What is an effective group discussion?

* All members have a chance to speak freely
* A variety of points of view are put forward and discussed
* The discussion is not dominated by one person
* Even in disagreement, there is an understanding that the group is working together

Non-Participating Students

* Wait. Call on students who are making non-verbal signals of readiness.
* After a student has shared an idea/opinion, don’t automatically be the first to respond. Count to five and see who else may speak up.
* Change a speaker’s opinion into a question, which you then ask of the students who have not been talking. Or ask if they know of any evidence that supports opinions being offered.
* Give students time to write an in (or out-of) class response to a text or problem, and in class, pick non-participants to read aloud what they have written.
* Quiet students are sometimes the best observers. Choose one to take notes for the group.
* If you get an entire class of quiet students, discuss the situation with them and have them come up with their own ideas for increasing participation.
* Talk with individual shy students outside of the class about methods for his or her inclusion. Discuss whether the student feels comfortable talking; would he or she like to be called on?

Disrupting Students

* Use an agenda to keep focus.
* Be honest - if someone is trying to intimidate you or you feel undermined, enlist the help of the group.
* Accept, deal, or defer: If someone keeps bringing up the same point over and over, ACCEPT that what they are saying; DEAL with it by spending some time on it; or DEFER it to the group for a decision about what to do.
* Talk to the student outside of class. Make it clear that you value the student who listens well, asks good questions, or who is sensitive to the needs of others.
* Silence the excessive talker by putting him or her into the role of discussion recorder: he or she must observe and record.
* Use the bouncing ball: no one can speak unless holding the ball (including the facilitator).
* Give everyone six to ten rubber bands, paper clips, or any cheap small object. Each time a person speaks he must throw a rubber band into the center of the table. When students have used up their bands, they can’t talk anymore.
* Have the class discuss what changes they would like, and how they might achieve them.
* If the students who dominate a discussion are not silencing others and are making valuable contributions, and if you’re finding other activities to help the rest of the students participate each day in some way, it’s going better than you think.
* Gottschalk, 1994
* Community Tool Box, University of Kansas, 2015