

7 Discussion

The importance of discussion

It is surprising how infrequently genuine discussion occurs in classrooms, even though pupils find these occasions memorable and engaging. There are some aspects of learning for which it is difficult to find an alternative.

It should not be restricted to just a few subjects such as English or PSHE. It is important to examine different views in many curriculum areas, in order to understand the political or ethical dimensions and dilemmas, differences of taste, or conflicting explanations. Anyone who is unaware of the range of views on socially important problems and doesn't have an opinion is marginalised in social exchange.

Discussion assists in building up an explanation or argument. The *social* construction of knowledge through the exchange of competing opinions, and the addition of further examples, lays a foundation for *solo* development and writing of an extended explanation. Pupils learn to develop and formulate an argument, present it convincingly, refute counter-arguments and reconsider their position during a discussion, which provides for more vigorous intellectual development than many other classroom activities.

Being open to the views and experience of others, and matching them against one's own position, helps cognitive development and develops democratic citizenship.

All this is undermined if topics for discussion are trivial, if the teacher gives the impression of discounting pupils' views, or if disagreement leads to outbursts of aggression. It is important to make time for pupils' suggested issues.

Discussion should be seen as complementary to other modes of learning, and there are various ways in which it can connect to them. For example, discussion can build on reading or can encourage pupils to research an issue. Pupils can be asked to present the key points of a debate through an image or poster.

Discussion, whether whole class or in groups, can punctuate the reading of an extended text, for example by considering how the plot might develop, how a character may react, what a character is thinking, or to think through the consequences of a set of attitudes. Discussion gives pupils an opportunity to insert themselves into a text, making it more immediate or personal, and bringing ideas to life.

It follows from this that:

the starting point for evaluating a discussion lies in weighing up how pupils are able to *engage* with it, and its significance for their *cognitive and social development*.

The pattern of exchanges

Many years ago, Michael Marland, in 'The Craft of the Classroom', warned against confusing question and answer sessions with real discussion.

When asked about the method of a lesson, teachers are three times as likely to call a session 'discussion' as a trained observer in the class would: what is thought of as 'discussion' by the teacher at the front does not always feel like that from the middle or back of the class. (Marland, 2002 edition, page 108)

The two kinds of activity follow different patterns. A genuine discussion involves pupils responding to or building on each others' utterances, not just replying to the teacher. Although a discussion is often chaired, especially if it involves a large group of participants, and the chair may ask occasional questions or push for explanations, the chair would not normally take every alternate turn as in an interview.

Clearly, a very important issue for observers, as for teachers reflecting on their own lessons, concerns the *pattern of exchanges*.

There is clearly a difficulty in the teacher, who combines disciplinary power with great articulateness and confidence, acting as chair without overwhelming pupils and hindering rather than encouraging their participation. Alternatives include:

- asking a pupil to chair the discussion
- dividing the class into groups of 4-6, with less need for a chair

A major curriculum project of the 1970s, the Humanities Curriculum Project led by Lawrence Stenhouse, was built round the procedure of teachers presenting two opposing statements (e.g. newspaper reports, personal statements, etc.) and then strictly keeping to the role of neutral chair, without expressing an opinion. This had great value, but pupils were so used to teacher-led interactions that it took a time for pupils to accept this new expectation. Often, they had to see it modeled out first.

Some advice on organizing discussions

Michael Marland gives the following useful advice:

In teacher-led whole-class discussion, the teacher's job is to set the frame, define the intended product, and then act as chair.... This role switch from exposition to neutral enabler has to be acted out so that the pupils realize they are not being questioned or assessed, but encouraged to join together to explore ideas. (p 108)

These may be useful questions to help planning, and also to prompt evaluation:

- 1) Does the teacher clarify his / her role at the start?
- 2) Is the seating conducive to a discussion?
- 3) Is the stimulus for discussion sufficient to engage pupils? (This may be a question, reminder of a current or local situation, photo, short video, etc.)
- 4) Is the topic introduced so as not to load the issue and thus stifle discussion?
- 5) Are the pupils both engaged by the topic and sufficiently calm to listen to what others say?
- 6) Have the pupils had the opportunity to acquire factual knowledge, or understand the wider debate in society on an issue, before embarking on their discussion? (Alternatively, an initial discussion may lead in to research, followed by more informed debate.)

Advice for pupils

It is important to consider the advice given to pupils, which of course will depend on the class and how used they are to discussion. This might include, for example:

- Don't just state your opinion, you have to explain your reasons or give some evidence.
- Don't interrupt other people, let them finish.
- Show that you would like to contribute by raising a hand or finger.
- By all means defend your position, but don't be so stubborn that you aren't open to what other people say or think.

During the discussion

The great temptation is for the teacher to keep intervening. It takes self-discipline to avoid this, but even encouraging comments tend to hinder the flow of contributions round the circle.

Good practice might include:

- 1) showing interest by eye contact, nodding, an attentive expression
- 2) signaling someone's turn to speak
- 3) asking a pupil to summarise the main disagreements
- 4) expressing an opinion only about every five or ten minutes, making it clear that this is a personal opinion, and keeping it brief.

Occasionally it may be necessary to stimulate the discussion. This might, for example, be via:

- 1) a contrastive question, e.g. 'Should GM foods be illegal, yes or no?'
- 2) a provocation, e.g. 'So it doesn't really matter if civilians die in wars?'
- 3) floating a commonplace but controversial view, such as 'Some newspapers and politicians are arguing that disabled people could come off benefits and find some kind of work if they'd only try.'
- 4) emphasize what a pupil said earlier, e.g. 'Khalid said earlier that cheap flights should be banned to prevent global warming.'

If a pupil is chairing the discussion, they should be well briefed, including some of the above advice.

Discussion in small groups

As suggested in the previous section, many of the pitfalls associated with whole-class discussion can be avoided by dividing the class into groups of 4-6. No pupil is likely to ask the rest of the group a succession of closed or test questions, and there is likely to be a flow of contributions among the group rather than to and from the teacher.

In such groups, although one pupil may prove more articulate than others, this is likely to serve as a model for his or her peers. It may still be necessary to choose a chair who is briefed to ensure that others have good opportunities to contribute.

Many teachers are afraid that time will be wasted. This can be minimized by setting a clear time frame and expectation for a specific outcome, to be shared with the rest of the class (though one which remains open in terms of conclusions reached). It is also important for the teacher to circulate around the class to monitor what is happening. (Of course, there is also time-wasting in whole-class sessions, whether overt disruption or pupils paying lip service while remaining unengaged.)

Often individual contributions will appear incomplete in themselves, because participants are building up knowledge or adjusting each other's statements. Observers should not always expect grammatically 'correct' sentences, but rather a cumulative process in which meaning is jointly constructed.

Close observation of small group discussions has shown the frequency of hypotheses (suggestions of possible causes or outcomes), which are infrequent in whole-class talk but important to learning. There is also a greater tendency for pupils to connect academic to everyday knowledge by providing examples from real life; this is also important in the development of knowledge and in the testing out of theories by application to real life.

The openness of small group discussion need not mean ‘anything goes’ in terms of the conclusion. The teacher has the opportunity, in the plenary which follows group discussion, to point out differences in the conclusions reached, inconsistencies, flawed logic, and so on. This will, of course, depend on the subject being studied, but all subjects can benefit from discussion. Indeed, comparisons between mathematics teaching in Japan and in the USA (the former being much more successful) show a frequent use of small-group problem solving in Japan followed by teacher-guided comparison of pupils’ methods and solutions. In the USA, where maths teaching was less successful, the norm was teacher exposition followed by individual practice.

Some issues for observation

- Consider how the discussion is set up. Is it suitably purposeful without closing down on pupil autonomy?
- How does the discussion link to learning activities which precede and follow?
- Don’t try to observe every group. Better to stay with one or two groups long enough for them not to be put off by your presence, and to give time for the discussion to develop.
- Avoid joining in or asking questions. (You could always do this after the lesson.) If pupils start directing their contributions to you, remind them that you are just there to listen to them talking to one another.
- Listen closely for how knowledge is built up, how ideas are suggested and tested out, how evidence is used, how contrary views are handled (all depending on the task and purpose).
- Consider how each person is contributing, bearing in mind that listening can also be learning.