

Improving Classroom Discussion and Discourse

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“SPEED DATING”

Purpose: To generate ideas on focused topics; to practice effective dialogue; to ensure every one in a group participates/talks in a “low stakes” way.

Instructional Process:

1. Decide what your aims are and develop appropriate questions/prompts.
2. Count off by twos...form two concentric circles in middle of room. If you have an odd number of participants, the leader/facilitator may join one of the circles, or designate one rotation place as “roving listener/note taker.”
3. Face and identify a partner...individual in inner circle facing another in outer circle.
4. Explain: You will have a chance to have a conversation on a given topic. Remind them of conversation norms, e.g., good conversationalists do the following:
 - introductions (if participants don't know one another)
 - talking AND listening
 - querying each other
 - you can't finish the conversation in the amount of time given!
 - look for new insights and ideas.
5. Question will be given...I'll say “start” and you talk until I say “stop.”
 - First question. Let conversation go 3-5 minutes.
6. Rotate circles, e.g., inner goes clockwise or outer goes counter-clockwise. Can mix up rotations so inner and outer have turns moving, but each rotation should result in a new partner.
7. Debrief, as needed, e.g., re: content generated, re: dialogue processes, etc

ACTIVITY: OPINION CONTINUUM

This activity can be found in any number of “values clarification” books. It is intended to have students physically move to a specific part of the room to show their position on controversial topics.

1. Identify issues of controversy in your curriculum and/or lesson. These might be questions of science and ethics, actions of characters in literature, or questions of civic or historical controversy. Frame each as a clear, one sentence statement with which students will be asked to agree or disagree.
2. In advance, post one sign stating “STRONGLY AGREE” and one sign stating “STRONGLY DISAGREE” on opposite walls or corners of the room.
3. Explain to the class that you will read a controversial statement. They are to think about their position on that statement and then locate themselves along a continuum from one side or corner of the room to the other; from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Explain that relative location is important; i.e. that being either farther to the extreme or closer to the midpoint is a physical way of stating the degree to which they think/feel about the issue.
4. Once located, direct students to begin explaining to those standing near them why they placed themselves as they did. Students should explain their reasoning and evidence for their location AND they should be “re-calibrating” with each other. This is the process of listening to other students near them and determining whether they really are more or less extreme in their thoughts/feelings on the topic. Encourage students to move as necessary to accurately represent the continuum of opinion in the classroom.
5. Move to a large group discussion where students explain to the class the reasons for their position. This can take the form of a sharing of reasons that are posted on the board or more of a debate where students are encouraged to try and compel their classmates to move toward their location. In either case, moderate in such a way that students are required to back up opinions with information and students listen carefully to each other.
6. Conclude the discussion by asking students on both sides of the issue to identify what they believe to be the strongest arguments/reasons they heard from the OPPOSING side. Either direct students to return to their seats or provide a new controversial statement and continue the process.

This is a good activity to use at the beginning of a unit where you want to sample student opinions and knowledge on topics you will be covering. It also can be a good get acquainted activity at the start of the term. In that situation, statements can be a mix of general opinion questions and statements drawn from future course content.

CAROUSEL BRAINSTORMING

Purpose: Carousel Brainstorming takes its name from the old time merry-go-rounds where riders went round and round in circles. In this classroom strategy, small groups travel together to various stations to brainstorm ideas related to identified topics. The purpose is to foster a generative discussion where a range of ideas/perspectives are laid out.

In a carousel brainstorming activity, some number of stations are set up with similar tasks. Small groups spend a finite amount of time adding to the brainstorm lists. The first group has a clean slate and then as groups move to a next station their job is to review what is already there and add to it or refine it. When done, all students have contributed to every list and reviewed the thinking of their peers who worked on the list before them.

Instructional Process:

1. Identify your content. This activity requires at least 3-4 related ideas, topics, or concepts. It might be the 3 branches of the federal government or 5 terms related to biology or 4 similar math problems. Each station should have a similar type of content and the content should lend itself to brainstorming which is the creative generation of ideas and solutions.
2. Set up the room. Create the individual stations with poster paper that either already has the topics on them or are accompanied by a clear set of directions. Place a different color marker at each station.
3. Create the correct number of small groups and review how students should work together in groups. Reviewing, reinforcing and, as needed, re-teaching these norms and expectations helps make the group process more successful. Reviewing the rules of brainstorming is also useful.
4. Assign one group to each station. Explain that they will BOTH use the marker at their first station AND carry it with them. This allows you to know which group contributed which ideas on the brainstorming sheets. When ready, tell groups to start their work. Depending on the size of the tasks, groups should be at a station for no more than 5 minutes; and frequently more like 3 minutes, or diminishing time as they move through the carousel. You want them to generate ideas, but not to exhaust the subject before other groups get there!
5. Conduct the "carousel" by rotating groups to the next station in an organized manner such as clockwise around the room until each group has been to every station. In subsequent rounds students should be reminded that they are to first carefully review what is already written and then add to and refine the existing ideas.
6. Conclude the actual carousel by having groups finish at their original station. This allows the group to read what was added to their original thinking.
7. From here, the content can be debriefed in large group as determined by the teacher.

THE LAST WORD

The Last Word

This protocol allows everyone to discuss a significant aspect of a text.

Materials: Index Cards
A text

1. Write a significant quote from the text on one side of the index card.
2. The quote should resonate with the reader, perhaps stating an idea that the reader agrees with or strongly disagrees with.
3. One person at a time reads the quote and points to where in the text this quote can be found. The person does not explain its significance.
4. The rest of the group discusses this quote.
5. The first person reads the back of the card or explains the significance of the quote. In other words, this person gets *the last word*.

Variation:

If the group is large or time is short, in a “whip around” structure have each person read the quote on the card even if the quote has previously been read. Do not have the group respond to any of the quotes.

The facilitator’s task is to listen for patterns or repeated quotes in order to decide which quotes should be clumped together for the group discussion (step 4). For those quotes that were repeated or that are very similar, only one person should restate the quote before the group discusses it. However, at step 5, everyone who started that quote gets to have “the last word.”

