

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 Bookshelves

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-lead 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.