Facilitating Classroom Discussions
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In a student-centered classroom, well-developed discussion is an important factor in helping students expand their understanding of material and meet their desired learning goals. Strong discussions facilitate opportunities for students to expand on what they have learned and gain new perspectives. Danielson (2011) states that “Effective teachers promote learning through discussion . . . . In a true discussion, a teacher poses a question and invites all students’ views to be heard, enabling students to engage in discussion direction with one another, not always mediated by the teacher” (p. 54). Facilitating an effective discussion challenges students to think at a higher level and demonstrates their skills and understanding of content. The effective teacher makes use of many questioning strategies, incorporates different discussion styles, and provides diverse platforms and mediums to support maximum student involvement in the process. Providing a discussion behavior model and outlining clear expectations allow for student-driven discussions to emerge and lead to extended discussions that include high-level questioning and increased perspective. The teacher can shift from being the “sage on the stage” to the “guide on the side” and thus spark more interactive student-to-student discussions.
Information Alignment

Materials presented in this eBook align with the following:

Module Questions

• How can effective classroom discussions deepen and extend understanding?
• What strategies can promote focused and engaging classroom discussions?
• What strategies can be implemented to increase and sustain student participation in a variety of classroom discussions and other instructional activities?

Learning Outcomes

• Analyze how effective classroom discussions deepen and extend understanding.
  ◦ Differentiate between explanations of content and effective classroom discussions.
  ◦ Explore verbal and nonverbal communication techniques that support effective classroom discussions.
• Devise strategies for supporting focused and engaging discussions.
• Reflect on and implement strategies for increasing and sustaining student participation in whole-class and small-group discussions.

Topic Focus

Effective Classroom Discussion Techniques

• Explaining Content vs. Discussing Content
• Effective Verbal and Nonverbal Communication Techniques
  ◦ Questioning, Verbal Prompts, Voice Inflection
  ◦ Body Language, Eye Contact, Hand Signals, Demonstration

Supporting Focused and Engaging Discussions

• Define Learning Goals Through Questions and Topics
• Choose a Discussion Style
  ◦ Have Students Answer Questions From Other Students
  ◦ Use Questions to Help Connect Important Concepts
  ◦ Elicit Student Interest and Restate the Points Students Make
• Wait Time
  ◦ Rephrase Questions
  ◦ Summarize and Emphasize Important Points

Implementing Strategies for Student Participation

• Providing Topics Prior to Class
• Providing Opportunities for Written and Oral Discussions
• FSLC Technique
Effective Classroom Discussion Techniques

The development of effective classroom discussion techniques is essential to creating an expressive student-driven discussion forum. Discussion happens when individuals assemble to present their ideas on a topic or proposition. People are able to express their ideas best in a forum where they are confident that they can freely express their opinions (Wasserman, 2010). Creating an open discussion forum for students allows the teacher/facilitator to encourage greater participation. This aids in the sharing of new ideas and the development of critical thinking skills. Byrd (2008) writes that the creation of a sanctuary environment—free from the fear of speaking one’s opinion—promotes open discussion and feedback from all involved and creates positive learning experiences as well as a culture of respect for others’ opinions. A well-developed discussion forum gives meaning to the learning that students have undertaken. Eric Jensen (2005) suggests that when students are permitted to show emotion, they are more inclined to share ideas with one another and are led to think at higher levels, resulting in a more relevant and meaningful learning experience. Through effective discussion techniques, a teacher/facilitator can create a classroom discussion forum where students can express their positions freely.

Figure 1 (below) shows the criteria essential to an effective classroom discussion.

Explaning Content vs. Discussing Content

A student-centered classroom relies on the active participation of students during the learning process. While useful, explaining content to students through lecturing and textbook reading deprives students of the opportunity to engage one another in discussing and making meaning (Lee, 2005). In a traditional teacher-centered classroom, students who are struggling with understanding content may feel uncomfortable expressing their distress to the teacher or others. A student-centered classroom that regularly offers supportive and meaningful discussions about what is being learned allows these students to comfortably raise their concerns or misunderstandings (Byrd, 2008).

Lee (2005) explains that in most discussion environments, teachers become the focus of the discussion, doing all of the work as students direct questions toward them at the expense of interacting and questioning one another. The role of
the teacher should be that of a facilitation expert. Teachers must listen to their students' questions and responses and guide the discussion by asking students to elaborate and/or clarify their ideas (Wassermann, 2010). A teacher may possess excellent expository skills which allow him/her to explain a topic in vivid detail; however, without meaningful student discussion to connect previous learning or to create new personal connections, students may not understand the explanation of the content (Jensen, 2005).

**Effective Verbal and Nonverbal Communication Techniques**

In any discussion, effective communication techniques are essential to transferring opinions and emotions about a topic from one person to another. Communications range from a passionately delivered oral argument to a simple body gesture that displays one's agreement with a topic. Instructing students how to employ verbal and nonverbal communication through modeling and practicing allows students to become familiar with classroom discussion norms for expressing themselves (Simpson, n.d.). As a result, those students who may be shy or feel worried about being drowned out or intimidated by more assertive students will be able to contribute to the discussion through a gesture that indicates to the class that they have something to say (Byrd, 2008).

**Questioning, verbal prompts, voice inflection.** Our voices allow us to identify our arguments and understandings to others. Teachers develop and promote discussion through the way they use their voices. Keltie (2011) explains that the manner of expression in a teacher's voice when answering or posing questions can settle student nerves, display caring and pride about student answers and actions, and encourage students to be expressive when they speak to others. The way a teacher responds to a student's question can enable the student to further develop an answer or to recall past learning to answer their own question. Wasserman (2010) writes that effective verbal prompts and cues allow teachers to respond in a productive way that encourages students to take their questions to a higher level of thinking and prolong a discussion. Voice can cause students' attention or interest levels to quickly increase or decrease. A passionate voice where the tone and volume is constantly changing creates vibrant language and an atmosphere that keeps students engaged with what is happening (Keltie, 2011). Monotonous voices that communicate little emotion disengage attention and can cause stagnant participation. A teacher's voice allows for the continued flow of discussion by creating an environment that supports engagement and understanding.

**Body language, eye contact, hand signals, demonstration.** An effective teacher is conscious of both the verbal and nonverbal messages that are conveyed to students, and that these cues can influence the behavioral atmosphere of the entire classroom. Poor display can cause students to mimic these behaviors and cause classroom management issues that prevent positive discussions from happening (Hendy, n.d.). Teachers can capitalize on students' tendencies to mimic by displaying positive body language behaviors and cues. Strong eye contact and positive facial expressions can create an environment where students are comfortable expressing their opinions and views (Simpson, n.d.). Gestures communicate strong emotion about concepts and ideas. Folded arms or slouched shoulders convey a message of disinterest or boredom, which can make students who are speaking feel insecure and cause others not to take the discussion forum seriously (Hendy, n.d.). Effective use of the hands to demonstrate a point can help in maintaining student attention. Teacher use of hand signals can encourage students to question what a fellow student has said or can prompt the speaker to elaborate on the answer that they are providing (Simpson, n.d.). Teacher demonstration of positive body language and nonverbal cues enables the creation of a well-functioning, attentive classroom where productive discussion can occur.
Supporting Focused and Engaging Discussions

When planning discussion activities, the teacher should consider the flow of conversation, which topics to emphasize the most, and what form the discussion will take. According to Gottschalk (1994), good discussion happens in many forms. Varying discussion formats helps in meeting the different needs of individual students. The better prepared the students and teacher are for the discussion topics and formats, the greater the opportunity for a rich and rewarding forum. The teacher, in a facilitation role, can create a discussion environment that engages students to become active participants in what they are learning. Clear procedures and effective discussion strategies help foster confidence in students’ own abilities while promoting lively, content-focused discussions.

Figure 2 (below) offers a checklist of ways to effectively prepare for classroom discussion.

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**Preparing for a Classroom Discussion Activity Checklist**

- Create a list of topics that students have prior understanding of or exposure.
- Select an appropriate topic.
- Create and share discussion guidelines and norms with students.
- Develop strategies or contingencies that allow all students to be able to contribute to the discussion.
- Design questions that guide and challenge students throughout the discussion.
- Create an activity for students to summarize and reflect upon the discussion.

Figure 2. Preparing for a Classroom Discussion Activity Checklist.

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**Define Learning Goals Through Questions and Topics**

Learning goals and intended instructional outcomes guide the topics and questions that an effective teacher selects for discussion. These questions should allow students to know quickly where the discussion is going and upon what to reflect (Gottschalk, 1994). Questions that do not clearly define what is expected can cause confusion, resulting in students’ reluctance to contribute. A well-defined list of questions that are created beforehand and reflect the intended learning goals of the activity is important. Further, these questions should conform to the development level of the students and allow for a scaffolded exploration of concepts and content that are re-emphasized and built upon throughout the discussion.

Fries-Gaither (2008) advocates for explicit instruction in explaining questions so that students are able to understand the ideas behind what is asked. For the best effect, the goal-defining questions that are used should be based on student readiness. As development and reasoning skills increase over time or throughout a given discussion, a greater number of higher-level or big picture questions can be implemented. Students at a lower stage of development require a greater mix of lower-level and higher-level questions that define the goals to build understanding before they can begin to apply concepts at a more abstract level of thought.

**Choose a Discussion Style**

Identifying the style of classroom discussion is important to the planning process. An open discussion is a traditional form of classroom discussion. In this scenario, students discuss the topics or themes the teacher has created as a whole-
class group. The Harkness Discussion (n.d.) is a style of open discussion developed at Philips Exeter Academy in the thirties. In this method, the teacher arranges the room in a circular format where students can see all other students. This allows all students to be aware of and exposed to the discussion. The teacher, acting as the discussion facilitator, poses questions about a topic or guides discussion, but generally stays out of the discussion and allows students to lead. Collaboratively, students build an understanding of the topic being discussed. The Harkness Discussion model requires a team mentality and active participation from all students in the classroom in order to facilitate a successful discussion.

Open whole-class discussions may allow for the class to collaboratively build conclusions, but may also limit the ability of all students to properly or comfortably participate (McGonigal, 2005). Several smaller, format-focused discussion styles can be used to help students become more comfortable in responding effectively in a discussion. Breaking students up into pairs to discuss a topic and then gradually combining pairs and groups can increase student participation and sharing of ideas. Cavanaugh (2006) suggests having students engage in physically active debates. This style entails moving around the room to stations where students discuss, share previous learning, and then move on. This movement allows for greater interactions between students and more opportunities to share their ideas. In a small-group style of discussion, McGonigal (2005) suggests having students discuss complex questions about a topic and coming to a consensus or conclusion. These ideas can then be shared with a larger group and can be built upon as students combine new interpretations about the theme of discussion.

Have students answer questions from other students. Transferring the focus of student questions from the teacher to fellow students encourages the development of a student-centered, student-led discussion. The teacher can facilitate this shift by utilizing strategies that elicit independent behaviors such as writing down questions relative to what another student has said or proposed (Rothstein & Santana, 2011).

McGonigal (2005) recommends that students rate a claim that others have made on a one to five scale, give five reasons why they agree or disagree, and develop a cache of information to contribute to the discussion. Gottschalk (1994) recommends several strategies to shift interaction from teacher-student to student-student, including having students provide evidence for another student's response, redirecting a question for the teacher to a fellow student, and bringing up past responses or arguments students have made about the topic. Promoting lively academic debate by encouraging the airing of conflicting opinions helps students learn to expand their ideas and to explore resolutions possible to the issues among and between them.

Use questions to help connect important concepts. Using varied questioning strategies helps students connect important themes together. McGonigal (2005) suggests finding connections in how students reply to responses as a way to emphasize an important concept and show the multiple pathways used to answer the same question. Continually building on a question helps students make connections between topics on their own and provides big picture understanding to what they have been learning. As a result, students are arriving at conclusions that they have developed through their own thinking and discussion, not by the teacher telling them directly. Using funnelling questions helps the teacher guide students into making connections through their own thought processes (Changing Minds, 2013). These questions can be deductive and cause students to start from general concepts to form specific conclusions, or they can be inductive and have students begin with a topical statement or question and work backwards to identify its components. The use of Socratic questioning methods to probe and lead students to prove connections and to develop answers helps students engage in metacognitive behaviors to see how they reached their conclusions.

Elicit student interest and restate the points students make. Restating the answers, questions, and opinions a student has made allows the teacher to press the student to elaborate on his or her reasoning and allows other students to voice their opinions on what was said (Chapin, O'Connor, & Canavan Anderson, 2003). The teacher can restate the questions or answers to see whether the student truly understands what he/she is saying. This gives the student the opportunity to clarify what he/she has said and allows other students to hear their classmates' reasonings. The teacher may then ask the other students if they agree with what the student said or whether they wish to present a dissenting opinion. This challenges students to explain other students' reasoning in their own words and gives the class the opportunity to hear different perspectives on how to arrive at an answer. Other students may be inspired to share how they got to their position on a topic. This enriches discussion and proves to students that there is more than one way to answer a question. Attentive listening and the discourse between students, as each attempts to elaborate upon their viewpoints, encourages other students to want to participate by displaying these behaviors (McGonigal, 2005). Engaging students in higher-level expressions of thought draws other students into the discussion and inspires them to contribute, thus further increasing the level of student participation and development of thinking.

Wait Time

It is important to allow think time or wait time before calling on students to answer or propose a question. Doing so allows students to focus their attention on the questions presented to them so that they can provide a thoughtful response (Marzano, 2007). The importance of a few seconds is critical. Researchers suggest anywhere from three to ten seconds of wait time before calling on a student to respond or in responding to a student's question. Marzano encourages teachers to give time during student responses to allow the completion of thoughts. He believes in providing time after the student has finished speaking to allow other students to reflect on what was just said. Lingering quiet time after a student response encourages students to focus their attention on the anticipation of what may happen next.

Rephrase questions. Refining and rephrasing questioning is important to the health of a classroom discussion. Unexpected answers or questions from students can be recorded and used to formulate questions for the future (Washington University in St. Louis, Teaching Center, 2009). Questions that may have sounded clear and concise when planning may cause issues when put into practice. Ambiguous or vague questions may cause students to misunderstand the expectations of what or how to answer (Academy of Art University, 2013). Questions can be quickly re-worded for better student understanding in order to evoke more developed answers. Wait time can be helpful when deciding to rephrase a question. Several seconds of quiet reflection give the teacher the opportunity to scan the classroom and observe students' facial expressions, enabling a quick assessment of understanding or the lack thereof (Gottschalk, 1994). Sometimes the question may need a small explanation of a word rather than a complete rewording to promote clarity. Complete rewording of a question can sometimes cause students to become confused on which question to answer. Effective teachers take an inventory of students' reactions and quickly consider possible points of
confusion, adapting questions carefully to ensure student understanding.

**Summarize and emphasize important points.** Closing a discussion requires summarizing ideas and themes and emphasizing the breakthroughs or conclusions that have been brought forth. Reflective writing is one way of having students summarize those conclusions and speculate on where the discussion can go next. Further, such writing is an important technique for measuring student thinking about what has occurred (Cavanaugh, 2001). Asking students for comments can provide opportunities for clarification and highlight unresolved questions. Writing a short journal immediately at the conclusion of the discussion allows students to summarize the important themes and topics while they are still fresh and easily recalled (Byrd, 2008). While the student engages in reflective journaling, the teacher can emphasize an important theme he/she feels students should write about to help reinforce and assess student understanding. By using organizers or logs during the discussion, students can be mindful of what they are learning. McLeod, Fisher, & Hoover (2003) write that the use of a student summarizing exercise allows for quick assessment of the activity. This measurement of learning allows the teacher to plan a course of action for meeting intended objectives and helps to identify best practices that can guide future discussion activities.
Implementing Strategies for Student Participation

Discussion forums work best when students are actively participating and contributing new ideas and interpretations. Establishing procedures for before, during, and after classroom discussions, creating incentives for participation, and arranging seating to promote eye contact are important elements to promoting student involvement in whole-class discussions (University of the Sciences in Philadelphia, 2013). When students work in small groups, they have greater control over the direction of the discussion. However, the risk involved in a small group is having some group members dominate the discussion. This scenario would require the use of strategies to effectively involve all students. Cavanaugh (2001) suggests assigning roles or jobs to small group discussion members to ensure that each member offers a valuable contribution to the group. Each student would have a specific task in the discussion to facilitate active participation. Assigning discussion jobs also ensures that all voices are heard.

Providing Topics Prior to Class

Successful discussion activities depend on students’ preliminary understanding of the topic. Appropriate preparation allows students to contribute higher-level thoughts and questions (McLeod, Fisher, & Hoover, 2003). Discussions that occur directly after new learning create the most effective conditions to support enhanced student learning. Preparing for a discussion may involve the students reading a short piece of information, a small list of key ideas, or for best effect, student identification of the topics via a class wide brainstorming session (Gottschalk, 1994). This brainstorming session can generate large lists of possible topics for reduction and refinement (through teacher guidance) and identify the “big ideas” about that topic. Students can gain a sense of ownership in the activity since they have contributed to the questions that will drive the discussion. The teacher can then take this list to supplement or enhance the topics that they have pre-established.

Providing themes or questions prior to the discussion allows students to be more aware and ready to contribute to the discussion (University of Oregon Teaching Effectiveness Program, 2013). Students can better prepare themselves for what they will experience during the activity and feel confidence in their abilities to succeed. Going over the topics prior to the activity can also uncover the students’ understandings and enable the teacher to see if the class is indeed ready for debate (McLeod, Fisher, & Hoover, 2003). This strategy can prevent a discussion where students are unable to contribute and can save participants from an unproductive learning experience.

Providing Opportunities for Written and Oral Discussions

Discussions can take many different forms and modes of communication. Despite the teacher’s best efforts to facilitate a traditional discussion where students orally participate by proposing and answering questions with other students, some students may still feel uncomfortable contributing (University of Oregon Teaching Effectiveness Program, 2013). To ease this discomfort, alternative forums are available to students, including written or electronic mediums. The opportunity to work collaboratively in a small group and prepare a response for a discussion will make students feel more comfortable in sharing their knowledge and opinions.

Web 2.0 or electronic learning tools, including but not limited to blogs, wikis, and discussion boards can provide active, high-level learning in a non-traditional discussion format (Eggleston, 2010).

Blogs are presented in an online setting and allow students to discuss their answers, questions, solutions, and opinions on a topic. Blogs encourage others to read and comment on particular topics.

Wikis are collaborative Web sites that can be edited and modified by anyone with access to the site. They enable students to work together in person or by distance to create a finished product. Wikis encourage discussion through collaboration and help students find the best ways to answer a question or meet a goal.

Discussion Boards allow students to evaluate topics and engage in lively debates. They create an atmosphere where the teacher can step back into a moderator role and guide discussion through questions while allowing students to develop their thoughts as the discussion progresses.

FSLC Technique

The Formulate, Share, Listen, Create (FSLC) technique is a tool used to promote active learning in larger whole-class discussions or in small group or paired discussions (University of the Sciences in Philadelphia, 2013). Students formulate an answer to a question or an opinion on a topic presented in the course of the discussion. They then share what they have formulated with their partner(s) or group members, allowing each person the opportunity to speak and defend
their opinion. While the other group member speaks, the student listens carefully to the presentation of ideas and writes down new information that their classmates have shared. The small group or partners then discuss ways to create an answer that synthesizes and exceeds the previously conceived ideas. When the new answer has been developed and refined, the group or group-spokesperson present(s) their feedback to the class for continued discussion. Through the FSLC method, students are exposed to different opinions on a topic and they actively discuss how they can reconcile or develop a new way of thinking.

Figure 3. The FSLC Model.
Conclusion

Learning environments are enriched through well-developed, student-centered discussions. They challenge students to apply what they have learned and to discover new approaches through the sharing of ideas. A well-functioning forum where students are actively engaged in the discussion demonstrates the effective teacher's commitment to building student thinking skills. Embracing multiple tools and strategies to promote effective discussion contributes to the expansion of student perspectives and allows for greater understanding of the topics and themes discussed. Students are given the materials, platforms, and mediums to express opinions in an environment where they feel comfortable contributing toward discussion without reservation or fear. Mastering the implementation of these tools lets the teacher transition from being the lead focus of the discussion to being the facilitator of a forum that allows students to take ownership of the activity.
References


