Pat Perkins

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Synthesizing Elements of Accomplished Teaching: Facilitating Classroom Discussion

Introduction

Facilitating classroom discussion has always been a challenge for me as a teacher. Even with a clear objective, I tend to let discussions wander, ranging from our stated topic to side topics that, while remaining educational and valuable, distract from discussion of our main idea. When I taught my lesson to my Advanced Placement students in which they were to analyze political speeches given at this summer's presidential conventions, I knew that a debriefing would occur after each speech in which we would talk not only about what was said but about how it was said. I wanted the conversations to focus on the arguments - how did Ivanka Trump and Chelsea Clinton use pathos (emotion), logos (logic), and ethos (credibility) to build their arguments in favor of their parents?

Facilitating classroom discussions aligns with demonstrating effective teaching practices, which is Criterion 2 in the Marzano Teacher Evaluation Model (OSPI, 2014). Specifically the model states, a distinguished teacher will "adapt or create new strategies" (OSPI, 2014). This phrase pops up frequently in Criterion 2, indicating that an accomplished teacher changes his practice as he goes, rolling with the punches, so to speak.

What do best practices look like?

Classroom discussions help students synthesize and reflect on information they have just learned or already have learned. For students, synthesis is critical - they need to be able to reflect

on what they have learned and hear and engage in multiple viewpoints from their classmates. Likewise, a teacher needs to be able to assess a student's understanding as the discussion progresses.

Fisher and Frey (2014) list several factors why "productive student talk is essential to teaching and learning" (p. 19). First on their list is that discussion promotes critical thinking. According to these authors, "When we understand a concept, it's easier to talk about it, which is probably why teachers talk so much when they're delivering content" (p. 19). The implication here is that teachers should do less talking and students should talk more. By talking about a topic, students develop their own understanding and can place it in their own context, which demonstrates and helps develop a higher level of critical thinking. The authors cite the use of essential questions to frame units, and those questions drive student discussions. The essential questions help give students something to talk and think about. When I began using essential questions last year in my AP English class, I noticed that students would open up more about the topics. This year, I've begun each unit with those questions and I've asked students to reflect on those questions periodically throughout the unit. One such question in a recent unit was, "What direction do you want the country to go?" In addition to promoting critical thinking, the questions help provide focus for the unit. Ultimately, the students' final essay was an answer to that question. By keeping the focus on the essential question, students were able to build knowledge about the topic in preparation for their final assessment, rather than having to build that knowledge on their own without the benefit of classroom discussion.

Fisher and Frey (2014) also point out that teachers must sometimes redirect conversations, often to address errors or misinformation. Accomplished teachers avoid giving

students the answers, however. “Skilled teachers listen closely to student talk and rapidly perform a gap analysis, thinking, ‘What does the student know and not know that would lead to that reply?’” (Fisher & Frey, 2014, p. 20). Checking for understanding is critical during discussions. I often emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers when we talk about broad topics, but students must be able to come to logical conclusions, and when they do not, I have to be able to correct them in some way. Fisher and Frey call it an “invitation to thinking,” an ability to use “additional questions, prompts, or cues to guide the learner” (p. 20). By doing this, an accomplished teacher avoids the obvious correction of a student that could trigger them to avoid making any kind of contribution in the future. This enables us to turn discussion errors into opportunities to learn and grow.

Not every discussion needs to be shared with the entire class. Some discussions work better in smaller groups where students have more opportunities to participate and collaborate with each other. This type of cooperative learning “aids students as they engage in structured conversations, which provide opportunities for students to extend their comprehension of texts” (Strom, 2014, p. 108). Another benefit of smaller discussion groups can even come from irrelevant discussions. Bond (2001) discovered that students developed connections to their own lives through those types of discussions (p. 582). Several elements are keys to this cooperative grouping strategy including forming interdependent teams, setting group goals, and ensuring individual accountability (Slavin, 2014). Slavin points out that individual accountability - avoiding the “free rider” - involves making “sure the team goal requires the learning and participation of all team members” (p. 24). Discussion questions prepared by the teacher ahead of time can help students stay focused on the team goal. In addition, one strategy I employ is the

use of random calling on students, so that when groups report out, every student must be prepared with an answer they can justify. All students are then held accountable for their learning, not just the outspoken ones.

Conclusion

Effective classroom discussion begins with good questions. It's not enough to stand in front of the classroom and ask students, "So, what do you think?". A couple of students who always contribute will do so, but I likely already know what they think and will quickly find out they have mastered the material. It is the other students, the ones who are not willing to raise their hands first, who need to demonstrate their thinking to me. This year I have been trying to have between five and six questions prepared ahead of time for students to work with. Typically I have students work in pairs or groups of four to answer questions, and then we come together as a class to discuss their answers. I call on students randomly using decks of cards with their names on them, so I can check students' understanding evenly throughout discussions, but even then not all students get a chance to contribute. However, at least they have contributed in the pair or group work.

While I see the benefits of whole-group discussion, I'm starting to see more benefits in students working in smaller groups. Students sit in paired desks already, and they can easily turn their desks around to work in groups of four. I've also rearranged desks to have them sit in groups of five or six, and occasionally we employ cafe conversations in which students discuss single questions then move to a different group to discuss a different question. This method allows students to have more meaningful discussions with different classmates. My challenge

now is to ensure that all members of the group are contributing. When we have cafe conversations, I roam around the room and sit in on the conversations. I keep a class roster and check off students' names as I hear them talking, but this method is not foolproof; some students may not be contributing in the minute or so that I'm sitting at their group.

Upon rewatching my video clip submitted for this class, I realize that while I was looking for a debriefing of an assignment completed the previous day, there were elements of small group work that I could have incorporated before bringing the learning to the entire class. I had several students willing to contribute, but they are also the students who speak up the most. Out of a class of 30, more than 20 did not speak up. I cannot say I know whether or not they could identify the arguments presented in the speeches they watched. Reflecting on the larger issue of facilitating classroom discussions can help me with that issue in the future.

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