

Discussion Strategies for the Inclusion of ALL students
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Abstract

Student-centered discussion strategies are described in this article in pursuance of insuring that ALL student voices have a chance to be heard in the classroom. Discussion strategies that are presented include the following: The 10 Second Rule, Think-Pair-Share, Quick Writes, Recorder-Reporter, and K-W-L.

Keywords

Classroom Discussion; Teaching; Discussion Strategies; Lesson Planning; Questioning Strategies; Lesson Presentation; Best Practice; Student Engagement; Student Comprehension; Student Language Abilities; Student Voices; Student Self-Confidence; The 10 Second Rule; Think-Pair-Share; Quick Writes; Recorder-Reporter; K-W-L; Social Learning; Student Response

Introduction

When it comes to classroom discussions and getting students to respond to the teacher's questions, teachers sometimes unknowingly stifle students' voices in the classroom through damaging and ineffective modes of asking questions.

Frequently, teachers want their students to respond to questions they pose to them for the sake of engaging in the lesson content they are presenting. The questioning format typically follows a routine of the teacher orally presenting a chunk of a topic followed by asking a question to the whole class for the sake of engaging them. What frequently happens is only a few students answer and many times, it is the same students over and over. These students are usually the ones who are not afraid to speak out in front of their peers, enjoy speaking out whether or not they know what they're talking about, and are mostly seeking attention.

This is a pattern that is ineffective in the classroom. It marginalizes voices of those students who are afraid to speak out. They might have a speech difficulty, just learning English, or are slower in forming their thoughts. Some students require more think-time before they speak their thoughts, while others have varying verbal and language abilities. For whatever the reasons, many students are reluctant to speak out in front of the entire class; therefore, their voices are seldom heard.

Teachers don't always have to ask questions posed to the whole class for the sake of engaging students, and many times, teachers fall into this habit because they rely on a few students' answers and comments for the sake of furthering their own agenda in their lesson. This, too, is a very ineffective practice. By setting the stage for the same few students to respond, doesn't lend an accurate picture of what ALL students are thinking, therefore it is a misrepresentation.

Furthermore, when the teacher calls on these students to answer, this serves to validate whatever they say, which can be contradictory to the other students' thoughts and opinions.

Another very damaging discussion practice is for teachers to call on students to answer who either haven't volunteered, or are not paying attention. This is a method used to punish students for not paying attention and the thinking behind it is that the student will pay attention for fear of being called out. However, in reality, this practice only promotes animosity and fear in the classroom.

In addition, some teacher personality issues come into play. Does the teacher really care what students have to say? The teacher's attitude about the learning value of student discussion affects the authentic level of involvement he allows students to have. Some teachers may place a high value on what students have to say, while others are more focused on what **THEY** want to say and only put forth a question to further their own agenda.

The old habit of the teacher presenting lesson information and asking a few questions posed to the whole class along the way is a very ineffective mode of teaching. If teachers truly want students to engage in meaningful discussion aimed at furthering their understanding of the topic being taught, then teachers need to employ specific discussion strategies that promote this activity. The following discussion strategies serve to advance the process in which more students' voices will be heard, thereby leveling the playing field for students, who in the past, have been marginalized to the point of exclusion. After all, a lesson is a text, and all students should be given the best opportunity to respond to it (see Rosenblatt, 1982).

First of all, in order for students to effectively engage in these discussion strategies, it's important for them to either be sitting in small groups or in very close proximity to each other, rather than being spread out with some sitting alone. The learning objectives for all of the strategies are to promote student understanding and learning, build language abilities, and to nourish self-confidence in students through social learning engagement (see Vygotsky, 1978). These objectives are accomplished by setting the stage for students to think before they talk and by allowing for more students' voices to be heard.

The 10 Second Rule

The 10 Second Rule (adapted from Batterson, 2008) is a discussion strategy that is implemented before a teacher's presentation in pursuance of allowing students to review a main point previously covered, introduce a new concept, allow students during a lesson presentation to discuss a concept together, or at the conclusion of a lesson, to quickly summarize what was learned (in the students' opinions). The teacher simply asks students to discuss with each other (this is a very open-ended directive) for 10 seconds their thoughts about... (The teacher poses orally a very brief discussion prompt). While the students are talking with each other, the teacher walks among them and listens to some of the comments, but these student-made comments are used only for giving the teacher information about what the students understand; they're not used for calling on individual students to report out to the class. The teacher, however, should orally summarize to the class what he heard, emphasizing the main ideas or concepts. This strategy is employed when the teacher wants students to respond very quickly to a question.

Think-Pair-Share

Think-Pair-Share (adapted from Lyman, 1981) is a discussion strategy that is most effectively applied during a lesson when the teacher wants to give students time to cognitively process a concept that is being taught, or after a lesson when the teacher wants students review what they think they have learned, and then to orally express their thoughts with peers for the purpose of social learning to take place. To implement the strategy, the teacher introduces a question prompt and asks students to think, without talking, about their response to the question. While the students are thinking, the teacher counts in his head for about 20 seconds, after which he then tells his students to turn to a partner and share their thoughts. As with the previous strategy, while the students are talking with each other, the teacher walks among them and listens to some of the comments, but these student-made comments are used only for giving the teacher information about what the students understand; they're not used for calling on individual students to report out to the class. The teacher, however, should orally summarize to the class what he heard, emphasizing the main ideas or concepts. This strategy is put into action when the teacher wants students to respond to their understanding of a concept or main point, after giving it some deeper thought.

Quick Writes

Quick Writes (adapted from Brozo & Simpson, 2007) is a discussion strategy in which students first write their thoughts and then share in small groups. The strategy is most effectively performed prior to a lesson either for the purposes of reviewing a topic that was previously taught, or for introducing a new topic. To implement this strategy the teacher first asks students to prepare a loose piece of paper with their names on it explaining that they're going to write their thoughts on the paper but they don't have to use correct writing mechanics, but instead, to write however they want to. They can make lists of words, sketches, or whatever they want to for the sake of expressing their thoughts. If they don't know what to write, they can just sit and think about the topic, and then during the sharing time, they can write ideas that were sparked by others. The teacher explains that they're going to write for about 2-3 minutes, after which they are going to share their Quick Writes in small groups. During the sharing, the students are free to change their writing however they want to, but instead of erasing, they should just draw a line through what they want to change. The teacher further explains that he just wants to see what their thoughts are, and when they are done sharing, he will collect the papers. Next, the teacher displays the question prompt for all students to see; he then asks students to write for a few minutes. The teacher should have a general idea of about how much he wants students to write; keeping this information to himself, but looking at most students' papers, and when it looks like most students have reached his goal, give the students a time warning by telling them they have about two minutes left for writing their last thoughts down. Following the writing, the teacher tells students to take turns sharing their Quick Writes in their small groups. As with the previous strategies, while the students are talking with each other, the teacher walks among them and listens to some of the comments, but these student-made comments are used only for giving the teacher information about what the students understand; they're not used for calling on individual students to report out to the class. This strategy is carried out when the teacher wants students to respond to their understanding of a concept or main point, after giving it some deeper

thought, for the purposes of preparing students for comprehending the lesson the teacher is about to cover. The teacher collects the students' papers at the conclusion of the lesson and reviews them to gain further insight into student learning. This information can then be applied in future, follow-up lesson planning.

Recorder-Reporter

The Recorder-Reporter Strategy is my own original creation. In this discussion strategy, students share their thoughts within a small group about a question that the teacher has posed following a lesson that he has taught. Before discussion begins, a student from each small group volunteers to be the Recorder-Reporter for the group. This person jots down the main points raised by the group, and then later, reports out to the class. This strategy works best if each group has a different question, and if everyone in the group is responsible for writing down the main points even if they're not the Recorder-Reporter. This way, all are responsible for listening and writing. Each person in the small groups writes on his own paper to be handed into the teacher. This practice also reinforces to the students the importance of their conversation and keeps each one accountable. If a student does not agree on a talking point with the group, then he can simply write his own opinion on his paper, however, he doesn't share this when the Recorder, Reporter reports out to the class. During the reporting out to the class, the teacher should keep his own opinions and comments to himself. This is a time for students to be heard, not the teacher. The teacher should validate students' responses by simply telling them in positive terms that they did a good job.

K-W-L

The student-centered discussion strategy of K-W-L (adapted from Ogle, 1986), an acronym that stands for "What we Know," "What we Want to Learn," and "What we Learned)," is best put into action prior to a lesson for the sake of focusing student attention, and then after a lesson to stimulate student reflection. To implement the strategy, the teacher first tells students to prepare a loose piece of paper with their names on it and a chart with the heading of whatever topic the teacher is planning to cover, along with three columns labeled from left to right respectively with K, W, and L. The teacher explains to the students that the "K" represents what they think they already know about the topic, the "W" represents what they would like to know about the topic, and the "L" represents what they learned about the topic after the lesson. It is best for the teacher to display an example of a chart already completed on a different topic, so that students are very clear about what the chart looks like and the content it contains. Next, the teacher explains to the students to work in small groups to discuss the chart together, but each student is responsible for writing into his own chart. This way, all are responsible for listening and writing. Each person in the small group writes on his own paper to be handed into the teacher. This practice also reinforces to the students the importance of their conversation and keeps each one accountable and engaged. If a student doesn't agree on a talking point with the group, then he can simply write his own opinion on his paper. The teacher tells the students to discuss and write in information for the "K" and "W", but to leave the "L" blank until after the lesson. Then, at the conclusion of the lesson, the teacher has the students discuss what they think they have learned and record this information into the "W" column on their charts. The teacher collects the

students' charts at the conclusion of the lesson and reviews them to gain further insight into student learning. This information can then be applied in future, follow-up lesson planning.

Support Students' Answers

In this article, I'm not promoting the ineffective practice of teachers posing questions out to the whole class in relation to what they are teaching, but occasionally a student will take a risk and ask a question of the teacher during his lesson presentation. When this happens, teachers need to practice extreme caution or they risk shutting students down by not supporting their attempts to speak out and ask a question or make a comment. For the sake of inspiring students to speak out, teachers can put into effect the following practices. Look the student in the eyes, smile, and tell the student that he has a good question and give a brief answer if possible, or say that you will cover that in a moment. If the question is off-base and reveals that the student was not paying attention, avoid the negative practice of embarrassing the student saying that he should pay attention or that you have already covered that information. Instead, just answer the question, because if this student didn't understand something, most likely there are other students who didn't either.

Conclusion

These discussion strategies covered in this article can be taught with any age of student. They level the playing field so that ALL students have a chance to be heard and to be understood. They foster a higher level of self-confidence in students because they have the opportunity to develop their thoughts *before* they speak them. Old habits of teaching are hard to break, but the benefits of advancing the value of student-centered discussion (Pressley, 1992) into a classroom that shares the ownership of information far outweighs the efforts it will take to change practice.

References

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