

Effective Classroom Discussions = Engaged Students

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Typical lecturing in a classroom setting has its place and time, but its overuse can be hurtful to a healthy learning environment. Many teachers are perceived by their students as overly attached to the standard lecture format. Whether that is true is a subject of teaching philosophy; however our focus should be on helping teachers improve students' perceptions of them, by encouraging diversity in their teaching styles. One practical solution to this problem is increasing the usage of classroom discussions.

Classroom discussions come in many shapes and sizes. There are peer-to-peer with pairing, small group with many variations such as having teams, whole class, either student or teacher lead, and a combination of any of the above (*Comments from CRISS*, Fall 1994). For this overview whole class discussion will be the focus of our learning which can be applied to both teacher, and student lead discussions.

Before we can go into particular teaching strategies, general guidelines should be discussed and stressed. It is important for teachers to:

- Make each student feel valuable,
- Plan good questions
- Discourage students from shouting out answers
- Wait an appropriate amount of time before calling for answers
- If possible allow the class to answer each other's questions
- Include practical examples
- Focus the discussion
- Personalize content with students
- Use closure effectively by summarizing and/or foreshadowing.

(Gail, 1990)

The focal point of classroom discussions is the first general guideline: making each student feel valuable. If this is not woven into every other aspect of classroom discussion, the end result will not be desirable. The students will feel valuable when you know their name, give everyone eye contact, promote many types of answers regardless of your own understanding and opinion, thank your students for contributions, such as "That is a good question".

If a situation arises where the question asked might seem inappropriate or immature, it might be that the student truly does not know the answer and desires to learn (Gail, 1990). The answer you give depends on your students' maturity, and class setting. If the question, statement or behavior is excessively inappropriate, suitable disciplinary actions according to your school policies should follow.

After teachers have made the students feel valuable, other aspects of discussions can be tackled. Teachers should have good questions planned prior to the class discussion. Other questions can be introduced by questions, but core elements should be addressed if students do not bring them into conversation. Students should be politely discouraged from shouting out answers, because it is important that everyone's voice is valued, and when students shout out answers, other students do not discover the answer on their own. Coupled with this is allowing an appropriate amount of time to occur before calling for answers. Prefacing the discussion with foreshadowing comments allow the students to formulate longer and stronger responses to your questions (Gail, 1990).

There are many forms of classroom discussions, but only three will be introduced here. These forms are *Reciprocal teaching*, *Elaborative Interrogation*, and *Collaborative Reasoning*.

Reciprocal Teaching is a back-and-forth discussion strategy where the teacher chooses specific text about the subject for the class to read, then the teacher, and the students take turns teaching the class about the material by summarizing important elements (VanDeVeghe, 2007).

Elaborative Interrogation is a previewing type of discussion model where the teacher prompts the students to “tell anything that comes to mind when “(Langer, 1995) relative to the subject that is going to be discussed or lectured upon.

Collaborative Reasoning is a discussion type that has a large group setting, where students gather evidence prior to discussing, and everyone then comes together to make an argument for one position (VanDeVeghe, 2007). During this process the students are asked whether they still defend their previous position or if their mind has changed based on the evidence shared.

Overall any type of discussion strategy that is utilized must enhance the teaching environment, by stressing the value of their students, and the opportunity that the educators have to help their students grow.

References

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