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Meeting Students Where They Are

Effective Classroom Discussions

Selma Wassermann

Five guidelines can build students' higher-order thinking skills.

Productive classroom discussions—those that enable students to invent, create, imagine, take risks, and dig for deeper meanings—can only take place in a climate in which students feel safe to offer their ideas. Teachers can create such a climate by being mindful of the essential conditions of interactive teaching.



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Read Abstract

Listen, Attend, Apprehend

On the surface, it seems like a no-brainer that teachers should listen to what students say. But in the real world of the classroom, with its many pressures and demands on a teacher's time, it can be difficult to pay full attention.

"Of course we listen to our students!" protested one teacher. But the combination of listening + attending + apprehending has dimensions that go beyond merely hearing a student's words. It includes carefully observing the student's nonverbal behaviors, voice inflection, and word choice, as well as what the student emphasizes or leaves out. Teachers who attend to all these dimensions are doing what Friere (1983) calls *apprehending*—taking in and making meaning of the totality. Here's an example from a 6th grade social studies class in which students are discussing the electoral process:

Teacher: Now that you've all read the case, perhaps you can tell me—what factors, do you suppose, influence a voter's choice in making a decision about voting for a candidate?

Simon: This may sound a little bit weird, but I think that person's appearance has a lot to do with how voters feel about him.

Teacher: (*reading into the student's statement from his facial expression and from the first part of his response*) It doesn't make a lot of sense to you that voters would choose a candidate on the basis of how he or she looks.

Simon: Well, I remember my father saying that "democracy is dependent on an informed electorate," and if people are basing choices on the kind of haircut a candidate has, or if he has zits, or is wearing uncool clothes—well, yes, that makes me worried.

It's not easy to pay such close attention to students' words amid all the background activity and noise of a normal classroom—when the teacher is worrying about what Melissa is saying to Dennis in the back of the room and interruptions from the school office are coming over the intercom. But a commitment to listen, attend, and apprehend means that nothing gets in the way of complete and full concentration on what the student is trying to communicate.

When teachers make this commitment, it gives them the information they need to formulate an appropriate response that will promote interactive dialogue. It also creates a climate of respect for students, making it



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safe for all to offer their ideas. Some people might leap to the conclusion that while the teacher is thus engaged with a single student the rest of the class will lose interest; but happily, the opposite is true. When the teacher's attention is riveted on a single student, other students become more attentive, knowing that such concentrated focus will inevitably come around to them as well.

Clarify What Students Mean

Some students have great ideas, but they experience difficulty expressing those ideas clearly. (Adults may have this problem as well!) If understanding is elusive, how can a teacher respond productively? One option is to call for clarification. For example,

Can you help me out here, William? I'm not sure I've understood you.

Frances, I'm going to try to say that back to you, and you tell me whether I've understood you correctly.

In these examples, the teacher assumes responsibility for not understanding. Such questions do not penalize students or make them feel stupid; they simply give students another opportunity to help the teacher understand. In addition, such questions give students practice framing their ideas into comprehensible statements.

Once the teacher fully grasps what the student is trying to say, that teacher can formulate an appropriate response so that the dialogue can continue on a productive course.

Give Students Time

So much to be done! So little time! The pressure on teachers to get everything done by the end of the school day is formidable. That race with the clock often forces teachers to speed up lessons and makes them lose patience with students who need more time to say what's on their minds.

I know that pressure intimately. Like many teachers, I have had nightmares about finishing the school year with too much left undone. Nonetheless, I am suggesting that we give students time to think.

In the following example, 5th grade students in science class discuss the decline in fish stocks due to overfishing and contamination, and the consequences of limited supplies of these fish for the industry and the economy.

Teacher: How is it possible, do you suppose, that some fish like cod and salmon that were once abundant are now in short supply? (*There is no student response. The teacher waits for about 10 seconds, and then comments.*) Perhaps you need a little more time to think about that. It's not an easy question. (*The teacher waits until a student raises her hand.*) Ah, yes, Lin. I see you are going to make a stab at it.

Lin: Well, I'm not sure this is right, but I remember a waitress in Sandy's Restaurant telling us that the reason that there were so few lobsters available now was greed. That's what she said.

Teacher: So what did you take that to mean, Lin?

Lin: Well, I think that meant that instead of the fishermen being careful not to be greedy, they just went along catching everything—just so that they could make more money. I mean, they caught the little fish and everything and didn't give them a chance to grow.

Teacher: You're saying that the fishermen caught even the little fish, and so the fish could not grow to replenish the fish stocks. They did not limit their catch to fully grown fish only and that's how the supplies became depleted.

Lin: Yeah, that's what I mean, and I think it's a shame.

Teacher: Thank you Lin, for being the first to open this discussion. I really appreciate that. So now, who'd like to add to what Lin has said, or offer another idea?

We cannot have it both ways: quality of thinking and speed are anathema to each other. In conducting effective classroom discussions in which we ask students to offer their ideas, waiting for students to think must trump the rush to finish. In the end, teachers have to choose which goal is more important.

Appreciate Students' Ideas

How do students become fearful of offering their ideas? We've known for many years that a major barrier to productive classroom discussion is teachers' natural tendency to judge, evaluate, and approve or disapprove of students' contributions (Rogers, 1961).

Consider the following dialogue, in which students discuss a photo of a weather station at the Arctic Circle. The teacher's ongoing evaluative responses limit thoughtful examination of important ideas, stressing "answers" rather than allowing students to dig for deeper meanings.

Teacher: What did you see in the photo?

Frank: Snow and ice.

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Teacher: Right! So what does that tell you about the weather?

Phillippa: It's cold there.

Teacher: Right! Good! So what does that mean about what life is like there? Anybody? Lillian?

Lillian: No response.

Teacher: Anyone else?

Eva: Maybe you have to dress warmly.

Teacher: Yes, but I was wondering about the way people live there, Eva, not their clothes.

Some teachers still cling to the belief that a big part of their job is telling students when they are right or wrong. Such judgments, however, work against a climate in which new and innovative ideas flourish. Students who fear being judged or penalized will rarely if ever, participate. The small group of students who are confident that they know what the teacher wants to hear may end up dominating the discussion, carrying on a private dialogue with the teacher while the rest of the class tunes out.

It may be asking a lot of teachers to shed the critic's mantle and replace "Right!" and "Good!" with responses like "I see," "Tell me more, Shawana," or "Thanks, Eva, for sharing your ideas with us." But when the teacher gives students a chance to expand their thinking and comments on their ideas without judgment, students feel safe to continue to examine and to go further in their thinking. In the following example, notice how the teacher accepts and appreciates Frank's contribution:

Teacher: What observations did you make about the photo?

Frank: Cold.

Teacher: Tell me a little more about that, Frank.

Frank: Well, I see a lot of snow and ice.

Teacher: So the snow and ice tell you how cold it is.

Frank: Yeah. It's got to be freezing for there to be icebergs.

Teacher: Where the climate is very cold, you may find some icebergs. Thanks, Frank. Does anyone else want to add an observation?

Accept Lack of Closure

The need for certainty seems to be part of our human makeup. When we've wrestled with dissonance and have finally brought a situation to closure, we feel relief, a sort of psychological "Whew!" Answers make us feel safe.

Even experienced teachers may feel a sense of accomplishment when our students can tell us, with certainty, that Ottawa is the capital of Canada and that Paul Revere designed the state seal of Massachusetts. Questions that have no "right" answers, on the other hand, make us feel unsettled.

This, of course, is the domain in which effective discussion occurs—the uncharted territory where we have to suspend judgment, put scrutinize nettlesome problems, offer new ideas, weigh alternatives, and consider different points of view. For teachers taking their first steps into effective classroom discussion, the prospect can be intimidating. For teachers who are comfortable in such territory, the experience is exhilarating.

When teachers talk too much, give too much information, express their personal opinions too frequently, or tell students what to think, all these seemingly innocuous responses seriously curtail opportunities for students to exercise their own brain power. When teachers instead respond with "Tell me more," "I'm wondering how you figured that out?" or "Perhaps you have some data to support your idea," they are inviting students to further examine their thinking. These responses insist on clarity of thinking, on reflection about a position, and on examples and data to support an idea. The ensuing discussion is likely to build deeper understanding.

Balanced Classroom Instruction

Teachers who have used the kinds of discussion teaching strategies described above have been enthusiastic about the results (Barnes, Christensen, & Hansen, 1994). It's important to remember, however, that the key elements of effective classroom discussion are not present every moment of every teaching day. Sometimes a teacher needs to offer his or her own ideas ("I think that we all need to pitch in and help someone out who is having difficulty"). Sometimes a teacher will want to make an evaluative comment to a student who has done an exceptionally fine job ("Mona, I loved your story. It was so touching it brought tears to my eyes."). Sometimes students need to learn addition facts, multiplication tables, or grammar rules. And sometimes it's appropriate for a teacher to agree or disagree with a student, provide information, or explain certain procedures.

The art of teaching requires being clear about our goals and using teaching strategies that are in concert with those goals—consistently connecting our means with our ends. The goal is to bring teaching strategies into sync with our teaching objectives for that lesson. Productive classroom discussions are an excellent means when the objective is to promote students' intelligent habits of mind.

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