The Discussion Method in Classroom Teaching
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Remarkably versatile and demonstrated as effective at all grade levels, the discussion method has great potential for classroom teaching. Yet many teachers are reluctant to use this method. This paper discusses the reasons for this reluctance, the characteristics and benefits of the discussion method, and ways in which it can be included in the classroom.

Why Teachers Don’t Use Discussion

Student reticence. Teachers usually judge the success of their discussions by the extent to which students talk. Unfortunately, many students clam up when invited to participate in a discussion. For example, Applegate (1969) found:

A class discussion implies open and active participation. However, in most instances it becomes a limited dialogue between the teacher and a few pupils, with the remaining ones sitting mute and inactive. (p. 78)

Some students feel unable to say what they mean and are afraid of being wrong if they contribute. Others are intimidated by the dominant participants, and so do not speak. Sensing students’ discomfort, many teachers feel that the discussion method simply does not work in a classroom setting.

Loss of control. Classes tend to get a bit noisy and disorganized when the discussion method is introduced. Noise and disorganization are threatening to some teachers. They suggest poor control, even bad teaching. The fact that the discussion method gives students some responsibility for structuring verbal interaction also threatens teachers. The sharing of instructional responsibility conflicts with the traditional view that the teacher alone should determine what and how students learn.

Learning outcomes. Some teachers do not appreciate the potential of the discussion method to help students learn. They argue that they are too busy “teaching” to have time for discussion. At a time when “back to basics” is on the minds of many educators and parents, discussion is seen as a frill. They do not realize that discussion is a highly versatile strategy that can be used not only to help students develop problem solving skills and to share opinions, but also to attain subject matter mastery.

Student reticence, anxiety about loss of control, and uncertainty about the place of discussion in the curriculum are reasons why so many teachers consciously or unconsciously reject the discussion method. Yet we have found that teachers, when properly trained, do value this method and are eager to
incorporate it in their teaching style. *Training* is the key. Teachers need training to understand what the discussion method is, and they need practice in discussion skills to insure its effective use. As we shall stress later, students also need training in discussion since the burden of responsibility for verbal interaction is on them.

Characteristics of the Discussion Method

The discussion method is often confused with recitation. Anyone who has observed classroom teaching is familiar with this pattern of verbal interaction: teacher question (e.g., "What is the capital of Oregon?"); student response; teacher feedback (e.g., "Correct"). This sequence of "rapid-fire" questioning is repeated again and again, with the teacher initiating and controlling each interaction. In discussion, however, the teacher encourages students to interact with each other. There are relatively long sequences of one student comment followed by another, with little or no teacher intervention.

Another difference between the two methods is that recitation tends to focus on students' recall and "reciting" of subject matter content. In contrast, discussion tends to focus on higher cognitive objectives.

What, then, is the discussion method in teaching? *It is a strategy for achieving instructional objectives that involves a group of persons, usually in the roles of moderator and participant, who communicate with each other using speaking, nonverbal, and listening processes.* Note in this definition that the discussion method requires the teacher and students to organize into a group, which has been defined as "a collection of interacting persons with some degree of reciprocal influence over one another" (Schmuck and Schmuck, 1975, p. 6). This element of reciprocal influence implies that students learn not only from the teacher, but from each other. Similarly, the teacher must be open to learning new ideas from students. Teachers who have been trained in discussion say this is one of the most rewarding aspects of the method: it enables them to find out how students are organizing the curriculum in their heads. Discussion helps teachers realize that the "sea of faces" in the classroom are unique individuals, each interpreting issues, problems, and subject matter content in his/her own way.

Another important characteristic of discussion is its emphasis on *speaking, nonverbal, and listening processes.* Conventional instruction relies primarily on students' use of two learning modalities: reading from the textbook and writing in workbooks or doing other writing assignments. Discussion engages other modalities (speaking, observing, listening) through which students can learn. Teachers agree that the opportunity to speak about their own ideas and to listen to others speak helps students learn. Furthermore, the nonverbal messages communicated between discussion participants adds affective meaning to the curriculum that is often missing in "dry" textbook accounts of ideas and happenings.

Purpose of the Discussion Method

The discussion method is remarkably versatile. Teachers can vary its use to achieve several different instructional purposes.

*Subject matter mastery.* William Hill (1969) has developed a variant of the discussion method for achieving traditional instructional goals relating to subject matter mastery. After students have read or viewed some curriculum material, the teacher conducts a discussion that includes these points: terms and concepts in the curriculum selection, the author's message, major themes and subtopics, relationship of the material to other knowledge, applications of the material, and evaluation of the author's presentation. Subject matter mastery discussions are characterized by teacher questions at the comprehension, analysis, application, synthesis, and evaluation levels of the Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives (Bloom, 1956). Studies by Hill (1969), Gall and his associates (1978), and a review of the research literature by McKeachie (1965) demonstrate that this use of the discussion method is effective.

*Issue-oriented discussions.* The focus of issue-oriented discussion is on students' opinions toward public issues. The most basic purpose of this type of discussion is to increase students' awareness of their own opinions and the opinions of others. Other purposes are to help students analyze and evaluate opinions, and to modify their own opinions in a way consistent with their analysis and evaluation. Some teachers use the issue-oriented discussion to help their students reach a *consensus* opinion on an issue.

Research studies demonstrate consistently that this type of discussion can lead to attitude change. For example, Fisher (1968) conducted an experiment in which one group of fifth grade students read a series of stories designed to promote positive attitudes toward American Indians; another group of students read the same stories, and in addition, participated in a discussion after each reading period. Students in the discussion group developed significantly more positive attitudes toward American Indians than did the students who only read the stories. Miller and Biggs (1958) obtained a similar effect working with secondary school students.

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There are several possible reasons why discussion is effective in changing attitudes. One reason is that discussion compels students to reflect upon and clarify their attitudes. This process alone may induce attitude change. Also, change can occur through coercion by other students, or by simple modeling of views expressed by the teacher, who is often perceived as an authority figure by students. In fact, these change processes are so powerful that the teacher needs to moderate the discussion skillfully to insure that they are not misused.

Problem-solving discussion. The teacher can use discussion to help students solve problems; for example: What is the simplest way to measure the perimeter of a room? What is a good title for this story? What kind of an experiment can be designed to test this theory? What class project should we do to conclude our study of the Incas?

One criterion of a problem-solving discussion is the quality of the solution. Another criterion is the extent of commitment that students have toward the solution; that is, how willing are they to carry out the solution? A third criterion is found in brainstorming, which is one type of problem-solving discussion. Students aim at generating a large quantity of solutions while withholding criticism. Then, the list of generated solutions is critically evaluated to select the best one.

Much research has been done to determine whether discussion groups develop better problem solutions than individuals working alone. Generally, research has found that discussion groups are more effective than individuals in solving problems which "require students to draw on the diverse talents of their peers, which have multiple solutions, and which will commit students to a course of action" (Gall and Gall, 1976).

Other purposes. A purpose of the discussion method, irrespective of type, is to help students in improving their discussion skills. As Gage and Berliner (1975) observed:

The ability to listen to others, to evaluate their arguments, to formulate one's own views in the heat of give-and-take, to resist the influence on one's reasoning of personal likes and dislikes for others, to continue to focus on the problem at hand despite emotional arguments and influences — these skills require practice in discussion. (p. 470)

Another purpose of discussion is to motivate students. The very process of talking and sharing knowledge with their peers may motivate students to learn more.

Finally, the discussion method can be used to help the teacher evaluate students' entry or exit levels of understanding of subject matter content. Written tests can be used to achieve the same purpose, but they are much more time-consuming for the teacher and students.

Effective Discussion Techniques

Group size. A successful discussion requires a relatively small number of participants — five being an ideal number (Schellenberg, 1959; Hare, 1962). The average number of remarks per participant and the percentage of participants who talk in the discussion decreases significantly if the group is enlarged much beyond this number (Stephan and Mishler, 1952).

The "five-participant rule" creates a problem for teachers, who may have from 10 to 40 or more students in their class. There are two solutions to the problem. One is the "fishbowl" method in which the teacher selects five or six students who sit in a discussion circle in the center of the classroom. The remaining students arrange themselves in a larger circle around this group; they observe the discussion, make notes, and can continue the discussion after the inner circle has finished. Teachers have used this technique in their classrooms with good success.

Another technique is to break a class of, let's say, 20 students into four small discussion groups (five students in each group). This method will work if the students are accustomed to working together in small groups, and if students have at least a minimum level of discussion skills. The teacher should appoint one student in each group to act as a discussion leader and recorder.

Seating arrangements. The traditional classroom seating arrangement — students in rows facing the instructor — severely restricts participation in a discussion. A circular arrangement, where teacher and students can see each other, is much more effective. For example, Steinzor (1950) found that a member of a group is more likely to interact with other members of the group if he or she can see as well as hear them.

Discussion skills. Gall and his colleagues (1976) have developed a list of skills for facilitating the discussion process. The skills are presented in Table 1. You will note that there are complementary skills for moderator and for participants. The teacher as moderator and students as participants share responsibility for keeping the discussion moving forward.

There are four major process skills shown in Table 1: maintaining an open discussion in which students feel free to say what they think; listening to others and keeping the discussion focused; analyzing different
points of view expressed in the discussion; and evaluating what happened in the discussion. Each of these broad process skills is operationalized by the more specific skills listed beneath them.

The skills in Table 1 may appear obvious, but they are not. For example, students placed in discussion groups without training seldom talk to each other, seldom acknowledge others’ ideas, and seldom ask each other for clarification. If teachers spend time teaching these discussion skills, though, students do show an improvement (Lai et al., 1972). To teach these skills, teachers need to model their use and to provide opportunities for structured practice and feedback. Various materials for teaching discussion skills are available, ranging from the helpful little book, Learning Discussion Skills Through Games (Stanford and Stanford, 1969) to a multi-media training program (Gall et al., 1976).

**Which Students Benefit from Discussion?**

Positive effects from using the discussion method have been found at all grade levels. It can be used effectively with primary students as well as with adult learners, if appropriate adaptations in degree of structure and instructional objectives are made. The discussion method is particularly valuable for students who are weak in reading comprehension or independent study skills. Discussion provides for these students a completely different learning mode (speaking

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**TABLE 1**

**Discussion Skills for Moderators and Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MODERATOR</th>
<th>PARTICIPANTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROCESS SKILL:</strong> Have an open discussion in which participants feel free to say what they think.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Support every person’s right to his or her own opinion.</td>
<td>1. Talk to each other, not just to the moderator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Use supportive silence to promote group interaction.</td>
<td>2. Don’t monopolize.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Distribute participation by calling on silent group members.</td>
<td>3. Ask others what they think.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Don’t monopolize.</td>
<td>4. Don’t engage in personal attack.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROCESS SKILL:</strong> Listen to others and keep the discussion focused.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. State the issue at the beginning of the discussion.</td>
<td>1. Listen to others’ ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Restate the issue to keep the discussion focused.</td>
<td>2. Acknowledge others’ ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Summarize statements made by participants.</td>
<td>3. Question irrelevant remarks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROCESS SKILL:</strong> Analyze different points of view.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. State areas of agreement or disagreement.</td>
<td>1. Ask for clarification.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ask for temporary agreements to break up deadlocks.</td>
<td>2. Ask for reasons for others’ opinions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ask for clarification.</td>
<td>3. Give reasons for your opinions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Ask for reasons why someone holds a particular viewpoint.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROCESS SKILL:</strong> Evaluate the effectiveness of a discussion.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Ask for a brief review.</td>
<td>1. Review the main points of the discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ask participants to explain viewpoints different from their own.</td>
<td>2. Explain viewpoints different from yours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ask participants to tell their current opinion and how the discussion affected it.</td>
<td>3. Tell your current opinion and how the discussion affected it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Ask about the next step for the group or individuals.</td>
<td>4. Suggest the next step for the group or for you personally.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and listening in a group) for achieving subject matter mastery and other educational objectives.

Certain groups of students tend to talk more in discussion than other groups. For example, boys tend to initiate more statements and exert more influence than girls (Lockheed and Hall, 1975). Black students tend to participate less than white students (Katz and Benjamin, 1960). And younger students in the group tend to participate less than the older students (Deal, 1970). Teachers can help these low-participation groups by such techniques as taking time in a discussion to invite them to express their views; by occasionally forming homogeneous groups (e.g., an all-girl group); and by choosing high-interest discussion topics that all students can talk about easily.

Making Room for Discussion in Teaching

The commonly held belief that the discussion method belongs to English and social science teaching is unfounded. Discussion has a place in every subject area.

The teacher of music, for example, can encourage students to take part in curriculum decision-making through discussion. “Should music courses concentrate on classical music?” is a possible focus for selection decisions for a school music program. Also, students can consolidate musical knowledge and develop musical appreciation through discussion. Questions of criticism or evaluation which arise so frequently in music, art, drama and literature are especially suited to the discussion method. Musical interpretation, for example, can be discussed by members of ensembles so that understanding of and commitment to a particular interpretation can be attained.

Another illustration of discussion’s wide-ranging applicability is physical education and health. A coach can offer his or her players the chance to develop game strategies or evaluate team performance through discussion. Team or club management decisions can be made in similar fashion, especially if members are trained in the discussion method. However, if students are given the right to reach decisions through group discussion, they must also be assured that their decisions will be implemented or at least seriously considered.

Inductive and discovery techniques in mathematics and science provide excellent opportunities for group discussions. Learning is enhanced if students are permitted to discuss research problems, solutions, and explanations that they have generated. The discussion method is quite consistent with the emphasis on inquiry that is found in contemporary math and science curricula.

The discussion method is strongly advocated for the teaching of English and the social sciences. For example, a secondary teacher found the method very useful in a writing unit. Students were unconvinced that a writing course was necessary. The teacher began by setting up a “fishbowl” in which students could identify possible benefits and air their grievances, freely and safely. They discovered for themselves the value of writing skills. The same teacher reported that students made good use of brainstorming sessions to decide upon topics and to share ideas prior to writing.

A first grade teacher adapted the discussion method through the “magic circle” technique. In the “magic circle,” students must obey three rules: to take turns at speaking; to listen to what others have to say; and to recall what others have said. The teacher first applied this approach to classroom issues. Later it was applied to an issue arising from a reading of The Little Red Hen: Should the red hen have shared her bread with the other animals?

Simulations developed for social studies curricula provide a ready-made context for use of the discussion method. Recently in training a group of teachers, we used a simulation, The Storekeeper’s Dilemma, (Fenton, 1977) concerning the Great Depression. The teachers viewed a filmstrip in which a storekeeper was faced with the moral issue of whether breaking the law and use of physical violence are justified to help destitute farmers. Next they participated in a fishbowl discussion to exchange opinions and to attempt a resolution. The instructional pattern of an experience followed by discussion, exemplified by this simulation, is one that the teachers were able to transfer easily to their own classroom teaching situations.

In summary, discussion is a method of great versatility in classroom teaching. Research findings demonstrate its effectiveness. Unfortunately, its potential has not been realized because teachers and students do not receive proper training and encouragement in use of discussion skills. The task facing teacher educators is to develop and implement programs that provide this training.

REFERENCES


