0.1 How to listen

You need to listen to students and they need to listen to each other. Tom Lester once told me of a study showing that the average amount of time between when a teacher asks a student a question and when the teacher prompts the student or gives up on them is 2 seconds. Two seconds is longer than it sounds, but nowhere near long enough to formulate a coherent thought unless you were already thinking it before the quesiton was asked. There may not be anything you can do about the sound-bite trend in TV reporting, but there's a lot you can do about it in your classroom. The first thing to try is waiting. Don't nod yes or no, or say uh huh, or give the student any feedback at all until they have finished saying what they wanted to say. Then wait five or ten more seconds. The odds are that the student will, after pausing for breath, realize that they are not finished and continue. If not, at least the other students will have had a chance to think about what they just heard. If you're uncomfortable with this long a pause, try pacing or holding eye contact with the respondent as if you expect them to continue, or act as if you're trying to digest what they've just told you. In fact often you really will need time to think. If they said something that was wrong in a puzzling way, see if you can figure out what they really meant. Students will only listen to each other if you set an example, so make sure you don't respond without having really heard.

Students are also more likely to listen to each other if they feel that they are responsible for having understood it. In small groups they are more likely to feel this, but at a ratio of twenty or thirty to one, many feel that they can just take notes and sort it out later or not at all. They may also feel they have no right to interrupt since everyone else obviously understands. You can counter this by demonstrating an expectation that each student understands what each other student has said. After one student says something the slightest bit unclear, ask another to repeat it in her own words. This is a good time to pick on students rather than have them raise their hand to volunteer a paraphrase. If student B can't paraphrase what student A said, it's not necessarily student B's fault. Student B can ask student A to clarify if necessary, or ask for volunteers for someone else to clarify. Make

sure to go back and find out whether student C's clarification of student A's remark did in fact help student B. After a little experience you'll know better when to go through this routine. If student B simply wasn't listening, they might feel reprimanded, but that's OK. It doesn't really work when the remark was clear in the first place, although it doesn't hurt to get a quick affirmation from the whole class that it is clear so far. The basic standard you are setting is that the discussion involves the whole class and is not a collection of one on one dialogues between the teacher and individual students.