

Discussion, A Contemporary Method

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Discussion has become a very popular method of instruction in the classroom, probably because both students and teachers desire a more active learning situation. In contrast to the read-and-recite method and the lecture-notebook routine, the discussion gives everyone the opportunity to express himself on subjects about which he is vitally concerned. Most importantly, it provides the opportunity to correct misrepresentations at the time they occur. However, some instructors can be disillusioned by the results, so far from their expectations. Part of the problem might be due to the fact that there are many formats from which to choose, the techniques vary from format to format, and the particular format chosen must be in accordance with the subject matter under consideration, which, in turn, will have its own unique outcomes. Since discussion is used frequently as a teaching technique in the first quarter of the American Language Skills course at Southwest Minnesota State College, I have found it helpful to assess its values and to define its various forms.

Definition of Successful Discussion

There is, of course, no surefire formula for predicting or insuring a successful discussion, but one of the keys seems to lie in the structuring of the situation, in how tightly the reins are held, or, to put it another way, in how narrowly or widely relevancy is interpreted. At one extreme, anything goes: free association, sudden changes of subject, personal reminiscence and other permissive practices. At the other end, there is a strong attempt to guide the students toward objectives already predetermined by the instructor. Neither extreme can be called a true discussion. The first is like the dormitory "bull session"; the second is nothing more than a lecture or class recitation in disguise. By contrast, good discussion is purposeful, calling for much student initiative and interaction, and a sharing of the responsibility to exchange ideas. This mode of instruction suggests itself whenever the aims of a single lesson, or even of an entire course, can best be obtained through common deliberation following from, and leading to, individual reading and study.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Discussion results in more student involvement and activity during the learning process, but it is also valuable from other standpoints. Examination of the values and limitations of collaborative behavior in discussion brings into focus four major advantages: (1) groups are generally superior to indi-

viduals in problem solving; (2) groups are more likely to carry out a group decision or solution; (3) group activity provides an effective means of modifying individual attitudes and behavior; and (4) individuals gain personally from group participation.

Discussion as a method is often attacked on the grounds that it is chiefly a verbal activity, not experience itself. For the most part, the school is charged with the responsibility of providing as many experiences as possible for the student. However, this does not resolve the problem of preparing him for experiences yet to come. Discussion is one tool with which various experiences can be handled.

Some other complaints against the discussion method are that it (1) consumes time; (2) diffuses responsibility for quality contribution; (3) may be impeded by diverse and conflicting value systems of the discussants; (4) is poorly suited for emergency decisions; (5) may be unable to cope with effects of status differences within the group; and (6) is sometimes subject to distortion from majority pressures, prior commitments of the participants, or lack of understanding of and skill in the process.

But in view of its advantages these factors should not inhibit the use of discussion as a worthwhile activity for handling a variety of topics. Able instructors can minimize the disadvantages. A discussion on discussion, for instance, might be helpful to inform the participants about the process. Also, before the discussion groups can organize with any degree of genuineness, members must be led to recognize that they, collectively, have a problem; must become aware or perplexed about the way in which their difficulties can be solved or modified; and must be willing to work with others in a search for the best way of solving or modifying the problem. These initial conditions are necessary.

Kinds of Questions

Another key to the success or failure of discussion lies in the quality of the questions that are raised: first, the basic question and its facets; second, those questions that give the process direction; and third, those questions that are asked at the conclusion to indicate the degree of achievement.

Questions should be worded so that they promote deliberations seeking factual information, assessment of value, or determination of policy. Discussion questions can thus be classified according to fact, value, or policy. Answering the first type of question involves drawing out information of various kinds, such as present conditions, historical facts, definitions and requirements. The second type is best answered by judgments about whether an idea or a course of action is good, beneficial, or effective. Ideally, this kind of question arises

during the discussion, originating from the students. Policy, the third type of question, is the most commonly used. In this type, a suitable strategy is worked out to solve the problem at hand.

Some precise examples of provocative questions facilitating the flow of discussion are:

Clarification: Would you explain what you mean by multiple use?

Validity of facts: How do you know that the amount was 72%?

Validity of authorities: Could you tell us something about Dr. Harold Livingston's qualifications?

Unsupported assertions: You just said that experts agree. Would you name a few of these experts?

Practicability: How would this work? How much would this cost?

Logic: How did you arrive at this conclusion?

And, finally, there are questions that evaluate the discussion in terms of the desired ends, the real test of instructional discussion:

Through this discussion, what have students learned that they would not otherwise have learned?

How has this learning advanced them toward mastery of the subject?

In the time spent, was maximum use made of opportunities to learn?

Could learning have been better effected through different instructional means?

Types of Formats

I. The Round Table

Since the two major functions of group discussion are learning and problem solving, the questions are designed to aid in these processes. The particular format to be used is also chosen with these two functions in mind. If an informal pattern of discussion is indicated, the round table is perhaps the most informal type of all. The participants exchange views around a table under the leadership of a chairman and most often without an audience. As in a committee meeting, the members of the group, usually numbering less than a dozen, speak without rising and need

not be recognized by the chair. In this kind of discussion, everyone feels equal. It is most successful, when the discussants not only feel equal, but are equally able and informed. The strict round table discussion is a waning type of device since it seldom functions spontaneously and artificial stimulation has to be supplied, and is thus a misnomer. To remedy the deficiencies of the round table, the panel came into existence to give everyone a feeling of active participation in a free and open interchange of opinion.

One intermediary step between the round table and the panel is the formation of several groups, all functioning at the same time in different parts of the room, with enough time allowed so that groups can break up and a summary of findings be given by one person from each group to the class as a whole.

II. The Panel

The panel is really a small-group discussion guided by a chairman. It may consist of four to eight selected members who remain seated facing the audience while talking back and forth, spontaneously, flexibly and informally. There are usually no set speeches, but the panelists are sometimes asked to give brief preliminary statements in which they set forth their different viewpoints. The chairman keeps the discussion moving forward, and at some interesting point, may ask the audience to participate. The discussion then spills over to include the listeners. Or the audience may be asked to join in at the conclusion, when the chairman sums up. The chairman also ends the discussion by thanking the audience and the panel. If the purpose of the panel is achieved, important facts and conflicting opinions should have come out into the open, audience thinking should have been stimulated and a common basis for participation by all should have been established.

III. The Panel Forum

The panel forum is similar to the variation on the round table. However, it is somewhat more structured than the panel group discussion and there is no reporting back to all the groups as a whole, as in the variation. The groups are self-contained units; each works independently. About four groups, with five or six members each, meet separately in different parts of the room. A chairman is elected and a discussion topic chosen from those which have been previously suggested and studied. The topic may be subdivided and each of these subtopics assigned by the chairman to a participant who gives a brief one-minute summarization of his phase of the topic. Then the group launches into a give-and-take discussion of the subject.

IV. The Colloquium

The colloquy or colloquium is an arrangement for reporting and questioning by experts or scholars. The chairman and the panel begin their discussion by providing expert analysis of the problem, raising significant questions and presenting pertinent facts and opinions. If at any point the chairman or member of the panel feels a significant solution is neglected, a point of disagreement revealed but not explored, or an obscurity allowed to stand, he invites comments and questions from the audience. Forum discussion ensues for a brief time until the point at issue has been disposed of, after which, the panel resumes its discussion. The colloquy requires greater expertise on the part of its chairman and panel members than any other form of public discussion. It combines the virtues of the forum, the hearing and the panel. Like the forum, it encourages questions from the audience; like the hearing, it seeks to bring out evidence bearing on the questions raised; and, like the panel, it draws an audience into discussion in order to weigh evidence.

V. Dialog

The dialog, a modification of the forum, can be very useful when there are only two knowledgeable individuals available or when the expert is known to be an ineffective lecturer. One of the two participants should act as the leader, guiding the conversation, summarizing and providing transitions. One of the participants must also open the discussion and conduct the audience participation, if any. It is not necessary, however, that the same person carry out all these functions throughout the dialog. A moderator could be used to introduce the subject, make the transitions and conclude. This method of discussion is best used by dynamic, witty and learned individuals who explore a vital problem. If these characteristics are not present, the dialog may become horribly dull, since the audience does not get the built-in variety provided by a number of speakers.

VI. The Lecture Forum

The same thing could happen to the lecture forum, where only one person speaks, with questions raised by the audience. The lecture forum is sometimes called the open forum, but actually any type of speaking program followed by audience participation is an open forum. The lecture forum uses two distinct types of presentation depending on the kind of audience participation permitted:

1. The lecture-questions type, in which the audience is limited to asking questions from the floor after recognition from the chairman. In some cases, the questions must be written, and in others, both written and oral may be allowed.

2. The lecture-contribution type, in which members of the audience may either question the speaker or make brief statements.

The single speaker is invited to explore a topic, present information, crystallize opinion and argue for a point of view. The audience benefits from a more expanded or deeper treatment of the subject than is possible with the symposium forum.

VII. Symposium

The term symposium is applied today as it refers to a set program of prepared speeches--persuasive, argumentative, informative or evocative, followed by audience participation. The procedure is the same as for the straight lecture forum, except that several speeches, usually from three to five, averaging five to twenty minutes in length, are presented. The subject chosen will suggest different ways in which the responsibility for its exploration can be divided; however, the objectives are the same as for the panel. Taken separately, each speech may be said to represent a point of view toward the single-subject problem; together, they present a broad consideration of it. The potential narrowness of the lecture forum is therefore avoided, since the basis for possible discussion is increased by diversifying the presentation, group interests are represented by different members of the symposium, and more members of the audience are stimulated to join in the discussion. The most satisfactory subjects are usually those with several, fairly distinct, controversial approaches.

Discussant Qualities

Although the choice of topic is crucial to successful discussion, selection of the techniques for organization must also be carefully done. In addition, the responsibilities of the chairman must be clearly understood and preparations made for the mechanics of the procedure. Most important to the dynamics of the discussion are the attitudes, abilities, and behaviors that participants bring to it. If students are provided with the information needed to understand the processes of discussion, given some guidance by the instructor, and allowed to practice, they will be able to engage in the activity with success and satisfaction. Both the diversity and similarity of students may present problems, but it is these same qualities that make discussion so valuable as a learning technique.

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