

Bringing All Students Into Discussions

Article



by Jori Krulder, May 2018

I'm not above bragging about my students' discussion skills. From my English 10 sophomores to my AP Literature seniors, my students ask deep, penetrating questions and explore ideas with curiosity—even those who don't start out that way in August.

At the beginning of the year, there's that small core of students who love to offer their opinions, eagerly raising their hands and sharing their often brilliant insights. There's also that much larger group of students who are perfectly satisfied to sit back and listen to the same four or five students in every discussion.

Over the years, I've worked to bring more of my students into the conversation, and doing so has become one of the most important ways I help my students develop essential communication and thinking skills.

Discussion vs. Debate

As in many aspects of teaching, I've learned that you can't assume anything when it comes to students' skills and knowledge, so I begin our pursuit of discussion with... a discussion.

The class reflects on and talks about the following questions: "What's the difference between a discussion and a debate? What is the purpose of each?"

Students are quick to realize that the goal in a debate is to win an argument, but when it comes to identifying what people in a discussion are trying to do, they struggle a bit. I tell them the goal of a discussion is to understand rather than win, so the tactics are different. When you're seeking to understand another person's ideas, being able to listen actively and question in a way that furthers the conversation is more important than focusing only on expressing your own opinion.

We establish a simple list of guidelines for effective discussions (https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fllDsYwLz08_op-sfvQByAH8IUQmJkmSQvUQ3kN8jXU/edit) and spend some time practicing them. We focus on concrete actions such as "look at the speaker," "wait for the person speaking to complete his/her thought before you speak," "speak one at a time." I once assumed that students knew how to have a respectful, productive discussion, but it turns out that this is one of the most valuable skills they can learn and practice in school.

Fishbowl is one technique I've found that works well with my less experienced students. During a fishbowl discussion, a circle of four chairs is placed within a larger circle. Students take turns moving to the inner circle for a brief, focused discussion while the rest of the class watches from the outside circle. The discussion participants then move back to the outer circle to reflect with their peers on what worked well in the discussion and what they'll seek to improve.

The power of fishbowl and similar formats comes from that reflection: Students focus not only on the topics they're discussing but also on how well they and their classmates are practicing discussion techniques that facilitate understanding.

Inviting Quiet Students Into the Discussion

There are many reasons students don't voluntarily join class discussions—some are introverted while others may feel discomfort with a particular subject area or have difficulty processing information, for example. Or they may be experiencing problems unrelated to class.

However, students are often much more engaged when they have a voice in class, and their contributions benefit everyone. There are some easy-to-implement ways to give

students more opportunities to be a part of the conversation.

Write first, then discuss: One of the reasons some students don't participate in class discussions is the time it takes to process their thoughts. I've found that by giving students just five minutes to write down their ideas about a question or topic before we talk, I get many more willing to participate and a much richer discussion.

Opportunities for small group discussions: In addition to giving students time to think through writing, I often have them turn and talk to a partner or two before bringing the discussion to the whole class. This gives them time to articulate their ideas in a low-pressure setting, and they have more confidence when it comes time to share with the larger group.

Random selection: Early in the school year, I have students write their name on a Popsicle stick and tell them I'll use these to choose random people to contribute in our discussions from time to time. I explain to them about how shy I was when I was in high school and how, even though I rarely participated in class discussions, I had quite a bit to say—and I know that they do, too.

I only use this technique when students have had the opportunity to write about and/or talk with others about the discussion question because the intent is not to catch them off guard but to provide them with opportunities to contribute.

Students who are still reluctant to talk when their name is drawn can ask me to come back to them after a few more people have spoken so they have more ideas to respond to. This usually gives them the space and time they need to come up with something to say, whether it be a new idea sparked by a classmate or a response to someone else's comment.

Silent discussions: Posing questions on Google Classroom elicits some rousing conversations, but it's also fun to go low-tech with a silent discussion. Students write questions at the top of a sheet of paper they tape to their desk or the classroom wall, and then they all move around the room, responding to each other's comments by writing on the papers. All students can be engaged at the same time, and it's a great way to get them up and moving around. Brian Sztabnik's Shakespearean musical chairs is a variation on this.

The key to having meaningful discussions in our classrooms is establishing a culture that values all of the voices in the room, and the more opportunities we give students to think, talk, and listen to each other, the more empowered they'll be to join the conversation.

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