Tammy’s Discussion Tips

It’s not radio, so don’t be afraid of dead air.
Nothing squelches discussion faster than the teacher answering his or her own question when only 2 seconds have elapsed. Students adapt very quickly to the communication rules established in class. If they don’t have to answer, they won’t.

Believe it or not, some students want time to think.
Not everyone is good at responding immediately to questions. A brief writing task due the day of discussion, or circulation of discussion questions gives those students who want it or need it time to think.

Good discussions are not modeled on the Jerry Springer Show.
A good discussion requires some relinquishment of control on the part of the faculty member. However, the faculty member must not relinquish all control. A discussion needs to be planned, open questions developed, developments anticipated, unanticipated developments addressed. The faculty member should be willing an able to follow where the discussion leads, but only to a point. If the students assume too much control, the discussion can devolve into a bull-session; if the faculty member retains too much, she is basically talking to herself.

Talking is hard work.
Facilitating a good discussion is much harder than giving a good lecture. There are more unpredictable moments; the content and focus moves and shifts. Faculty members shouldn’t just rely on the students who are good at discussion and willing to talk. Pulling reticent students into a discussion requires the teacher to actively monitor the discussion w/o even a split second of distraction. Engaging shy students requires that you know their names. A good discussion also requires the teacher to move the discussion along, addressing items that need it but not belaboring points, challenging comments without being disagreeable. You cannot let your attention wander.

Yes, this will be on the midterm.
Well, not really. It may be purely mechanical, but students do respond to situations which earn them points. Grading participation does commit the faculty member to recording participation after every class, so it can become a burden. I use this system Participation will be recorded on most days. Points will be accrued as follows:
- Freely offers substantive, unprompted comments 4 points
- Offers an occasional comment 3
- Responds when prompted 2
- Present, without comments 1
- Absent 0
A student will earn 0 points for participation even if the absence is “excused.”

Use Feng Shui.
A room can be situated for discussion. Put the chairs in a circle. Don’t allow a student to hide behind a pillar. Don’t stand behind a desk. Avoid crossing your
arms. However, a good atmosphere for discussion requires more than interior design. It involves a commitment to an academic process that requires that students be active and responsive. That atmosphere needs to be established in the first few days of the class.

**Dare to be Stupid**
Students will be less intimidated about saying something stupid if on occasion the teacher says something stupid. If the teacher is proven wrong on a point, acknowledge the error gracefully and thank the student. When students realize that part of the academic process of discussion requires that people build on each others efforts, and that some efforts can be abandoned gracefully, they will be more willing to engage in the discussion. If it’s acceptable for the teacher to misspeak on occasion, it’s certainly acceptable for the student to do so as well. Daring to be “stupid” is part of building an atmosphere for discussion.