

Discussion Strategies in the Classroom

Discussion is one of the most effective ways to make students aware of the range of interpretations that are possible in an area of intellectual inquiry. Teachers can introduce diverse perspectives through lecturing or pre-reading activities but in such cases the students become passive recipients. Diversity of interpretations that can be made of the same apparently objective facts generate greater interest and participation if initiated among peers. It is believed that chances of lively discussions distinguished by interpretive diversity increase considerably if the participants are drawn from diverse social, ethnic and gender backgrounds; if they take a variety of ideological perspectives on common experiences and express their perceptions in different terms. Discussions that involve students to speak in different voices, express varied viewpoints and use different expressive forms, help the students to learn about the contested nature of knowledge. The students come to realize that there is rarely a single interpretation of an issue or a problem, but rather arrange of sustainable views, each of which may hold a legitimate claim on the participants. A discussion usually exhibits different ways of speaking and thinking and involves different cultural, class and gender experiences and thus exposes the students to different uses of language. Discussion is a very useful strategy to develop the students' ability to transcend miscommunication and mindfully comprehend the underlying meaning of human speech.

Discussion as a strategy promotes reflection and critical thinking. **Guided discussion**, i.e. discussion helped by the teacher is effective in enabling the students to listen properly, seek clarification and create opportunities for all voices to be heard. Engaging in a discussion requires a certain degree of intellectual agility and ability to react to unanticipated comments. Students know that what they say may be challenged or contradicted and thus they get mentally prepared to formulate counter-responses. This develops the ability of critical response and logical thinking.

Building connections, both personal and intellectual constitutes the core of any discussion. Ideas perceived as distant or irrelevant when presented through a lecture become relevant and significant when one has to explore them through speech. When a teacher is introducing the students to a new topic, usually there is no inherent point of connection between students' experiences and the new topic of discussion. In such situations the teacher can help create this connection by asking students to participate in a discussion. The insights gained through discussions sometime connect directly to real life experiences. Discussions become a

continuous spiral of action, reflection on action, further action and further reflection, as pointed out by **Freire** (1993).

The hierarchical experience of education is turned into a collaborative and respectful process in which individual experiences are recognized and valued. Discussion is mainly an analysis of experience, in an attempt to understand how individual experience is socially formed. Codified legitimated bookish knowledge is integrated logically and reflectively with individual and social experiences. **Myles Horton & Freire** (1990) assert that, 'people know the basic answers to their problems, but they need to go further than that, and you can, by asking questions and getting them stimulated coax them to move, in discussion, beyond their experience'. In the classroom discussion, students must be encouraged to subject their personal experiences to critical analysis in order to perceive alternative interpretations and new perspectives on those experiences.

Fostering democratic discourse in the classroom is not easy. Immediately after World War II, adult educator **Edward Lindeman** (1947) proposed eight democratic disciplines that, taken together, constituted a natural code of behaviour for a citizen living under democratic conditions. These disciplines included learning to live with diversity, learning to accept the partial functioning of democratic ideals, learning to avoid false antitheses, learning to ensure that means and ends are congruent, learning to value humour and learning to live with contrary decision and perspectives. **Brookfield & Preskill** (1999) assert that if discussions are introduced in the classroom and conducted carefully, the classrooms can become laboratories in which students will learn democratic habits through democratic principles being tried, adapted and reframed with a minimum consequential threat for the participants. Through discussion **possibility of dialogue across differences** is increased and **effective use of language** in order to tackle difficulties in communication is naturally taught to the students. Discussions naturally train the students to communicate with clarity and precision and use analogical reasoning. The students become more adept at entering into other people's frames of reference and analysing an issue through multiple lenses. In responding to questions in the discussion, students learn to recognize those aspects of communication styles that create difficulties for others.

Preparation for Discussion

Students in most cases do not share a common understanding of the process of discussion. In many cases students actively resist discussion by staying silent or agreeing to their peers. For

a successful use of the strategy of discussion in the class the teacher must follow certain steps, as discussed below.

- a. Ensuring early and equal access to relevant material. A prerequisite for group discussion is that participants should be as fully informed as possible about the topic under consideration. One way to achieve this is giving relevant handouts, introductory lectures or giving a list of study material available in the institutional library. The electronic location of necessary information may also be given to the students.
- b. Beginning every lecture with one or more questions that needs to be discussed. A teacher poses these questions at the outset of the introductory talk in order to inspire the spirit of inquiry aiming at a more comprehensive understanding of the matter. If the students get used to the teacher opening his introductory lectures by raising a series of questions, they would naturally be more accepting when the teacher frames discussions around a question or questions to be explored.
- c. Ending every lecture with a series of questions that the lecture has raised or left unanswered
- d. Deliberately introducing periods of silence. A barrier to a good discussion is the general belief that conversation means continuous talk. Periods of reflective silence are integral to good discussion and students must be made aware of the fact that they should not feel pressurized to fill the short periods of reflective silence with speech.
- e. Preparing students for periods of reflective silence. The teacher can tell the students that reflective silence is significant for intense engagement with the subject of discussion. After every twenty minutes of uninterrupted discussion, students may take three to five minutes of silence reflective speculations. Students may be made to write down the important points and the areas of doubt located in the post twenty minutes. After the period of silent reflection students may share the ideas in groups and proceed with the discussion under the supervision of the teacher.
- f. Deliberately introducing alternative perspectives. The teacher may participate in the discussion introducing variety of alternative ideas and perspectives in order to break the unilineal progression of the discussion and make it more animated.

- g. Introducing periods of assumption hunting. One of the purposes of discussion is to encourage critical thinking, which involves students in identifying and scrutinizing the assumptions that inform their ideas and actions. The teacher may guide the students by introducing periods of assumption hunting into introductory lectures. These are moments when the students should stop professing what they believe and rather try to locate the assumptions on which such beliefs rest. The students would also be encouraged to investigate the validity of such assumptions. This prepares them for the practice of critical scrutiny which helps in a meaningful discussion.
- h. Introducing buzz groups into lectures. Students may be initiated to the habit of discussion by participating in brief buzz group sessions during lectures. A buzz group is usually made up of three to four students who are given a few minutes once or twice during the lesson to discuss a question or an issue that arises. The teacher may frame questions to inspire the students to make some judgements regarding the relative merits, relevance or usefulness of the constituent elements of the lecture. Some examples of such questions are –
- What is the most important point that has been made in the lecture so far?
 - What is the most contentious statement you have heard so far in the class today?
 - Of all the ideas and points you have heard so far today, which is the most obscure and ambiguous to you?

In the buzz groups students may discuss and take turns giving a brief response to the question asked and should note if any one response draws particular agreement or produces significant conflict. A focussed buzz group actually gets the students involved in meaningful discussions without the students realizing what is happening.

- i. Using **critical incident questionnaire**. One of the strongest facts about discussion is that students learn to use language in critical and democratic ways by observing people in authority. A teacher is the most commonly followed personality in the class. A teacher can use a **critical incident questionnaire (CIQ)** which is a simple classroom evaluation tool used to find out what and how students are learning. It usually consists of a sheet of paper with attached carbon. Containing five questions, all of which focus on critical moments or actions in the class, as judged by the students. Space is provided beneath each question for the students' response. This may be handed out to the

students ten minutes before the end of the last class of the week and the students may keep the carbon copies of their responses to review at their leisure and notice habitual preferences, dispositions and points of avoidance in their learning. The teacher may use the responses to initiate animated discussions on the same and promote critical thinking. Some of the common questions used in the CIQ are –

- At what moment in class this week were you most engaged as a student and why?
 - At what moment in the class this week were you most distanced as a learner and why?
 - What portion of the lesson this week did you find ambiguous or confusing and what clarification do you seek?
 - What surprised you the most about the class this week and why?
- j. Engaging in discussion with the students without any barrier. The teacher holds a position of authority in the classroom and often communicates in an overly academic manner. If the teacher mingles with the students freely and participates in the discussion using colloquial language and familiar metaphors, the process of discussion would proceed with great facility.
- k. Development of ground rules for conducting discussions. Rules of conduct and codes of behaviour are important in determining whether students take discussions seriously. Ground rules for discussions must be set, preferably based upon the students' most vivid recollections of their experiences as discussion participants. Ground rules are rules that must be followed to ensure that the discussion is a meaningful, useful, respectful and worthwhile experience for all participants.
- l. Using video-taped discussion vignettes. The students may be shown excerpts from bad discussions and urged to jot down the reason behind apparent unacceptability of the various comments, contributions and actions shown in the videotape. They may be urged to critically discuss about the bad discussions and suggest improvements. In this way the students are initiated into productive and meaningful discussions that help in meaningful learning in the long run.

- m. Introducing the students to structured, critical pre-reading. An important prerequisite of a good discussion for meaningful learning is serious and critical pre-reading of materials. It is however difficult to make all the students read the materials and so the teacher may begin by selecting and providing structured pre-reading material, centred around a set of critical questions related to the lesson they are going to learn, but questions without any immediately clear resolution or answer. This may mentally stimulate the students to go through the material and think about it, which would generate interest about the lesson and lead to meaningful learning.
- n. Making the students aware of a protocol for critical reading. Critical reading can happen only when readers do the following –
- Make explicit assumptions authors hold about what constitute legitimate knowledge and how such knowledge comes to be known.
 - Take alternative perspectives on the knowledge being offered so that this knowledge comes to be seen as culturally constructed.
 - Undertake positive and negative appraisals of the grounds for and expression of this knowledge.
 - Analyse commonly held ideas for the extent to which they support or oppose various ideologies.

A teacher may explain these protocols to the students and ask them to read the text accordingly.

- o. Introducing the students to epistemological questions. While reading a text and discussing on it the students should be able to address questions that probe how an author comes to know something is true. These are epistemological questions which a student must be habituated to for a successful use of discussion as a tool for learning. Some example of epistemological questions are –
- To what extent does the writing seem biased?
 - To what extent is the description presented in a clumsy and inaccurate way?
 - To what extent are the central insights presented in the text grounded in documented empirical evidence?
- p. Introducing the students to experiential questions. While discussing about a text students must be able to develop questions that help them to review the text through

the lens of their own relevant experiences. The teacher must develop such a habit of thinking among the students to see discussion as an effective tool for learning. Some examples are –

- If the text addresses experiences with which you are familiar, to what extent are these congruent with or contradicted by your own experiences?
 - What experiences are omitted from the text that strike you as important?
- q. Introducing the students to communicative questions. To imitate a discussion that would help him transacting a lesson in the class effectively, the teacher must develop a frame of mind among the students so that they can think about the author's strategy of conveying meaning and the effectiveness of the forms chosen by the author. Such questions are called communicative questions. Some examples of such questions are –
- To what extent does the text use a form of specialized language that is unjustifiably distant from colloquial language?
 - To what extent is the text connected to practice?
 - To what extent is the text help in solving problems?
- r. Clarification of expectations and purposes. Teachers must justify to students why discussions are being held in a class and clarify that students would not be humiliated under any circumstances so that they participate freely and think critically. This helps in inspiring the students who might otherwise feel that discussions are wastage of precious time and barriers to successful completion of the syllabus.
- s. Inserting discussion as an important element of the syllabus.
- t. Showing video clips of animated discussion on contemporary issues to the students. To give an idea about critical thinking and logical progression of discourse in a good discussion selected video clips may be shown to the students and it may be explained how they should take up issues and proceed step by step, analysing and responding critically.

Starting Discussion

Easy flow of conversation and logical argument is not easily achieved in a typical classroom situation. Some effective ways of opening up a discussion that concentrate the students' attention on the theme and that models a democratic process, are discussed below.

- a. Discussion should not be started with the teacher giving a lecture in which all the important points, possible perspectives and personal concerns are summarized.
- b. Discussion should never be initiated by posing vague or general questions like what do you think or who wants to start speaking.
- c. Discussions should never be started with the extrovert and studious students urged to speak up. The other students lose their desire to participate since they predict that the usual suspects will speak up, and majority of the students then become passive mentally.
- d. Initial silence is to be tolerated. At the start of a discussion there may be periods of silence as the students may take time to settle into the new intellectual project. **Palmer** (1993) points out, 'we need to abandon the notion that nothing is happening when it is silent to see how much new clarity a silence often brings'.
- e. A classroom speech policy should be declared. Many students from working class backgrounds, female students, minority groups, first generation learners or students with special needs generally approach discussion sessions with diffidence and a justifiable sense of distrust. In the prevalent educational system they get to believe that a good student would have the ability to spring confidently into speech at the earliest possible opportunity, and thus they feel that they are not competent enough due to limited linguistic competence. The teacher can briefly talk about the power of silence and the students' right to speak out their minds without any fear of public embarrassment. The teacher may emphasize the importance of participation in class discussion, and clarify that the volume of eloquence is not important.
- f. The teacher should organize the discussion around questions raised by the students and then allow the discussion to proceed freely.

- g. Students may be asked to choose a concrete image. For students who are visual rather than auditory learners **Frederick** (1986) and **Van Menten** (1990) suggest asking students to choose a specific image that is suggested by the text they have read. No analysis is required initially, but recollections and brief descriptions must be asked for. As each student reports the collective images are listed on the blackboard, providing a visual record of selected content from the text as a necessary backdrop to the discussion. Usually such a recall of concrete scenes prompts further recollection and a flood of images flow from the students.
- h. The discussion may be grounded in a debriefing of the critical incident questionnaire responses used in the preparatory session.
- i. Discussion may be initiated with a strong, provocative or even inflammatory statement that usually challenges the assumptions that students take for granted.
- j. Discussion may be initiated to choose quotes or information from a text that they wish to affirm and quotes or information that they wish to challenge.
- k. Personal experiences may be used effectively for lively discussions. However the teacher must make it clear that there should be logic, reasoning and critical reflection in presentation of personal experiences.
- l. Circular response discussions. The habit of attentive listening is very important for successful discussion. The circular response exercise is a way to democratize participation, promote continuity and give the students some experience of the efforts required in respectful listening. This technique was popularized by **David Stewart** (1987). In this process, students sit in a circle and each person takes turn to talk about a given issue for two to three minutes. The speakers are not free to say anything they want, and must make a brief summary of the preceding speaker's message and use that as a springboard for new comments. This is to say that what each speaker articulates depends greatly on listening well to the preceding speaker as well as on generating new ideas. In circular response, no one can prepare remarks ahead of time because what each person says depends on paying careful attention to the words of the preceding speaker. This exercise gives the students a practice in participating in discussions where

collective and cumulative understanding is more important than the contribution of any one individual. This helps in a detailed analysis of the lesson and hence contributes to meaningful learning.

- m. Ensuring equal participation is necessary, though mandating speech may seem like an exercise of teacher power that violates the democratic spirit of discussions. In *Teaching to Transgress*, **bell hooks** (1994) describes how she mandates students to read out paragraphs from their journals in the class so that no one feels silenced or marginalized. According to her this is a responsible and necessary exercise of power.