The SAGE Encyclopedia of Classroom Management

Managing Classroom Discussions

Classroom discussion is a powerful instructional tool that is effective across all grade levels, kindergarten through college and beyond. The complexity of content and sophistication of students' ideas may vary, but the core elements of respectful interaction during a discussion are the same for all groups. Discussions are an engaging way to promote students' enthusiasm for learning.

Importantly, discussions bolster students' academic *and* social competencies. Student-to-student discussion improves comprehension of content matter and exercises students' argumentative reasoning and academic language skills, which transfer to improved literacy and overall reading comprehension. These capacities are beneficial not only in English Language Arts classrooms but also in Science, Social Studies, and Mathematics. Beyond improved academic competence, classroom discussion helps students develop empathy, perspective taking, and self-regulation skills that are necessary to foster healthy relationships.

This entry describes effective techniques for managing classroom discussions. It begins by defining the construct of classroom discussion and then describes management techniques teachers can use to effectively facilitate productive classroom discussions.

What Does Typical Talk in the Classroom Look Like?

A lot of talking happens in classrooms. However, not all classroom talk involves interactive *discussion*. There is a wide spectrum of talk activities that occurs within a classroom and that falls along a continuum of teacher-dominated lecture all the way to student-led collaboration. The most common form of classroom talk can be located somewhere in the middle of that continuum. It includes both student and teacher voices and takes the shape of an Initiation–Response–Evaluation (IRE) pattern in which (1) the teacher first poses a question in hopes of *initiating* student thought or reflection, (2) the student *responds* to the teacher's prompt with some sort of claim or input, and then (3) the teacher *evaluates* the student's claim as correct or incorrect. Consider the following transcript excerpt from a fourth-grade English Language Arts classroom:

Teacher: What is an example of Mamie's short-term goals*? INITIATION*

Jeremy: To finish college. *RESPONSE*

Teacher: Yes, we know she wanted to finish college, right*? EVALUATION*

What is another short-term goal*? INITIATION*

Eglantine: To have a family. *RESPONSE*

Teacher: Great. Yes, to have a family someday*. EVALUATION*

In this excerpt, the teacher controls the direction of talk; she asks students questions for which there is a predetermined correct answer, then the students offer a reply that must be validated by the teacher. While there are times when this pattern of classroom talk is necessary (e.g., to review answers to homework or to quickly assess students' knowledge), experts have found that more open-ended forms of dialogue are better suited to promote students' deep comprehension of academic material.

How Do Classroom Discussions Differ From Typical Classroom Talk?

Classroom *discussions* differ from other types of classroom talk because they are open-ended in nature and move away from a teacher-dominated IRE pattern. A *classroom discussion* involves two or more students—and sometimes, but not necessarily, the teacher— discussing an educational topic that is supported by academic materials (e.g., a book, short story, chart, graph, explicit instruction from the teacher). The talk is dominated by students and involves open-ended inquiry, fueled by evidence- and logic-based claims. For example, the following excerpt shows a small group of fourth-grade students debating whether or not people should learn to speak a second language at school:

Eglantine: If you and your friend keep on speaking Spanish, maybe all other students will feel left out. *PRESENTS A CLAIM ACCOMPANIED BY LOGIC*

Robbie: Can you give an example*? PRESSES FOR EVIDENCE*

Eglantine: Um, like you see two students outside at recess talking Spanish, then you come and try to communicate with them, but you can't because you don't understand Spanish. *ELABORATES REASONING*

Jeremy: What do you mean by that*? PRESSES FOR CLARIFICATION*

Eglantine: You would feel left out! That's what I'm saying! *CLARIFIES*

Jeremy: Oh. Right. It's not good to use two languages at school. *AGREES AND REPHRASES*

Robbie: What makes you think that? *PRESSES FOR REASONING*

In this exchange, the teacher's voice is not present. Instead, the students are driving the discussion. The students use open-ended questions to challenge each other's arguments; they hold each other accountable for logical claims and evidence that supports their reasoning.

Descriptions of Discussion- Based Activities

Discussion-based activities vary in the number of students present, the degree to which the teacher's voice is present, and the amount of scaffolding necessary to prepare students for the activity. Listed below are five discussion-based activities that can be used to scaffold students' discussion skills. All of these activities are effective in bolstering students' comprehension of content as well as their prosocial capacities. Furthermore, all of these activities require practice in order for students to learn how to engage productively in a discussion. As a general rule, as students become familiar and proficient with different discussion formats, teachers should gradually transfer management and interpretive authority to students.

Think–Pair–Share

In this activity, teachers pose a content-related question to the whole class and give students 30 seconds to reflect on their own thoughts. Next, they allow students approximately 1 minute to share their ideas with a partner. Following this brief exchange, they reconvene the whole class and ask students to share aloud their partner's idea. This activity provides opportunities

for students to practice reflection, listening, and perspective-taking skills. A think–pair–share activity typically takes a total of 4 minutes of class time.

Fishbowl

Teachers ask a group of three to five students to sit in a circle in the center of the classroom, making sure to include one empty seat in this inner circle (for observers who will want to join in). The rest of the class should form a standing ring around the outside of the inner circle. The teacher will pose an open-ended, content-related question to the inner group (e.g., Were the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt grand rulers or cruel oppressors?). While students in the inside circle discuss the prompt, students in the outside circle should listen carefully to the ideas being generated. If a student in the outside circle has something to say, he or she may join the conversation by taking a seat in the available spot in the inner circle. When a new student joins the inner circle, another student must leave and join the outer circle. This activity allows students to practice directing their own conversational flow, maintain interpretive authority of the material, and sharpen general listening and reflecting skills required by discussions. A fishbowl can take anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes of class time.

Structured Debate

Depending on the size of the class, teachers divide students into two to four groups. They then introduce an open-ended topic in which more than one plausible solution or answer is evident (e.g., Who should be responsible for getting students to do their homework—the student, the teacher, or the parents?). The teachers next assign a stance to each group and let them know it will be their responsibility to (1) justify and defend that stance and (2) rebut counterarguments. Students are given time to prepare their arguments and their rebuttal to the other team's argument. This activity provides students with opportunities to engage in complex reasoning about a shared text, as well as chances to formulate evidence-based arguments and practice strategies for respectfully disagreeing with others. A structured debate can take anywhere from 20 to 45 minutes of class time.

Whole-Class Discussion

Typically, whole-class discussions are started when the teacher poses an open-ended question to the group (e.g., How does Jeremy know that the farmer was left with seven apples?). Then, students are encouraged to share their ideas and to respond to each other's thinking. It is ideal to encourage students to simply speak out when they have something to say, rather than raising their hand to request permission from the teacher. Over the course of the academic year, the management of the whole-class discussion can shift from being predominantly facilitated by the teacher to being driven by students (who will feel more and more comfortable questioning each other and sharing ideas). This activity provides an opportunity for students to learn how to manage large multiparty conversations, while at the same time deepening their comprehension of content and exercising prosocial discussion skills. A whole-class discussion can take anywhere from 3 to 45 minutes of class time.

Small-Group Discussion

In groups of three to six, students are asked to contemplate academic content. They may be provided with an exploratory prompt (e.g., What types of metal are attracted to magnets?); they may be requested to discuss a chapter from a text (e.g., Why did the lead character

choose to run away from home?); or they may be asked to solve a complex problem (e.g., How much money does Coach Selman need in order to purchase enough food for the team?). Typically, the entire class breaks into small groups at the same time and then reconvenes at the same time to report their findings to the whole class. Small-group discussions offer students the most interpretive control over content and are best suited for students who have had some modeling or practice engaging in discussion. The teacher may circulate throughout the room to monitor that students are on task. Over the course of the year, students will become more autonomous about setting their own goals and engaging in academically productive conversations. This activity provides an opportunity for students to learn how to manage large multiparty conversations, while at the same time deepening their comprehension of content and exercising prosocial skills. A small-group discussion can take anywhere from 5 to 20 minutes of class time.

How Can Teachers Promote Effective Classroom Discussions?

Establish Ground Rules

It is important for teachers, together with their students, to set and enforce effective ground rules for classroom discussions very early in the year. Students will feel more dedicated to a set of rules if they have had a hand in creating them. The teacher can start by asking students to reflect on positive conversations they have had with their friends or family members. Following are a few suggested prompts to get students thinking:

- What makes a good conversation partner?
- What are the differences between a fight and a discussion?
- How do you feel when others interrupt you when you are talking?
- How does it make you feel when others laugh at your ideas?
- How do you know when what is said in a discussion is a fact versus an opinion?

The questions listed above will get students thinking about the importance of empathy and perspective taking during discussions, as well as the need for logic- and evidence-based contributions. After challenging students to visualize what constitutes a friendly and productive discussion, teachers ask them to think of a few rules that would ensure respectful talk. Listed below are recommended ground rules. Having just a few rules is more effective than having a long list.

- Actively listen to your peers' ideas.
- Wait for an appropriate moment in the discussion to speak.
- Use evidence or reason to support your ideas.
- Ask for clarification when you are confused.
- Do not speak too much—give others a chance!
- Use kind words, not insults.

The purposes of student-generated ground rules are that (1) they are more likely to be adhered to and respected by students and therefore will reduce the likelihood of misbehavior and (2) introducing respectful standards will contribute to the overall harmony of the classroom climate and naturally create an atmosphere that is conducive to collaborative learning.

Instructional Techniques

During any type of discussion activity, the teacher has the important job of making sure the talk remains academically focused and productive. While students should be allowed considerable interpretive authority, the teacher may intervene when necessary. Listed below are ways the teacher may gently get students back on track:

- Question how statements are related to the academic content or topic.
- Review or repeat central points when students seem confused.
- Remind students that differing opinions are okay.

Talk Moves for Productive Classroom Discussion

No matter the structure, there are both student and teacher talk moves that are conducive to productive classroom discussions. Talk moves, whether used by teachers or students, help to improve the quality of conversations by helping to clarify, link, invite, and extend contributions. These moves promote both *academic* and *social* understanding at the same time because they repair and extend the discussion in an inclusive and respectful manner. Therefore, students who are engaged in a discussion about an academic topic will be practicing prosocial behavioral tendencies while also deepening their comprehension of subject matter.

Teacher Moves

Teacher moves encourage students to externalize their thoughts and press students to deepen their reasoning. These teacher moves can be used during any discussion format. These talk moves help the teacher to achieve the following:

- Ensure that students can hear one another:"Say that louder," or "Can you say that again so that everyone can hear?"
- Prompt students to support contributions with evidence from the text: "What evidence in the book supports that position?" or "Where in the text does it say... ?"
- Prompt students to provide general reasons for their contributions: "Why do you think that?" or "Can you explain your reasoning to us a little more?"
- Encourage students to clarify their contribution: "Can you say more about that?" or "What do you mean when you say... ?"
- Prompt students to respond to other students' reasoning: "Who agrees or disagrees with X?" or "Who can add to what Y just said?"

The teacher moves listed above are subtle ways for the teacher to hold students accountable for maintaining quality dialogue that promotes content understanding. Sometimes, the teacher will need to use more direct moves to achieve the following:

- Ensure that students pay attention to one another: "Who can put that into their own words?" or "You need to listen to Alice."
- Guide students back on topic: "How does that relate to X?" or "Let's remember that our topic is X..."
- Remind students of the classroom rules for discussion: "Jeremy, please rephrase that using kind words," or "Don't interrupt your classmate."

Student Moves

Desirable student moves involve extended talk in which students provide evidence or reasoning for their ideas. Respectful disagreements, requests for peer elaboration,

interrogation of sources, and attempts to gain clarity are key indicators that the discussion is going well. Students' use of these moves should be highlighted and encouraged:

- Provide general reasons to support a contribution:

  "I think the sum is nine *because* when you put four with five..."

- Refer to specific evidence from the text to support a contribution:

  "On page 7, it says that water freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit."

- State that they agree or disagree with another student:

  "I disagree with Eglantine. I do not think copper will stick to magnets."

- Acknowledge multiple perspectives in the discussion:

  "Robbie thinks that the Pharaohs were kind, but Jeremy thinks they were oppressive."

- Ask another student a question about his or her contribution or the topic:

  "Eglantine, what makes you think that the copper will stick to the magnet?"

- State that he or she had changed his or her mind:

  "I used to think that we shouldn't use two languages at school, but now I think it's okay.

Not *all* teacher and student talk moves need to happen during a single discussion in order to view the activity as a success. Rather, these moves will fluctuate depending on the activity structure and how advanced students are in their discussion skills.

In order to make clear how to scaffold and encourage productive talk early in the year, this entry has differentiated between teacher and student moves. As students' discussion skills become more sophisticated, they can be expected to appropriate teacher moves to manage and extend discussions. Similarly, the teacher can borrow student moves to model effective discussion techniques.

Throughout the course of the year, it is important for teachers to explain the significance of each of these moves to students and to highlight with applause students' effective use of these moves. Sharing with students why and how a particular talk move is important will help students understand the social and communicative purposes of each move and will help them learn to use talk moves effectively and independently.

Conclusion

In summary, classroom discussion is a powerful instructional technique that serves to strengthen students' academic and social skills. The versatility of discussion allows it to take on many formats within the classroom. Teachers can scaffold students' discussion skills throughout the year by enforcing ground rules, modeling effective talk moves, and integrating frequent discussion-based activities into the routine of the students' school days. Classrooms rich with discussion can expect to experience a more harmonious overall climate with reduced behavior concerns and increased student engagement. The fostering of this positive

classroom culture encourages deep comprehension of academic content and profound respect for diverse perspectives, resulting in greater content knowledge, improved test scores, and healthier interpersonal relationships among students and their peers.

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See also Cooperative Learning Groups; Democratic Practices in Classrooms and Schools; Fostering Classroom Engagement; Management of Student Grouping; Managing Groupwork; Sharing Authority; Social and Emotional Learning

Further Readings

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