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The Power of Discussion: One Teacher's Strategies With Children in Content Classes

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The Power of Discussion: One Teacher's Strategies With Children in Content Classes

Abstract

The use of discussion has been a practice commonly used by teachers. Over the years, how discussion is defined and used in the classroom has changed. These new definitions and rationales for discussion in classrooms creates new roles for the teacher. Once a teacher assumes these roles and is able to use discussion in the classroom effectively, students' understandings of meaning will begin to improve (Leal, 1993). It is through talk that students negotiate the meaning of text (Vygotsky, 1978) and review and master subject matter (Gall & Gall, 1976).

THE POWER OF DISCUSSION:
ONE TEACHER'S STRATEGIES WITH CHILDREN IN CONTENT CLASSES

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The Power of Discussion:

One teacher strategies with children in content classes

The use of discussion has been a practice commonly used by teachers. Over the years, how discussion is defined and used in the classroom has changed. These new definitions and rationales for discussion in classrooms creates new roles for the teacher. Once a teacher assumes these roles and is able to use discussion in the classroom effectively, students' understandings of meaning will begin to improve (Leal, 1993). It is through talk that students negotiate the meaning of text (Vygotsky, 1978) and review and master subject matter (Gall & Gall, 1976).

A historical definition of discussion based on research states that discussions are teacher-controlled and teacher-dominated talk that consists of low-level informational questions that limit the students to two- or three-word answers (Alverman, Dillion & O'Brien, 1987). In these types of interactions usually the teacher was looking for a single right answer (Dillion, 1981). This teacher-dominated process is an

initiate-respond-evaluate (I-R-E) model. However, Palincsar (1987) defines discussions as a reciprocal teaching framework for students to discuss work with others. In this reciprocal discussion framework, the participants question, summarize, clarify, and predict as they work with text. Whether discussions are teacher or peer led, research indicates that meaningful talk about text helps improve long-term concept memory and recall, and can be used to help students review or master the subject matter (O Flahavan, 1992). This new view of discussion refers to the interactive events in which individuals collaboratively construct meaning or consider alternative interpretations of the text in order to arrive at new meaning (Almasi, 1996).

The rationale for the use of reciprocal discussion is that it provides an opportunity for students to claim ownership and be more responsible for the learning process, and to clarify and collaborate in areas they find significant (Leal, 1993). Thus, the use of discussion serves as a kind of scaffold - a mechanism that provides temporary and adjustable support to instruction (Palincsar, 1987). Through discussions, teachers

are able to adjust their instruction to meet students individual needs. This instructional change by teachers would indicate that teachers have somewhat different roles in a classroom using discussion.

The different roles teachers assume in lively discussions begins with one as an inquisitor. Here, as an inquisitor a teacher asks few questions, but may model good questioning for students by asking an open-ended question that encourages students to participate (Gambrell & Almasi, 1996). Along with an inquisitor role, a teacher becomes a facilitator of interaction and interpretation. The facilitating teacher will encourage as much interaction as possible among students and will stay neutral during discussions. The facilitating teacher realizes the interaction doesn't flow through the teacher but from student to student.

Lastly, the idea of evaluator during discussions moves from assessing the correctness of students' responses to evaluating the process by which students construct meaning (Gambrell & Almasi, 1996). The teacher is more concerned with the meaningful interactions students have with their

peers about text.

This instructional change for the teacher involves not only adjusting instruction, but includes modeling this reciprocal discussion process (Palinscar, 1987) and includes all of its phases of questioning, predicting, summarizing, and clarifying (O Flahavan, 1994). Through these phases the participants involved in discussion are able to invite, support, probe, clarify, refine, and focus responses brought to the group (Langer, 1994). The modeling of these skills by the teacher (such as predicting, clarifying, probing, refining, etc.) will slowly be handed over to the students to practice in small groups. Two other key teacher roles in discussion are scaffolding conversations and coaching students. Scaffolding is the behavior of any person that is designed to help a peer engage in some aspect of learning beyond his or her actual level of development. Coaching students is when the teacher helps students stay on task, work with each other, and share ideas between the group members. Both scaffolding and coaching are done before and after discussion. (O Flahavan, 1994).

While most teachers agree that classroom discussion is a valuable teaching technique. This is especially true in a reciprocal model where teachers have a variety of roles to take on during the discussion of text. Once a rationale for the use of discussion groups has been clearly made by a teacher, and the teacher has a sound understanding of the roles in discussion groups, students will begin to improve their comprehension and understanding of text.

RATIONALE FOR CHANGE IN AN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

In all forms of discussion all participants, whether free speaking and expressing ones thoughts or feelings in social-personal relationships, conflicts with peers, or stating opinions, need to be able to listen carefully, speak clearly, and think of other individuals' points of view and opinions. The characteristics of good discussion need to be constantly practiced and taught in all levels of education. I found this to be especially true in my fifth grade classroom working with special needs students.

From my observations of two boys, who are low readers, in my classroom I realized they needed a classroom environment that would allow them to become more confident interactive students.

Because of their poor reading abilities I needed to engage them in more meaningful talk about social studies. From this useful talk they would be able to construct more meaning and improve their understanding of the social studies concepts. It is through talk that students negotiate meaning of text, (Vygotsky, 1978), and I needed to create opportunities where these two young boys would feel comfortable and confident enough to speak.

CLASSROOM SITUATION

This is a story of how one elementary school teacher developed a simple idea. An idea used by conversant 5th graders to help poor readers better understand and apply concepts taught in social studies while helping to improve all students confidence in themselves.

My 5th grade classroom consisted of twenty-four students who attended a rural satellite school in a small community. These students all had been classmates for the last five years which I believe was a definite benefit to the social growth and teaching of these students. They have already established comfort zones with each other and had knowledge of each others' special needs and abilities which did not have to be recreated each year as it does in

a larger elementary with new class members each year.

The instruction in the classroom has always been done in a cooperative learning environment where each student works with different peers on various projects and assignments and includes opportunities for group discussion. The content instruction is done in cooperative groups because of the difficulty with vocabulary, the newness of concepts and the unfamiliarity of the people introduced in the text. Because of the newness of the material being learned and the students lack of prior knowledge they need to draw upon each other for understanding.

I was monitoring students' progress during a small group discussion. The members of this group were discussing specific Spanish explorers that came to North America. They were reinforcing and explaining each of their views and thoughts on each explorer. What did catch my attention was one boy just repeated what another person had just said, which is not an uncommon practice by elementary students. I decided to spend a few minutes watching the group work. It was during this observation time that I again noticed the same young man restate many times a shortened version of what had just been spoken by another student.

This observation prompted me to take a step back and really observe my classroom and how it was running. I did this by charting each students responses and types of conversations used in their group work. The results after one week were rather embarrassing to me. I had always "bragged" about how well kids worked together and collaboratively constructed meaning through conversation about text, but this wasn't really happening for all the members of the class. I found that I had two boys in my class that weren't speaking about text. They were really supportive of their peers in conversations but rarely spoke and when they did it was never an original thought but one that was previously shared by a peer, only restated by them.

These two young men were also my two special needs students. I realized that my new challenge was to involve these two students, who were poor readers, in meaningful talk about the text. I had to find a way to engage these two boys in searching text, for information that they could recall, around which classroom conversations could revolve.

RESULTS

The strategy of posting and re-posting was discovered one

day during some work time. I was reading the next section of my social studies text to do lesson plans. While reading I would write thoughts for teaching ideas on post-its and place them in the text where they would be used. One of my students came to my desk and asked what I was doing. I told him I was "posting ideas."

As he walked to his seat the proverbial light clicked on for me. I realized I had just stumbled into an idea that I had to try. I would have these two boys post their idea as they read the text. For the next few days we practiced how to use this idea together. I modeled the process of post-it and then shared what I read. I explained what I wrote and why. I allowed them to ask me questions, make responses, give supporting comments, and connect ideas to other ideas as we discussed the text.

The two special needs boys and I practiced this idea for the next few weeks in small groups with shortened readings to allow for effective and meaningful ways of posting.

During my observations of the discussion groups over the next few days, and during conversations with my two special needs students, the following insights were made. The post-its allowed students to organize text information as they searched. They were

readily able to share what they read with their peers by referring to the writings. More significant, the two special needs boys showed other students what they were doing and the concept of posting ideas spread throughout the class. From this they gained more confidence in themselves and what they understood and thus were more active in the whole class and small group discussions. I could tell by the nods of their heads and ideas shared with their peers, they realized a confidence in themselves as productive students that they had lost or never experienced before.

Having the two special needs students share the post-it idea with peers had very profound results. Students would ask the two boys questions and they became the authorities of post-its and slowly became authorities of ideas because they were validated by post-its in the text.

As for all the students, the active discussions with peers provided them opportunities to gain feedback through negotiation regarding each student's thought processes of why they wrote what they did. This provided the boys and their peers an opportunity to replace information and ideas they overlooked when reading. One of the boys named this process "re-posting".

The opportunity to listen to others in cooperative groups allowed students to see alternative interpretations of the same text and finalize their own understandings of what they had read and shared. All students gained confidence about what they read and understood by posting and re-posting their ideas, thus the students became more involved in small group and large group discussions.

CONCLUSIONS

I found that using the post-it ideas in Social Studies text books and then conversing about the text allowed all students, especially the two special needs boys, to increase their knowledge of the content, improve their communication skills, and give them confidence in themselves. It also made the learning experience more interesting and at times more challenging for them and myself. What I found most beneficial was the meaningful talk about social studies by all students. When we say in 5th grade, "Lets talk.....," we really do now!

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