



If you have not participated in classroom events at St. John's, or even if you have, a few words of introduction may be helpful.

The Conversation

The style of teaching and learning at St. John's is often described as conversational. The conversation is cooperative and respectful, not competitive. Discussion is meant to pursue questions that are of general interest to the participants. We also speak of what we do as learning together through shared inquiry. We strive to build something together that is not the exclusive property of anyone at the table. Participants both teach and learn from one another.

Classes typically begin with an opening question from the tutor (as all our faculty members are called). Often the opening question will set the direction for the entire conversation, but not always.

Participants enter the conversations freely and as the spirit moves them. The success of our classes depends almost entirely on what participants bring to the table. Contributions can be of many kinds: some will address the question directly; others will offer adjustments to the suggestions of their fellow participants. Sometimes it is useful to reformulate a question on the table or to ask for a clarification of someone's point. At times it is appropriate to bring the conversation back to the text under discussion.

Since all the views presented are assumed to be under construction, it is good to speak up when an idea is just beginning to take shape and not wait until it is fully worked out. Our work is concerned more with exploring interpretations than defending or attacking them.

The Books

Readings are assigned for each of our class sessions. Our working assumptions are that the reading has something to teach us and that participants have read the text thoroughly. This usually means carefully reading the material at least twice. What, precisely, we are to learn from the book is discovered by the participants and the tutor working together. Participants pursue their own questions and their own ways of reading the books. We ask only that comments, observations, and questions return to the text for support and clarification. This commitment to the centrality of the text helps give the conversation shape and keeps it from becoming diffuse or deteriorating into merely personal reflection.

The Tutor

The tutors' work is to assist with the learning of others while continuing to learn themselves. They neither lecture nor do they merely facilitate conversations. They guide the conversation, sometimes steering it in a particular direction, sometimes listening and letting it take its own course, and occasionally, steering it around an unpromising detour.

The Classes

Classes are of two basic types, seminars and tutorials. For seminars, the reading assignments are usually longer and the conversation addresses more sweeping issues. Seminars are either co-led by two tutors or led by one tutor. Tutorials tend to treat shorter reading assignments with more attention to detail and the careful unfolding of an argument. In tutorials, the conversation tends to be more highly structured by the tutor.

Rules

Of course, there are no firm rules. A few suggestions about accepted classroom manners, however, may be in order:

1. *Participants need not raise a hand or be recognized by the tutor to speak. Jump right in at the end of someone else's statement. It takes some practice to figure out just when to do this and how to do it gracefully.*
2. *Each person will not speak for the same amount of time, but it is important that everyone contribute something.*
3. *Succinct comments are more effective than protracted diatribes. Speak briefly. Make it easy for others to build on your ideas.*
4. *Listening is at least as important as speaking. Connecting ideas makes for interesting conversation.*
5. *Asking questions is an important form of participation.*
6. *Challenging the ideas of others or offering modifications of them is perfectly in order as long as it is done respectfully and in the service of seeking truth. Our conversation is not a debate. Participants are not trying to win something or beat someone.*
7. *As much as possible, participants refer only to books the group has read together. Trumping the conversation with a reference to a recent scholarly article, a fair tactic in graduate schools, is considered bad form.*
8. *Even in serious conversation—especially in serious conversation—a sense of humor is a wonderful thing.*