

## The Distortion of Discussion

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### Introduction

Classroom discussion is an essential pedagogy for teachers across grade levels and age groups. But what is a discussion, exactly? Are teachers really using discussion when they say they are? Recent research has examined this question and the results are unsettling. Martin Nystrand et al's (2001) massive study of classroom discourse (hereafter "the Nystrand Report") found that, out of 872 observations in 200 eighth and ninth grade classrooms in the Midwestern United States, "less than 7% of 1,151 instructional episodes...in English and Social Studies" had even one discussion. As Walter Parker (2006) noted in an analysis of these results, and the authors of the study echo, there is an expectation in these kinds of classes—given the age group and material—that discussion will occur. Where the word 'discussion' is uttered, either by teachers vocally, in their syllabi, school-generated standards, or state-mandated standards, Nystrand et al's data demonstrate two things: first, that there is very little discussion happening in the observed classrooms, and second that this dearth occurs in spaces where the word 'discussion' is uttered. Are educators fulfilling their promises of discussion in United States schools?

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This essay will interpret the Nystrand Report's findings and these questions they generate. The claim is somewhat modest: discussion in the United States is distorted.

To make that claim the article first defines the term distortion as an inconsistency between the meaning of a word and what goes by its name. Next the paper surveys the meaning of the word 'discussion', the generally-articulated idea of discussion, arguing that it denotes a certain kind of interactional pattern in educational contexts and connotes participation, dialogue, openness, equality and freedom, as well as other values associated with democracy. Third, the paper presents Nystrand et al's understanding of discussion as "in-depth exchanges of ideas in the absence of either questions or teacher evaluation" (p.36) following a "dialogical spell," summarizing the authors' empirical conclusions. Finally, the paper recommends concrete teaching techniques from the literature on educational discussion to promote (rather than distort) classroom discussion.

### What Is a Distortion?

Things are distorted when they are twisted, messed up, or out-of-sync with one another. A viewpoint can be distorted, or an image or sound. Distortion for the present purpose refers to a relationship between utterance and practice, or word and deed. Since the idea of distortion involves a kind of discrepancy between word and thing, or utterance and object, ideas from the philosophy of language can help distinguish ways of understanding what a distortion is. There could potentially be as many understandings of distortion as there are theories of truth in language, insofar as the relationship between word and thing has something to do with truth, falsity, and the like. Two general views of this relationship stand out and help to clarify the sense of the word used in this essay.

One way to understand distortion is through a lack of correspondence between what a thing is and the word intended to refer to it. In this case there are several presumptions one must make. First, things must be essentially or objectively some way or another. Second, a word must refer to that thing (whatever it is). There would have to be an objective truth with respect to what discussion is and the word 'discussion' must refer to that state of affairs. Otherwise, discussion is distorted. This is a *correspondence* distortion. Another way to articulate a correspondence distortion is to say that appearance is out-of-sync with reality: the way we talk about discussion is objectively false because discussion is thus-and-so and the word *discussion* refers to that state affairs.

The correspondence understanding of discussion is very old-fash-

ioned and hard to defend. Making a case for an objective truth about discussion would be difficult to do. It might require recourse to religious or spiritual doctrines, cosmologies, or unpopular accounts of existence which have been rejected by generations of theoretical work. Given these constraints a correspondence understanding of the distortion of discussion is unappealing. But there are other options.

A *consistency* distortion between a word and its object is fundamentally different. In this case there is a word, which has a series of denotations and connotations, and a referent. Rather than necessarily referring to something that must be thus-and-so, on a consistency understanding of distortion, there is a disagreement between those denotations and connotations and the thing to which they refer—whatever they all happen to be. If “discussion” denotes a winged animal that mimics the sounds around it, and the word is uttered to refer to parrots, then there is a consistent usage. But if the word has this denotation and is used to refer to couches then there is an inconsistency. These examples are absurd but the point should be clear: a consistency distortion is a discrepancy within a system of more-or-less agreed-upon meanings. There is a stipulated or widely-accepted meaning in utterance with which an observed practice is inconsistent. The meaning, which is contingent, is out-of-sync with practice, which is also contingent.

The distortion of discussion is a consistency distortion, but a more subtle one than the blatant absurdity of “discussion” referring to parrots or couches. Teachers, administrators, students, policymakers, and parents actually utter the word ‘discussion’ and interactions actually do occur after such utterances. Yet the interactions, Nystrand et al have found, are not discussions. The interaction is something else, “most likely a recitation,” a pattern that scholars have considered for decades as the default pattern of educational interaction (Cazden 1986; Dillon 1990, 1994; Guitierrez & Larson 1994; Hoetkker & Ahlbrand 1969; Stodolsky et al 1981; Swidler 2000).

Briefly, the recitation pattern is when a teacher initiates with some kind of comment or question, a student responds, and then the teacher evaluates that response somehow—and repeats. Initiation-Response-Evaluate, or IRE. Low student participation, quick teacher-student question turns, teacher-dominated interaction, and low densities of student questions all characterize recitation. (Paulo Freire’s [2001] (in)famous “banking model of education” comes to mind here.) Ahlbrand and Hoetkker (1969) found in 1969 that this IRE pattern of speech has persisted in US schools since 1892, and other educational discourse analysts (Hulan 2010; Swift, Gooding, & Swift 1988), including the authors of the Nystrand Report, confirm this trend continues in our own time.

So the distortion of discussion has a particular character: someone utters the word “discussion” but what ends up happening is a recitation. More than an inconsistency, this discrepancy between word and deed is something like hypocrisy, since “discussion” connotes many educational and political benefits that recitation does not deliver: participation, dialogism, multiple points of view, equality, and other democratic values (Bridges, 1979; Burbules, 1993; Dewey, 1954; Dillon, 1990; Haroutunian-Gordon, 2009; Hess, 2009; Mill, 2006, Parker, 2010). Distorted discussion, as a strong discrepancy or hypocrisy, promises one thing but delivers its opposite—for which there are political consequences.

Consider an analogy. The situation with discussion and recitation which the Nystand Report presents is like an inadvertent version of a mobster who enters a new restaurant in the neighborhood offering the restaurant owner “protection” from break-ins, robberies, or other violent activity. The word “protection” generally means providing safety, but in this particular case it is used to threaten the hearer with the opposite. The mobster really means that if the owner does not pay him, then he will threaten her safety. Uttering the word ‘protection’ here is a hypocritical euphemism which occasions an imbalance of power between the speaker and listener. In this case there is a consistency distortion between the word ‘protection’ and what goes by its name.

Certainly, in the hundreds of classroom interactions which Nystand et al observed, those teachers who say there will be a discussion and lead a recitation do not mean to do harm to anyone like a mobster. Discussion is not a euphemism they use to facilitate a different interaction, one where they have more power, with some intention. However, intentionally or not, teachers can benefit from the word’s meaning by promising something while doing its opposite. To understand what the promise of discussion and its distortion entail one would need to explore the meaning of discussion more carefully.

### The Meaning of “Discussion”

There is *written* discussion: a kind of printed discourse, argument, or examination of a subject by one or many authors. Then there is *spoken* discussion: individuals speaking and listening to one another. Finally there is *online* discussion, which appears to be a dialectical synthesis of the written and spoken forms: people writing to and reading each other in a time-frame and style more in kind with speaking and listening than discursive writing (Backer 2016b). The etymology of “discussion,” as a compound of the Latin roots *dis* and *cutere*, has been rendered as

“striking back and forth,” which thematically summarizes the similarities between written, spoken, and online forms: in each case there is a striking back and forth of utterance or thought, between persons over time and place (Joyce, 1968).

The concern in this essay is spoken and online discussion rather than written discussion. Even within this arena of spoken discussion there are still a variety of things the word can mean. Discussion could be as vague as talk between people on some subject, like when Mike Myers’s character Linda Richmond on *Saturday Night Live* bids the audience to “talk amongst yourselves” when she chokes up crying. A parent may want to discuss something with a child, indicating a serious chat about a particular issue. The same may occur between workers and bosses, teachers and students, or even friends with didactic tendencies—in each case one engages an “other” in dialogue to address a serious point, potentially with that other’s input.

Most relevantly to present concerns, and closest to what teachers and educational researchers mean when they use the word, a discussion is an interaction which improves knowledge from a variety of viewpoints in some appropriate form (Bridges, 1979). This appropriate form of interaction (or manners, more simply) can take the shape of a seminar (interpretation of a text), deliberation over public policies, and conversation which concerns the participants of the particular discussion group (Parker & Hess, 2001). Thus discussion is sometimes talk about controversial issues (Hess, 2009), interpretations of literary texts including certain kinds of questions (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2009), constructivist interactions along a spectrum of teacher-directedness and unstructured talk (Golding, 2011), or certain kinds of philosophical talking including Socratic dialogue, Habermasian communicative discourse, and Derridian deconstructive dialogue (Sarid, 2012). It can also mean conversation (inclusive and divergent talk), inquiry (inclusive and convergent talk), debate (critical and divergent talk), or instruction (critical and convergent talk) (Burbules, 1993) or forms of educational talk which cover course material, integrate participants’ thinking with course material, or express participants’ opinions (Farrar, 1988). Within any of these discussions there might be several purposes for the talk that occurs: persuading, information-seeking, advice-soliciting, expert-consulting, negotiating, or quarreling (Walton, 2010).

Discussion’s “appropriate form” has also been defined in observable ways: turn-taking, for example. James T. Dillon (1990, 1994) requires that discussion address a question in common by having a mix of moves such that no participant follows up any other participant more or less than any other. This is perhaps the most concrete understanding of

educational discussion available since it unquestionably distinguishes discussion from recitation. Using the chart below (see Figure 1), Dillon articulates the difference between two transcribed interactions, one a discussion and the other recitation. Each have a different percentage of teacher talk (number of times the teacher speaks), question turns (when someone asks a question), teacher-student turns (when a teacher addresses a student), student participation, rate of exchanges per minutes, and length of student responses in seconds. Discussions have less teacher talk, fewer question turns, fewer teacher-student turns, much more student participants, fewer exchanges per minute, and longer lengths of student response.

Figure 1 says that discussion should encourage interaction between students over teacher-student interaction, and also encourage more students to participate. In a recitation, there is more teacher-talk, more question turns, and more teacher-student turns. To summarize, discussion has a “mix of moves” or an equality and variety in the sequence of turns, which, besides being the most concrete, is also perhaps the most provocative criteria available in the educational literature, as such a sequence makes fully apparent the discrepancy between what is called ‘discussion’ and the interaction which largely goes by that name.

These are the procedural and productive aspects of discussion, but there is a political aspect which is just as important. The interaction can connote democratic politics, dispositions and values. The connection to democracy is at best a connotation, not a denotation, but the significance of discussion to democracy and vice versa is strong enough for Diana Hess to claim that “to be against discussion is akin to opposing democracy.” Nick Burbules (1993) writes that there is a “close link between communication and politics, particularly democracy” (p.13). Burbules cites John Dewey in that same passage, to whom he attributes the idea that “what sustains democracy” is its “public discourse.” The critical theorist and philosopher Jurgen Habermas has created a far-reaching philosophical argument for

**Figure 1**  
*From Dillon, 1990, p.17*

<i>Aspect of Questioning</i>	<i>Recitation (%)</i>	<i>Discussion (%)</i>
Teacher talk (vs student talk)	69	22
Question turns	78	11
Teacher-student turns (vs student-student)	88	6
Students participating	41	77
Rate of exchanges	6 per minute	1 per minute
Average student response	4 seconds	25 seconds

the restoration of political lifeworlds and public spheres through discourse and communication, profoundly influencing communication theory, legal studies, social and political philosophy, as well as education (Habermas, 1984). Haroutunian-Gordon (2009) and Hess (2009), both educationists, locate their work on discussion within the general project of democratic education, and Walter Parker's (2010) research explicitly characterizes discussion as a socialization process for liberal consciousness within democratic society. The concept of dialogue in critical pedagogy is sometimes affiliated with "radical democracy," or an activist interpretation of democratic education (Giroux & McLaren, 1986).

Finally, the Philosophy for Children movement following Lippman has taken up the idea of dialogue and given it political and democratic meanings (Splitter & Sharp, 1995). William Keith (2007) has written a history called *Democracy as Discussion*, and merely glancing at the title of Bridges's (1979) foundational *Education, Democracy, and Discussion* evokes the connection between democracy and discussion. Bridges acknowledges that his central influence is John Stuart Mill (1846/2006), whose *On Liberty* begins with a chapter called "Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion." In that chapter Mill claims that "[l]iberty as a principle has no application to the state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion" (p.35). Free and equal discussion, in this fundamental text on liberal-democratic theory, is a prerequisite for liberty.

Looking at these claims as a whole, discussion at least has a close link with democracy. At most, discussion sustains democracy and is a precondition to liberal freedom itself. What is at stake in the distortion of discussion is therefore not just the retreat of a certain kind of pedagogical interaction but also a worrying indicator of a democracy's ill health and well-being.

There should now be some clarity about what "discussion" means in education, at least in the context of academic literatures on the subject. A significant problem for this map of the meaning of 'discussion' however is the family resemblance of other terms: conversation, chat, forum, deliberation, dialogue, dialectic, discourse, and interaction. Dillon (1994) has noted that there is an entertaining confusion between them, making a systematic study difficult and possibly specious. I focus on the word 'discussion' and not the others for particular reasons which I hope make my argument non-arbitrary. For the sake of clarity, other forms of interaction which contrast with discussion in a more profound way than mere usage are the following. *Recitation* is an initiation-response-evaluation (IRE, as Cazden, 1986, writes). *Conversation* is typically uttered in reference to a wandering form of talk, going from topic to topic playfully

and without obligation (Tarde, 1898/2010). *Debate* is eristic. *Dialogue* is interaction between “others” and a *forum* is usually a question-answer session, or town hall. *Deliberation* is explicitly political, used in reference to liberal-democratic attempts at consensus in pursuit of just decisions. *Discourse* is a general term for the circulation of meanings and symbols and does not specify speech act from textual act from epistemological content, whereas an *interaction* is any communicative act whatsoever.

“Discussion” for the purposes of this argument means an interaction between persons which addresses a question in common through a mix of moves, connoting democratic values which include participation, equality, and freedom. This provisional understanding of the meaning of discussion gels with Nystrand et al’s (2001) understanding, which, combined with their extensive data on classroom discussion, makes vivid the claim that discussion is distorted in the United States.

### The Nystrand Report

Nystrand et al (2001) draw from a somewhat different tradition to arrive at a similar idea of discussion: that of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, whose distinction between dialogue and monologue sits at the heart of the authors’ report. These two categories are species of discourse, ways of understanding interactions between speaking beings under any interpretation of those terms. Monologue, for Bakhtin, is a species that “is finalized and deaf to the other’s response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any decisive force. . . .” (p.3). Monologue is also official, in the sense that those who would want to have the final word on a matter will speak in this way. Nystrand et al characterize recitation as a token of the monologic species:

... the recitation taking place in typical school settings seeks to elicit “official” answers originating in texts and transmitted only one way—from teachers to students, to be received and recalled intact by students. The resulting monologic discourse... is one in which the relationship of teacher and student is restricted to that of evaluator and novice, organized for the transmission of information students have little chance of becoming conversants of consequence, recognized as contributing, producing, or participating actively in the construction of knowledge. (p. 3)

Dialogue is the opposite of monologue, which entails a give and take defined by the dynamic transformation of understandings through interaction.

In an ideal dialogic learning environment, especially in open discussion as opposed to recitation, teachers treat students as potential sources of knowledge and opinion, and in so doing complicate expert-novice

hierarchies. By contrast, recitation within typical classrooms is overwhelmingly monologic precisely because the teachers routinely violate these prescripts. (p. 4)

The authors unpack the difference as follows:

When utterances are treated univocally, as in recitation, focus is on the “accurate transmission of information”; when they are treated dialogically, as in discussion, they are used as “thinking devices.” From this perspective, whereas monologic discourse is useful for establishing topics and conveying information, it is dialogic discourse that opens the floor to discussion and the negotiation of ideas and new understandings. (p. 4)

Teachers and students enact monologue and dialogue in concrete ways: asking questions to which they do not know the answer in advance, skipping or withholding evaluative language in response to student comments, using student comments as ways to reach new understandings, and promoting student-to-student interaction. Such behaviors carry “dialogic weight.” Returning to a large data set collected by Nystrand in the 1990s, the authors operationalized several concepts drawing from Bakhtin’s distinction between monologue and dialogue in order to measure the dialogic weight of interactions in United States classrooms, which they cast as the extent of discussion present in those classrooms. Setting out to observe shifts from monologic to dialogic discourse, the authors crafted the idea of a “dialogic bid” and “dialogic spell.” The former are “indirect efforts as which include actively welcoming and soliciting student ideas and observations by following up their responses, and opening the floor to students by asking authentic questions the teacher’s repeated efforts to elicit student contributions that open the possibility for a shift” (p. 8). Instructional episodes which occasion such shifts are “dialogical spells.” They summarize their study of these phenomena across a large series of interactions as follows:

In short, for whole classroom discourse to take the form of discussion, teachers must use dialogic bids as scaffolding and students must become engaged, e.g., by asking questions. Our study examined the sequencing and effect of (a) teacher dialogic bids, (b) student questions, and (c) open discussion,” the last defined as “as the free (unprescribed) exchange of information among at least three students and the teacher that lasted at least a half minute during a classroom instructional episode. (p. 11)

The authors analyzed 1,151 episodes of interaction in English and Social Studies classrooms using the criteria mentioned above. Of these, 1,045 had no discussion. In other words, 90.79% of lessons did not include discussion. For every ten lessons that the authors observed and

coded, nine of them had no discussion. The numbers are only slightly different for dialogic spells. In general, there is nod discussion where there is supposed to be discussion. The following table (see Figure 2) summarizes their specific results, from which, given what has been said above about the meaning of discussion, we can make some conclusions about its distortion.

Again, where discussion was expected to occur, 93.31% of the lessons observed had no dialogic spells and 90.79% had no discussion. Discussion, according to the report, is distorted.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that discussion is distorted in the United States. By “distortion” I mean an inconsistency between the generally understood meaning of the word and the practices that go by it’s name. The meanings of ‘discussion’ range from turn-taking sequences to democratic ideals, as opposed to recitation, conversation, debate, and other forms of interaction. The distortion of discussion should now be clear in light of the Nystrand report: there is very little discussion occurring in the educational spaces where it is meant to occur. The authors of the report say as much:

Despite considerable lip service among teachers to “discussion,” we found little discussion in any classes in the sense of in-depth exchanges of ideas in the absence of either questions or teacher evaluation...What most teachers in our study called “discussion” was, in the words of one teacher, “question-answer discussion”—i.e., some version of recitation. (p. 36)

The “lip service” referred to here is the distortion of discussion itself. “Lip service” is a situation in which someone says one thing and does another,

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#### Figure 2

*From Nystrand et al., 2001, p. 36*

Subject	Total number of episodes	Episodes with no dialogic spells	Episodes with no discussion	% of episodes with no dialogic spells	% lessons with no discussion
Social Studies	569	520	514	91.39%	90.33%
English	582	554	531	95.19%	91.24%
TOTAL	1,151	1,074	1,045	93.31%	90.79%

placing value on the thing they said they would do in spite of the fact that they did not do it. In this case discussion is what the teachers said would happen, but what happened instead were recitations, which is a contrary form of interaction to discussion.

The practical and theoretical implications of this finding are more striking than the impact the report has had in academic and professional literatures. The authors of the report themselves express regret that discussion is so infrequent because student questions lead to better learning outcomes. The situation is more dire than they admit. Parker goes some length to conveying the urgency of the problem when he characterizes discussion as a socialization process for democracies. Though he only mentions this in order to motivate his own idea of discussion as a form of political friendship. The distortion of discussion—given the word's meaning—is nothing less than a distortion of democracy itself. If we presume that society is something like an agglomeration of interactions which have a certain democratic character, and we presume further that schooling has something to do with the preparation of the young for entering the social life of their society, then students in United States classrooms do not live in a democracy and they are not being prepared for life in a democracy. Rather, they live in a society where democratic interaction is an unfulfilled promise, only given “lip service.”

Further, and building on Parker's arguments, students are learning that the word discussion—with its democratic significance—means something like its opposite, a highly-controlled process, product, and politics of interaction. Not only are students living in a vacuum of democracy, but they are learning that this absence of democracy is what democracy is. Such is the nature of a distortion: the utterance stands despite its inconsistency with existing understandings. Over time the meaning of the words will have an added layer: discussion is when someone talks a lot and does a Q&A; democracy is when one person controls participation. Though it lies beyond the scope of this article, there are connections here between this distortion of discussion and the effects of neoliberalism, which promises democracy and freedom through market competition and the privatization of public goods.

Using words like democracy and freedom to justify policies that create unequal distributions of wealth and constrained social circumstances for most people is like saying there will be a discussion and then facilitating a recitation, and vice versa. The distortion of discussion, so prevalent in classrooms, is therefore a micro-neoliberalism. We might go further to say that the distortion of discussion teaches neoliberalism: it instructs students to expect control by the few when promised shared control. The exact connections—causal, correlative, ideological—between the

distortion of discussion must be further explored, though it suffices to say here that pedagogical practice in facilitating discussion has political consequences.

It is within the control of individual teachers and students and facilitators to make sure that discussions happen when they are promised rather than permitting the distortion to continue. Each moment is another opportunity to teach, participate, and facilitate differently. Nystrand et al's suggestions are a fine starting place for teachers: increase authentic questions, withhold evaluations of student comments, and increase uptake of student thoughts and questions during interactions. In other words they recommend increasing dialogic spells, which they correlate with discussion. There are numerous manuals for teaching discussion with other helpful techniques to ensure that discussion occurs during interaction. Harkness teaching (Backer, 2015a) and horizontal pedagogy (Backer, Wozniak, Bissen et al., 2016) are two styles which are helpful in making sure that discussion happens rather than recitation. Below are the four techniques to keep in mind when teaching and facilitating discussion, observed by researchers in contexts as wide-ranging as fourth grade classrooms to graduate school seminars to social movements.

1. Permit silence, especially during two key moments. First, permit a silence after you have begun the discussion. Let silence build in the room rather than filling it by repeating what you have said or accusing participants of not speaking/being unprepared. Count the seconds, sing to yourself, or look busy. Next, permit a silence after a participant has responded to you. Let another participant respond rather than immediately following up.
2. Take notes during the discussion. Write down what participants say. This serves to increase uptake of participants' comments, but it also makes your eyes unavailable. If you encourage students to look at each other they will be more likely to respond to one another rather than to you.
3. Do your best not to ask questions about the subject of discussion. Limit your questions and comments to the process of participants' speech by repeating things they have said. If possible, do not ask questions at all. Use unfinished sentences, phatics (hmm, umm, ahh), or body language to participate.
4. As a participant, try to wait until everyone has spoken before speaking again. (Backer, 2015b)

While these are little techniques, what is at stake here is big: whether

discussion—and by association democracy—will continue to be distorted in the United States.

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