Idea Exchange

This section represents a venue for sharing the work of our teaching peers. More to the point, what follows are suggestions for solving specific teaching problems. There is more than a small chance that some of these practical tips might be useful for those of us who teach. Should you wish more information on one or more of these tips, contact the author at the e-mail address attached to the tip.

***

Moving From the "Sage on the Stage" to the "Guide on the Side": Discussion Strategies That Build Student Ownership

If you walked into my American Literature classroom on an average day, you would see my students sitting around a table, books open, notebooks open, pen in hand or nearby, and they would be talking to each other. It's possible there would be a bowl in the center of the table filled with questions they'd written, or it's possible that you'd see them tossing a tennis ball from speaker to speaker. What you probably wouldn't see – or at least notice much if I am doing my job right – is me. I'm the one sitting quietly within or maybe even just outside the circle, jotting notes.

A common complaint from teachers is that conversation in

the classroom often bounces from student to teacher, to student to teacher, to student to teacher… and continues that way. It is essential for students to be engaged participants and not passive observers in their learning. If the teacher is talking 50% or more of the time, then what are the students doing? One way to get students more involved is by moving the teacher out of the center of conversation so students are talking more, thinking more, and listening to each other more.

Discussion is a skill and should be seen as essential to student preparedness for the world beyond secondary school. If we want engaged students in our classroom that are invested in text and share their ideas openly, it is our responsibility as educators to teach them these skills. Below are several steps we use in my classroom to practice and master academic discussion.

Step One: Preparedness. Students can't have a meaningful discussion unless they have first read material deeply or researched a topic thoroughly. In my classroom it is common to see additional texts or printouts that students have brought with them, post-its tacked under author and character names, and journals hastily re-stacked on the shelf because they are used often at the opening or close of class.

When creating class work that will stimulate discussion, it is good to have a concrete assignment with an abstract product. Some examples from American Literature:

- write three discussion questions connected to your reading. These should be written or typed on a separate sheet of paper that will be checked at the beginning of class and handed in at the end with your notes from the discussion.
- Bring in two "nuggets" of research about the author of our text. Go for original; don't tell me where he/she was born, or that they wrote this book. Try to find information that no one else will find! Bring printouts from websites or pages copied from books to verify your source (This may be a great way for students to practice MLA citation, if that is a skill you are also teaching).

Neither of the assignments above can be completed unless the student does his or her reading and research. Also, because there is a product that must come to class with them, it is easy to quickly assess at the beginning of the hour which students are ready for class.

Step Two: Questions. The assignment "write three questions" will not produce great conversation unless students know how to write good questions that will get their peers talking. Before assigning question-writing, it is a good idea to ask students: "What makes a good discussion question?" A sampling of my students' responses include:

- it is a high interest topic
- it has more than one answer
- it is linked to the text or theme.

This is also a good time to introduce or review question stems (i.e. "who, what, when, where, why, and how?") and have students practice writing questions that meet their standard for a good question. They should find that "How" and "What" questions will provide deeper understanding than "Who, When, Where" questions. The questions below have one answer and can be answered quickly without much speculation or analysis:

- Who is the main character of this novel?
- When does the turning point happen in this short story?
- Where is the setting of the scene?

These questions from the American Literature students' study of *The Things They Carried* illustrate how quality questions can set up an engaging discussion:

- How is "truth" explored in O'Brien's fictional account of his Vietnam experience?
- What mood is created by O'Brien's use of the lists of items the soldiers carry?

Questions have a tendency to get stronger peer responses if they are linked to passages in the text, because then students must dig into the book and reread to develop their understanding. For example:

- Why does Rat Kiley shoot the baby water buffalo on page 78? How does it relate to Curt Lemon's death?

Also, make sure to caution students about unanswerable questions. Students and teachers cannot answer questions like, "How does O'Brien feel about the Iraq War?" Only an author can answer that; even research is speculative.

Step Three: Behavior. Students must know what a teacher is looking for when watching them discuss. There are several roles that students can play in discussion.

- Leader – students who are leaders often start things off with supplemental material or a strong opening question and will change topic when there is a lull in conversation. They do not watch the teacher for cues; instead, they watch their classmates to see when it may be time to move to another topic or question. This may be an assigned role and it may rest on one person or a small group.
- Contributor – students who contribute come to class with materials, share questions and comments that build off of what has previously been said, and take an active role in sharing ideas. All students should be contributors. Some specialized ways to contribute include:
    - Supporter – students who support in discussion are good at using the names of their classmates when referring to their ideas and may ask someone a direct question to invite their participation.
    - Challenger – students who challenge bring up opposing viewpoints to the popular opinion in conversation in a respectful way, often by asking follow-up questions that push the class to explore various facets of a question.
- Listener/Observer – it is a misconception to think that only students who talk are communicating. When students are not talking, it is still important to show inter-

est and engagement in what is said. A listener uses eye contact and focuses on the person speaking. They may show engagement by turning to a page in the text mentioned by the speaker, jotting notes, or through nonverbal signals (like nodding).

Often people believe that discussion skills are subjective, but many of the behaviors are observable and can be measured. Another thing you would see, if you were in my classroom, are clipboards hanging on one wall with charts. If you look closely, you'll see each student's name in a row with hash marks and notes in columns with labels like "question," "text reference," "interruption," and "name use." These provide immediate feedback to students about their discussion behavior.

Step Four: Reflection. Students need to know what their strengths and weaknesses are in a discussion in order to improve. Feedback on discussion should be frequent and concrete. Some ways to provide feedback include:

- Teacher observation and conference – watch students during discussions and take notes on their contributions. Informally or formally report the results of what you see to them.
- Peer observation and reporting –on assigned days, articulate discussion leaders and observers, or use a model where some students are responsible for watching and charting what they see in discussion. At the end of the hour, reserve the last 5-10 minutes for the observer to talk to the group about what they saw.
- Self-assessment–at scheduled times (quarter or semester) have students reflect on their strengths and weaknesses in discussion and set personal goals for improvement.

I find that most students want confirmation from me about behaviors they know they exhibit in discussion, so my feedback pairs nicely with their reflections. The feedback they give each other is often more direct and their responses to each other are often punctuated with laughter and nods.

I always know that my students have successfully learned what I want them to know on the days there is a substitute teacher. If the notes tell me which pages the students explored, the themes they discussed, and that all students showed some observable behavior, it was a good discussion.

If students feel accountability for their preparation, write compelling questions, are aware of their behavior, and observe and reflect on their own and others' discussion, they will develop a sense of ownership for their learning and sharing that moves conversation away from teacher leadership and toward student leadership. Teacher knowledge becomes the guide, as it is still the teacher's responsibility to set a context or tone, to provide quality primary and supplementary materials and to step in when students need additional guidance and support. However, students become the center of conversation and take on the active roles in discussion.

What makes a good discussion?

BEFORE

- Be prepared – read your text; come with assignments done
- Questions should be complex with the ability to share multiple views

DURING

- Everyone is involved and focused and invested
- Relevant issues are talked about – related to the text
- Eye contact is important so that the speaker knows you are listening
- There is more going on inside your head than coming out of your mouth
- Ask a question, knowing what your "talking points" are so you can clarify or follow up
- Support your opinions with evidence
- Use text references, chapter names so everyone can find

your source
- Don't repeat or restate; it shuts down conversation
- One person should not dominate; equal contributions
- Respect when others are talking. Don't talk over or interrupt
- Don't have side conversations
- Pacing – pauses can be good for thought
- Respect other people's ideas, even if you don't agree
- It's good to have differing opinion; conflict is important
- Arguments are not productive – it closes out everyone except the people arguing
- The best way to challenge is with a question
- Quality, not just quantity

AFTER
- You still want to talk to someone as you are walking out the door
- You have reached a deeper understanding about the topic than you had when we started
- You have more questions when you leave than when you entered
- You have an emotional reaction to the content or group

Note: the American Literature students generated this list during the first week of class. It was brainstormed from the prompt, organized and printed on a laminated bookmark that each student carries in whatever text we are reading throughout the year.

Kathryn Campbell teaches at St. Paul Academy and Summit School in St. Paul, Minnesota, and has been trained in discussion techniques at the Exeter Humanities Institute and through professional development. Discussion is a graded component in her courses and, on the best days in class, she doesn't talk much.

lit.soup@gmail.com