond to discussion questions posed by the instructor with a series of disconnected monologues, rather than actually having a genuine conversation amongst themselves.

The resulting class ‘discussion’ often seems more like Q&A, recitation, or what’s sometimes referred to as “IRE” (Initiation-Response-Evaluation), wherein the instructor asks a question based on what’s been taught, one student provides an answer, the instructor evaluates that answer, and then the process repeats with a new student. Participants in my workshop had all experienced this same phenomenon.

Yet one of the main benefits touted for in-class discussion is that it can provide an opportunity for students to practice attentive, respectful, deep listening, as well as learn from one another in a collaborative environment ([Brookfield & Preskill, 2005](#)). Indeed, I frequently begin my own Religion courses by communicating to students that they will not only learn from me, but that I will learn from them and *they will learn from each other*. However, if students are solely focused on listening to the instructor and preparing their own responses, without engaging their peers’ prior contributions, how much are they really able to learn from each other? Does discussion then become wasted class time?

I’ve tried a number of strategies to tackle this problem over the last decade, ranging from the simple (e.g., increasing my wait time, a concept I wrote about in [a previous Toolbox](#)) to the more complex (e.g., trying more structured discussion techniques like the fishbowl, in which students are the sole discussants, responsible for carrying on the conversation, while I remain silent), but one of the easiest strategies that has worked well for me is one I borrowed from an article in *The Atlantic* about high-school writing, called [“The Writing Revolution” by Peg Tyre \(2012\)](#). In the school profiled, Tyre reports that “classroom discussion became an opportunity to push... classmates to listen to each other, think more carefully, and speak more precisely, in ways they could then echo in persuasive writing. When speaking, *they were required to use specific prompts* outlined on a poster at the front of each class” (my italics).

These were the prompts students used:

- “I agree/disagree with \_\_\_\_ because...”

- “I have a different opinion....”
- “I have something to add....”
- “Can you explain your answer?”

Asking college students to use these prompts during in-class discussion works well too, especially in lower-level courses, where students may not be accustomed to being invited to participate, offering nuanced but differing analyses, or co-creating knowledge with their peers. Students right out of high school are an especially apt audience for this strategy. I have listed the four prompts on chalkboards, whiteboards, even projectors in the past. When students forget and try to begin a comment during discussion without using one of the prompts, I simply remind them to do so; they’re always happy to comply. After a few days, everyone is so used to the process that I no longer need to display the prompts at all. They just listen and talk to each other. And that’s when amazing things start to happen.

*About the author: Dr. Emily O. Gravett is Assistant Director of Teaching Programs at the [Center for Faculty Innovation](#) and a faculty member in the Philosophy & Religion department. She can be reached at [graveteo@jmu.edu](mailto:graveteo@jmu.edu).*