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Classroom Discussion: a Journey to Decentralizing the Classroom

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Classroom Discussion: a Journey to Decentralizing the Classroom

Abstract

Throughout history of the United States, teachers have instigated classroom discussion about text in hopes that talk enhanced understanding. More recently, Vygotsky (1978) produced evidence of the importance of social talk in learning. It is through this social interaction or discussion that students construct and negotiate meaning of text. What constitutes social interaction or discussion is what leads some teachers to disagree. The literature on discussion has classified it into two types: recitation and discussion.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION: A JOURNEY TO DECENTRALIZING THE
CLASSROOM.

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by

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Classroom discussion: A journey to decentralizing the
classroom.

Throughout history of the United States, teachers have instigated classroom discussion about text in hopes that talk enhanced understanding. More recently, Vygotsky (1978) produced evidence of the importance of social talk in learning. It is through this social interaction or discussion that students construct and negotiate meaning of text. What constitutes social interaction or discussion is what leads some teachers to disagree. The literature on discussion has classified it into two types: recitation and discussion.

Recitation historically has been the type of discussion that has taken place in the classroom. Kletzien and Baloché (1994) describe recitation as a situation where the teacher controls the turn-taking, does most of the talking, asks low level questions, and limits students to two- to three-word answers. Students rarely speak to one another or ask questions, and the teacher speaks more than all others combined. In addition, the teacher's questions are not put forth for the sake of discovering information in answer, but merely to "parrot" back known information. It is through this questioning that the teacher initiates and sustains the conversation, specifies content, and controls its direction (Dillon, 1981). Other researchers such as Cazden (1988) and Gambrell and Almasi (1996) define recitation using the I-R-E model. The teacher *initiates* talk by asking a question, a student *responds*, and the teacher *evaluates* the adequacy of the response. The concept of true discussion is quite different than recitation.

True discussion is an experience where students control turn-taking, do most of the talking, manipulate ideas, and make personal connections with text. There is an open exchange of ideas and opinions about topics that may or may not have easy answers. Students ask questions directly to one another rather than ask the teacher. This allows the students to determine the direction they need or want to take to construct their own meaning keeping the teacher's role to a minimum (Kletzien and Baloché, 1994). A simple definition of discussion is offered by Gall and Gall (1993) that states discussion is a method of teaching in which a group of persons communicate interactively using speaking, nonverbal, and listening processes in order to achieve instructional objectives. True discussion does differ from recitation and therefore offers many new benefits for students and teachers.

Students who participate in discussion do have many benefits including the opportunity to discover and clarify naive conceptions. This helps them become aware of alternative interpretations which encourage a more complex understanding than one could achieve as an individual (Gaskins, Satlow, Hyson, Ostertag, and Six, 1994; Tiballi and Drake, 1993). Further, students are provided with the opportunity to initiate and take ownership of the topics to be investigated. They can explore meaning while creating and investigating new possibilities for interpretation in a less threatening platform (Leal, 1993). They can also think about their readings in depth and on their own terms promoting retention and in-depth processing associated with cognitive manipulation of information (Nystrand, Gamoran, and

Heck, 1993). Almasi (1993) found that discussion provided opportunities for students to engage in higher level thought processes which included responses that were more complex and elaborate than students in teacher-led discussions. In mastering subject matter, Gall and Gall (1993) found discussion to be a useful approach that also developed problem-solving skills and provided an avenue for students to share their opinions.

Teachers are also able to reap some benefits from discussion. This method transfers some of the responsibility for learning from the teacher to the student while giving the teacher a window to view the students' strengths and weaknesses to help develop future instruction (Leal, 1993). In addition, discussion can serve as a kind of scaffold allowing a teacher to adjust instruction to meet individual needs thereby increasing motivation and success (Palinscar, 1987). All these benefits mentioned for students and teachers may lead one to incorporate discussion with the belief that simply placing students in a group and telling them to discuss will produce the same results. The fact is, teachers need to understand what true discussion is and that students need training since the burden of responsibility for verbal interaction is on the students (Gall and Gillett, 1980).

This training about discussion focuses on the roles of the discussant and can be approached two ways. The first way centers on assigning students to certain roles during discussion. Close (1992) suggests specific tasks such as: facilitator, recorder, reporter, and organizer all of which make students feel more comfortable. Gambrell and Almasi (1996) assign similar tasks in their roles of inquisitor, facilitator, evaluator, and respondent

This multitude of roles traditionally reserved for the teacher is what helps empower the students to listen and think critically about the comments from their peers.

The second way of training centers on the role behaviors of the students during a discussion. Gall and Gall (1993) created student specific role behaviors to establish and maintain a group, to get tasks completed, maintain effective working relationships with each other, develop understanding, mastery, and retention of assigned material, and role behaviors to challenge each others' conclusions and reasoning to stimulate academic controversies (see Table 1 of Gall and Gall, 1993, for complete data). In a more simplified version Sorenson (1993) utilizes three general rules for open discussion. First, students must be courteous while keeping participation equally distributed. Second, students must rely on each other rather than looking at the teacher. Third, the discussant group must tolerate silence to give each other a chance to think in stalled times. Both the roles of the discussant and the role behaviors would be beneficial to teach when implementing discussion in the classroom in that they provide clear expectations to students.

The use of discussion in the classroom requires a clear definition. It does not involve a traditional I-R-E model where the teacher controls almost every aspect of the discussion, but rather empowers students to negotiate and facilitate meaning through social interaction with peers in a low risk situation. It is in true discussion that many student and teacher benefits are realized. Students can not be expected to achieve a true discussion merely by placing them in a group, but need training

that communicates the expectations of student roles so groups can work efficiently. "What a child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 101). This statement exemplifies the outcomes I hope my students will experience as I begin a journey to decentralizing my classroom through the use of classroom discussion. What this classroom looks like and the methodology utilized to achieve it is what I hope to find out.

My journey to decentralizing the classroom began with a graduate course in the fall of 1996, where the book Lively Discussions! Fostering Engaged Reading by Gambrell and Almasi (1996) was used. It gave a portrayal of what discussion really was and what it was not. It really made me think about my own classroom and the practices I used namely discussion. The more I read, the more I realized that I was utilizing the I-R-E model of interaction introduced by Cazden (1988). I was the one who initiated the discussions, who determined who would respond to my question, and I was the one who evaluated each response to determine the value of the response. I realized my understanding of discussion was not accurate, therefore, I was determined to learn all I could on appropriate ways to teach and utilize discussion in the classroom.

In my reading in Gambrell and Almasi (1996), I found that roles of the students or discussants in groups was important to the success of the discussion. There were three roles that students were expected to partake in. The first was the role of the inquisitor who asks questions. The second role a student should play is the facilitator who encourages others to participate by saying things like, "What do you think?" The last

role is the evaluator who gives alternative points of view like , "I like because..." Students are not assigned any particular role , rather they are to understand that a discussant moves from one role to the next. To gain an understanding of these roles we first talked about each role in a large group to define each role. Then I had the students give examples of things they might say to fit each of the roles. Finally, I had a volunteer group come up and discuss their favorite movies. As they conversed with each other the remaining students and I listened for examples of each role. We then talked about the examples we heard from the volunteer group in a large group setting. The students seemed to have a firm grasp on each separate role. We were now ready to learn about role behaviors which was other key area for achieving success in discussion.

The role behaviors mentioned in Almasi (1993) were basic common sense behaviors like: take turns, cooperate, listen when someone is talking, pay attention, use quiet voice, etc. My classroom environment is based on such behaviors so this was not new to the students. However, we did decide as a class to develop some specific role behaviors to be observed in our discussions. This was accomplished by using a t-chart which directs the students' attention to two major areas, what it looks like and what it sounds like. The role behaviors we came up with can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Role Behaviors for Small Group Work

1. Make eye-contact with the speaker/audience
2. Take turns

3. Listen when someone is talking
4. Use an appropriate voice
5. Cooperate and compromise
6. Keep hands and feet to yourself

Now that we had learned the roles and role behaviors of discussion I was ready to give discussion a try. I explained to my students how I had been learning about a new way of discussing readings that sounded fun. Up to this point we had been meeting in small groups for our Social Studies and Health/Science classes where we would share information regarding questions on a handout or activity. Then we would meet in large group to further discuss the results in small groups to iron out any misconceptions and reemphasize key points. I began our discussion changes by stating, "Today I am taking myself out of the discussion. I am going to take a back seat and see what you can do." I told them that we would use our novels from reading class that we had just started as our focus for this discussion. Even though this was the first time we had attempted to discuss a novel, I was still confident because the students had caught on to everything so quickly.

After explaining my expectations, behaviorally and socially, we went on with the class period to hold our discussions in our small groups. These small groups were homogeneously grouped with both boys and girls included. I then waited for the excitement to begin. How wrong I was. The students just sat there like bumps on a log. They appeared to have no idea of what to say. I then tried to salvage the class period by using prompts like, "What did

you like or dislike about the book? What parts were clear or unclear?" The prompts received little success so I decided to I had to take control or I would have only one or two people taking part on their own. From that point on I reverted back to a I-R-E format. I finished the class period feeling greatly disappointed.

As I reflected later that day I realized that the reason why the students were so tight-lipped must be because they did not know what to say. This was their first time with a true discussion where the information, approval, and leadership would have to come from them, and this apparently created an unclear picture of what a discussion is and how to have one on their own. It seemed obvious that some sort of modeling needed to take place before I could try this again.

The next morning I had the same expectations as the previous day, but today we talked ahead of time about some different things a person could comment on such as: the characters, setting, problem, plot, resolution, things we liked or disliked, or connections we made with other texts as we read the book. In addition, I gave the students a list of sample questions derived from Daniels (1994), seen in Table 2, that provide specific questions to ask while in small groups.

Table 2

Sample Questions to Ask in Small Groups

1. What was going through your mind when you read this part?
2. What was discussed in this section of the book?
3. Did today's reading remind you of any real-life experiences or events that took place in another text?

4. What questions did you have after reading this section?
5. Did anything in this section surprise you?
6. What are the two most important ideas?
7. Did anything surprise you?
8. What was the most exciting part?
9. Predict something that will happen next.

Then I had a volunteer group come up and model what they thought was the appropriate way to have a discussion. The rest of us observed them. I had used this "fish bowl" activity with success in the past for teaching other skills so I thought that this would be a great way to learn about discussion.

I had just finished reading Watchdog and the Coyotes by Bill Wallace (1995) so I chose it as the piece of literature to discuss. The small group eagerly talked about the piece. They shared who the characters were and the setting while giving information about their favorite parts or why they liked the book. Upon completion of their talk the entire class commented on the roles and behaviors that were demonstrated by the small group students. This included roles and behaviors we felt were suitable for a true discussion and ones that we could improve. Then I again reviewed with the students my expectations and my role as I had the previous day. I then directed the students to their groups so they could begin to hold a discussion.

I made my way around the room observing how the students were interacting with each other , and I noticed that they seemed to be more prepared to speak. That definitely had to be attributed to the modeling activity. In some of the groups I

heard things like, "I like this part because.... I didn't like this part because ... I think it would be fun to do what the character in the story did." These kind of responses were quite prevalent in most groups. However, I was surprised that I didn't hear more responses about areas that were confusing to the students. This lack of discourse about confusing areas could be from inexperience, little personal connections with the text, or maybe there just was not anything that was confusing.

The next day in reading class we again reviewed the behavioral and academic expectations we would utilize in our discussions groups including the role behaviors in Table 1. We also discussed the type of things to comment on during the discussions utilizing Table 2. Then the students went to their groups, and I chose a group to sit in on, The Wishgiver group, to listen to the type of discourse that was taking place. It was really interesting to hear the differences in the discourse today from what I heard the day before. Again, I heard things about what parts each liked and major events in the plot, but today I heard what I was hoping for, comments concerning confusion parts and personal connections. One boy started the discussion by saying, "I didn't get the part in the story about the water. I mean, how could? I don't know." I gave a puzzled look hoping for some further explanation.

One of the girls in the group apparently sensed what was troubling the boy and added, "The water covered their land. The only thing that was there was a fence. That wouldn't hold the water. Remember, this is a fantasy book so things like that can happen." This was a great example of how students can relate to

each other and help clear up misconceptions or make personal connections. This was again apparent later on in the discussion. The same group was talking about how they would respond in Adam's situation in the book where his family's farm was completely flooded. "It would be great! You could swim off your front porch, " one boy responded.

"You could go fishing, " another boy said.

"You could go boating and water skiing, " one girl said.

"It would be hard to get around though."

"Yeah, and you would have to worry about water getting in the house."

"You wouldn't be able to grow crops or have animals either." These comments were exactly what I hoped for, but I still had one individual that seemed quite passive in the discussion. I wondered how you could get full participation while not interfering in the group. The students were really taking off in discussion, and I did not want to jeopardize it by sticking my nose into the group's discourse. Maybe we could make rules to help regulate participation or maybe I can teach the students to do the prompting. I hoped to get some answers from my colleagues at my college class that evening.

At class I presented my project and explained my concern I had with some students not participating as much as the others. I received some very helpful insights and suggestions. First of all, it was mentioned that you cannot realistically expect that all students will participate evenly since they have different strengths, weaknesses, skills, and interests. Maybe my reluctant students are simply not interested in novels as much as they are

in social studies or debatable issues like whether or not to have a curfew. As I thought about it, that made a lot of sense. One of the key components going into a discussion is that you have some personal connection with the topic. So if the topic does not connect with the discussants then they probably will not have as much to say as they would with something they have knowledge or opinions on that creates a personal connection.

One colleague mentioned that if I use discussion in social studies that I try something she used that worked with her students who were passive. She had her students write down three things that were confusing or that they didn't understand. She said it was really important in how you worded it as well. For example, you might say, "You need to write three questions that you do not understand. I know you will want to write more than that, but please keep it to three." She said that this careful wording seems to give the students confidence that they will easily complete the task. I thought this made sense, and I was ready to utilize these insights in my own class.

In social studies class the next day I planned to use a strongly opinionated question as the focus of our discussions while utilizing my colleague's suggestion about careful wording and writing down a set number of responses. I said to my students, "Please write down only five reasons for having a curfew and five for not having a curfew. I know you will want to write more, but please keep it to five." The students responded beautifully with all the students meeting the requirement with little or no help by me. In particular, the passive girl I mentioned earlier who was reluctant to speak in reading group, she

easily completed the task, her positive response suggesting that personal knowledge is crucial to discussion. After completing our pre-discussion activity I directed the students to their small group where they shared their feelings. We then got into our Community Circle, a large circle where we discuss issues.

It was interesting to see how the students were so eager to share what they thought. I could sense the feeling of confidence in their actions. However, one thing that frequently appeared was the use of hand-raising. We had talked prior about not being required to raise our hands, but merely waiting for someone to finish before we talked. It was evident how ingrained hand-raising is to students. Never the less, we continued with the discussion as time ran out. This brought to mind how time can be a serious issue with discussion. I had originally planned 30 minutes to introduce the activity, review expectations of small group work, and to discuss the issue, but 45 minutes would have been better because the main part of the time needed to be with the actual discussion. We decided to finish our discussion the following day.

I was a little worried that the students' internal motivation would be lost, but I was wrong. The students took off right where they left off in our Community Circle. The first time around the students gave their opinions whether or not they liked a curfew. But the second time around some of the students began to question others' viewpoints and defend their own. One student said, "A curfew would be bad because you have to walk home after the skating bus drops you off."

One boy replied, "I don't agree. All you have to do is ask

them to drop you off, and they will." This was a prime example of questioning another person's point of view and being able to back it up with evidence. Later someone mentioned, "Curfew would reduce drug selling."

Then someone said, "Drug deals could just as easily take place during the day. Also drug dealers are getting younger so drug deals could easily take place during the day." This kind of discourse took place the remainder of the class period. I was really pleased with the excitement, participation, and quality of discussion that took place the past two days. I was able to sit back and watch students give their point of view, question ideas, and defend their beliefs. The students understood the expectations I had for them and knew how to converse with others whether they agreed with them or not. Now that I tried discussion with a novel and a debatable issue, I was ready to try it with a science experiment.

The experiment dealt with paper towel absorbency. We outlined the class period with the steps to take to complete the experiment along with the behavioral and social expectations of the activity. I informed the students that a discussion would take place following the experiment. A short time later the students had completed the experiments and were ready to share their results.

The students began by sharing things like, "I liked it because we got to use our hands, I liked it because we took turns, and I liked it because we cooperated by sharing jobs." These comments were fine, but I wanted more so I prompted the students by asking things like: How come every group does not have the

same exact results, and what value does the experiment have to you? This is where the discussion really took off. I did not even have to remind them not to raise their hands. When one person was finished talking, another started while either supporting or disagreeing with the previous respondent. It was a sight to see and listen to! When I thought we were done I asked what paper towel would they choose and that started a new vein of discussion. Someone said, "It depends. In our house we have two brands. One we use for napkins and the other for spills." Then the discussion shifted to the stores' strategy in placing paper towels on the shelf. "They put the really cheap ones on the upper shelf, and the more expensive ones at eye level so you buy the expensive ones," one perceptive student added. I was amazed how the discussion led to a related because I certainly did not plan on discussing a store's strategy for selling merchandise, but what a valuable experience it turned out to be. I guess you have to be prepared for discussion to change courses because sometimes you do not know what prior connections students have made with a topic.

Today again I really saw the importance of having a topic that students can make connections to. To form these connections the students need a common background of knowledge whether it is personal knowledge or first hand experience gained through a shared experience at school.

Conclusions

As I look back over the attempts at discussion in my classroom, I definitely saw some progress and also some areas to improve. First of all, students need to know what kinds of things are appropriate to talk about in a discussion group. This skill

can be attained by sharing your expectations, making a t-chart of what it sounds like and looks like, or drafting a list of things to talk about like we did with the novels in Table 2. Next, students need to know what behavioral expectations will be utilized. Again a list of expectations, as in Table 1, should be made easily assessable to all students. Both of these two crucial areas do not happen over night, and need a lot of modeling by the teacher, by students themselves in a fish bowl activity, and they need many opportunities to review and practice the skills. Once the procedural skills are taken care of the next thing is to utilize a topic that kids can make a personal connection to.

If you choose novels, it is important to let the students have some choice in the novel they will read and discuss. This gives them a sense of power and motivation to discuss something they chose in the first place. I found that it is also crucial that the students be in the same place in the book to allow for a common knowledge base.

Another choice might be to choose a debatable issue where students will be able to take a side. A pre-discussion activity where the students write down a few comments on both sides of the issue seems to help out in that it allows the students to see both sides and be prepared for what an opponent might say to them.

A science experiment activity could also be an appropriate activity for discussion in that it is a shared experience that all have as first hand knowledge. Most students like to work with their hands and are willing to share and defend their results.

The last major area of a successful discussion is the aspect of time. You need to understand that initially a lot of time

needs to be spent on the behavioral and academic expectations you set forth. Also, you need to plan effectively including a large block of time that allows for a pre-discussion activity, review of expectations, behaviorally and academically, and discussion time.

I think my biggest concern right now is that I want to find ways to make my students more accountable with the discussion. I have utilized a written paragraph, but a journal entry would certainly be useful as well. Writing an editorial for our Writer's Workshop or having a debate were other avenues we utilized. This will definitely be an area that will require further investigation and practice in the future.

All in all I think discussion can prove valuable to any classroom if you focus on a few key aspects. Students need to know what behaviors are expected from them. They need to know what things to talk about once they are in a small group. This clear understanding of the expectations must go hand-in-hand with many opportunities for modeling and for practice with the skills in a variety of settings. Lastly, students need to form a personal connection to the topic whether from their own personal experiences or from a shared experience at school. This connection gives them a sense of motivation and confidence needed for a successful discussion. What concerns should you have? Time. A lot of time is needed up front for teaching, practicing, and learning discussion skills. Also, do not assume that your students will know what to do or say. That is where the practice is crucial. If you focus on the key aspects and keep in mind the concerns I mentioned, you can get off to a great start to a true discussion!

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A The Reading Teacher

The Reading Teacher (RT) is a peer-reviewed, refereed journal published eight times each year by the International Reading Association. *RT* is an open forum for the thoughtful consideration of practices, issues, and trends within the field of reading and literacy education. Submissions focusing on children's literature or the relationships between literacy and other subject areas are also welcomed. *The Reading Teacher* serves classroom teachers, reading teachers, administrators, supervisors, consultants, college/university faculty, parents, and others who are committed to improving literacy instruction for children through age 12. It is received by approximately 65,000 individuals and institutions each month.

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- **Through Children's Eyes:** Children's own insightful or humorous literacy-related quotations, writings, or drawings are published in *RT*. These normally should not exceed two pages. Materials must be prepared by children and should be co-submitted with an adult; both the child and the adult will receive credit in the journal. Signed permission from the child and his or her guardian must accompany the submission.

- **Poetry:** Poetry from children or adults about topics related to literacy learning will be considered for publication.

- **Literacy Pictures:** Photographs, cartoons, or drawings will be considered. Submissions must be camera-ready (i.e., black and white

- **Letters:** To promote dialogue among *RT* readers, authors, and IRA members, letters to the editors that comment specifically on articles or issues addressed in the journal are encouraged. When letters are critical of works published in *RT*, authors of those works will be provided an opportunity to respond within the same issues in which the letters are published. Letters should generally not exceed two pages.

Manuscript form

Manuscripts should be prepared according to the style described in the fourth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (American Psychological Association, 1994). The *APA Manual* is available in many libraries. It may also be purchased at most university bookstores or directly from the American Psychological Association, 1200 Seventeenth Street NW, Washington, DC 20036, USA.

Authors should pay particular attention to APA guidelines for:

- manuscript organization;
- writing style, grammar, and use of nonsexist language;
- punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and headings;
- quotations, references cited in the text, and the reference list; and
- procedures for typing the manuscript, including pagination and page headers.

No abstracts are required for *RT* submissions.

How to submit a manuscript

The editorial team welcomes manuscripts from a broad range of literacy professionals. The following information

submit single copies of all materials. All copies must be dark and clear. The author should retain the original manuscript, as submitted copies will not be returned. Likewise, the author should retain original figures and photographs; these will be requested later if the paper has been accepted for publication. Signed, dated permissions (if necessary) should include a statement by the photographer, artist, or child and guardian giving permission to publish the work in *RT*. Likewise, obtaining permission to quote previously published material is the author's responsibility.

Mail all submissions to Editors, *The Reading Teacher*, 414 White Hall, College of Education, Kent State University, Kent, OH 44242, USA. Authors will receive notification of manuscript receipt within two weeks.

The review process

Articles submitted to *RT* are reviewed anonymously by three members of the editorial advisory board or occasionally by guest reviewers. Other submissions are reviewed by members of the editorial team and may be reviewed by editorial advisors. Authors are generally notified of decisions about publication within three months. Substantive feedback on articles will be shared with authors regardless of publication decision.

Articles submitted by IRA committees, affiliates, or special interest groups are subject to the standard review process. For subsequent publication, the individuals who produced the manuscript are listed as the authors, and it is noted that the article resulted from group action during specified years.

Manuscripts are judged for their usefulness to *RT* readers, potential significance and contribution to the field, and quality of writing.