I teach social capital in a week long course with lots of discussion. Here are some of the questions and exercises I do.

Social Capital Questions

- What are some groups you are a part of?
- Do you generally trust people?
- If you were stranded 50 miles away with no money or phone how would you get home?
- Do people in your neighborhood interact?
- Describe a time you worked with others to solve a problem.
- What would life be like without cars?
- What technological innovation most impacts your life?
- Would you rather give up having a car or having a phone?
- Is life generally getting better?
- How does trust/social capital relate to politics?
- How many times a week do you eat with your family?
- What would happen if a law forced all high school students to eat at home every meal? To not have a car?
- Is technology driving a wedge between our individual and collective interests?
- What would happen to the US if we had no power or electricity for a day? (Did you read the article about the delaying of the flu outbreak because airplanes were grounded on September 11? Sometimes I think of modern technology as a virus attacking the collective.)
- Do schools build social capital?
- Does technology separate us or bring us together?
- What do you do when you get home from school?
- Describe how you got a job. Have you ever gotten a job without knowing someone involved in the job?
- Is virtual social capital as valuable as face to face social capital?
- What role does capitalism play in the erosion of social capital?
- Does the market favor the group of the individual?
- What is the relationship between democracy and the group?
- Can you legislate social capital?
- How does the United States measure success?
- Who are your heroes?
- Is the pace of life in the US too fast, slow, or just right?
- Would you slow your life down if you could?
- What does increasing societal wealth do to social capital?
- Were we better off in earlier times when we had higher social capital?
- Would you want to go back to that time?
- What is our future if we don’t increase social capital?
Social Capital Demonstrations

The Rug
I ask nine students to stand on a rug. They generally take up about 75% of the rug. I then tell them that they must flip the rug over.
The hard part is that they must stay on the rug.
It’s fun and funny to watch them work, but it teaches some valuable lessons about social capital, democracy, leadership, cooperation.
We always have a great discussion afterwards as we try to make connections between the rug exercise and social capital.

The Yarn
(With apologies to Donna Rader at the Winston-Salem Foundation.)
The class stands in a circle. I take a ball of yarn and give the end of it to a student. I ask the students to throw it to someone they know and to tell the class how they know them. The web that we have at the end of the throwing is social capital. There is always a great discussion that comes out of this.