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Christopher E. Garrett
Nevada State College

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Three Key Principles for Improving Discussion-Based Learning in College Classrooms

*Christopher E. Garrett, Ph.D.
Nevada State College*

Abstract

Discussion-Based Learning (DBL) can be an effective pedagogical tool for student engagement and developing higher-order thinking skills. However, DBL can be a challenging endeavor for college teachers for various reasons. The purposes of this article are to identify those challenges, present three key principles, and share several practical ideas that will help improve discussions in college classrooms.

Keywords: discussion, active learning, student engagement, teaching methods, discussion-based learning

Introduction

Discussion-based learning can be an effective pedagogical tool for promoting student engagement, developing higher-order thinking skills, and improving learning outcomes (Astin, 1985; Bodensteiner, 2012; Garrett, 2011; Howard, 2015; Johnson, Johnson, and Smith, 1991; Murray and Lang, 1997). Discussion can be defined as “a form of group interaction, people talking back-and-forth with one another” about a particular issue, and proposals offered (Dillon, 1994, p. 7). Those proposals could include various understandings, facts, suggestions, opinions, perspectives, and experiences. Discussion-based learning (DBL)¹ is a form of active learning, a constructivist teaching method, and an exchange of diverse “interpretations, explanations, approaches to a problem, or possible solutions, followed by an evaluation” (Herman & Nilson, 2018, p. 1). In its purest form, DBL is not recitation. As Dillon (1994) explains, “People do not discuss a topic that they already know and understand”; instead, they

¹ This article will use “Discussion-Based Learning” (DBL) as a term for a teaching methodology that engages learners interacting with the instructor/facilitator and/or other learners in various forms of discussion.

discuss issues that they have questions about and “join with others to form an answer” (p. 8). There are numerous reasons for utilizing DBL, including providing opportunities for students to explore diverse perspectives, investigate assumptions, learn the habits of democratic discourse, and experience collaborative learning (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999). Additional benefits include deep, conceptual understanding, integration of ideas, motivation to learn, and retention of the material (Herman & Nilson, 2018).

However, DBL is a challenging endeavor because it is “unpredictable in process,” and teachers who utilize DBL must learn “the art of managing spontaneity” (Dillon, 1994, p. 105; Christensen, 1992, p. 15). Unfortunately, most teachers do not receive training on leading discussions, and coaching is typically not offered (Dillon, 1994). Some discussions fail because the topic is not ripe enough for fruitful discussion, the pacing is too slow, or the students may lack enthusiasm for the subject (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999). Another major challenge for many teachers is how to handle dominant talkers (Howard, 2015). In contrast, many students do not see engagement in the classroom as their responsibility; they may even believe that it is unfair to expect them to interact. This mindset derives from classroom norms, where students often assume that they should be passive learners and expect to be lectured to in a traditional classroom. This leads to the norm of civil attention or putting on the appearance of paying attention (Howard, 2015). What can teachers do to prevent or remedy these problems with leading discussions in college classrooms? Many of the challenges associated with DBL can be resolved through the implementation of three key pedagogical principles: creating an inclusive learning environment, preparing students for discussions, and practicing essential discussion skills.

Key Principle #1: Students need an inclusive, hospitable learning environment.

Research has established that the learning environment (or course climate) impacts both motivation and learning (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Various factors can influence course climate, including faculty-student interaction, stereotyping, student demographics, and student-student interaction (Ambrose et al., 2010, p. 170). To lead effective discussions, a teacher needs to create an inclusive learning environment where students feel safe and are not intimidated. Intentionally designing an environment where students feel a sense of community, a safe space where they can take risks, will foster engaging discussions (Strean, 2018). Most students struggle to transition into college because they do not feel a sense of belonging in a college classroom. Students of less privileged and more marginal backgrounds

face even greater challenges as they enter what they perceive to be an unwelcoming or even hostile environment (Carter et al., 2006; Kalsner and Pistole, 2003).

One way for a teacher to increase a sense of belonging in the classroom is to know the names of students and their interests (Center for Teaching and Learning, 1997). The following activity, “Introduce Your Neighbor,” can help teachers memorize students’ names on the first day of class. First, using the class roster, take attendance by calling the name of each student. In the process of doing so, create a seating chart, and identify where each student is sitting. After calling attendance, invite each student to pair up with a neighbor. Each student will interview their neighbor, asking questions such as their name, where they are from, their hobbies, something unusual about them, exotic places they have traveled, etc. After about five minutes of interviewing, each student will then introduce their neighbor to the class.² As each student is introduced, make additional notes on the seating chart about each student (e.g., Sydney plays tennis; Susan loves poetry and prefers to be called “Susie”; Malik recently returned from a trip to Paris).³ Because one of my goals on Day One is to memorize each student’s name I announce that goal to the class, and at the end of the “Introduce Your Neighbor” activity, I point to each student and call them by their first name. Instructors who are willing to invest time and effort in learning students’ names and interests during the first class meeting convey a clear message that they care about each student and want to create an inclusive learning environment and establish a community of learners.

Another way to build and strengthen community is to engage students periodically in icebreakers throughout the semester. These icebreaker activities are an investment of time but a significant way for students to get to know each other. Simple icebreakers can be custom-designed or found online and can be used at the beginning of class or as a halftime activity. One icebreaker is “Student Bingo.” First, review the student interview notes (collected from the “Introduce Your Neighbor” activity described above), find interesting snippets about each student, and place that information on a bingo-like card (without identifying that student’s name). In the icebreaker activity, students must discover which peer’s name belongs in each square and confirm it with that student; if they are correct, then the student signs the bingo square that contains information about them. The first student to get a bingo yells it out. However, students typically have so much fun doing this activity that an instructor may want to allow for several bingos before ending the activity.

² Make sure to emphasize that each student needs to teach the class the name by which they want to be known in the class (e.g., Elizabeth may prefer being called “Liz”).

³ I recommend that you ask students to take interview notes that you will collect at the end of this activity. These student interview notes will help you in learning more about the unique interests and experiences of your students.

Key Principle #2: Students need to prepare for discussion.

It is essential to allow students adequate time to prepare for engaging in discussion (Howard, 2015). A teacher who arrives for a class session with a list of questions to pose to the class has an unfair advantage: that teacher already knows the questions that they plan on asking, but the students do not. Consequently, when that instructor poses a question to the class and expects not only immediate but also quality responses invariably, such expectations will likely be shattered. A simple remedy to this problem is to provide students before class with the list of questions that you plan to pose for discussion.

Another method to aid students in preparing for discussion is to invite them to write response papers where the instructor provides a question for them to consider about an assigned reading or topic, and each student is expected to write a page or two and bring their response paper to class (either a hard copy or an electronic version). At the beginning of the class session, the instructor may choose to have several students read their response papers aloud to the whole class or share in small groups or with a partner. Another exercise can be utilized as a way to jump-start discussion by inviting students to respond or ask questions about a particular response paper. If response papers are utilized in these ways regularly, they essentially serve as “tickets” to class, and students know that they are expected to come to class prepared.

An additional strategy to prepare students for discussion is to incorporate informal writing as a regular practice. As part of their course materials, each student will need a composition book or journal. Begin by providing a question prompt for the students to respond to and allow them about ten minutes to write in their journals. During this writing time, the instructor may opt to play quiet instrumental music. Make sure to announce to the class that they may be asked to share what they have written with their peers. After the informal writing exercise concludes, pose the question prompt for either whole-group or small-group discussion. This practice will help prepare more students to engage in meaningful discussions, and according to research studies conducted, combining writing and peer discussion improves student learning (Shewmaker, 2018; Linton et al., 2014).

Key Principle #3: Teachers and students need to practice three skills essential for effective DBL.

For effective discussions, three foundational skills need to be practiced and developed not only by teachers but also by students: questioning, listening, and responding.

Questioning

There are forms of questioning that promote recitation and those that foster discussion. The dominant form of classroom talk is recitation, which also been dubbed by researchers as IRE: Initiate, Response, Evaluate (Walsh, 2015). Recitation is a type of formative assessment, a way to check for understanding. In contrast, questioning for discussion encourages a deeper understanding of concepts and provides opportunities for students to make connections. College teachers should be transparent about course objectives so that students know the learning goals and ensure that the types of questions asked are congruent with those objectives. For example, if a course is intended to focus on developing a student's ability to apply knowledge, then the instructor should intentionally and strategically design questions that promote that level of cognition. Ideally, both teachers and students should be familiar with Bloom's Taxonomy and practice awareness of the types of questions that are being posed in class discussions (Kratwohl, 2002).⁴

Listening

Listening is essential for teachers in a DBL classroom because they must be able to evaluate the understanding of students, help them make connections, and ensure continuity of the discussion. Thus listening means much more than merely being quiet and allowing students to talk; it involves attempting to understand the speaker's point of view and assessing what is being expressed. One of the biggest obstacles to listening effectively is that an instructor can be preoccupied with thinking about what they should say next. Instructors must practice being mindfully present and listening attentively; this not only shows respect to their students but affirms to them that their contributions are valuable.

Likewise, students can be distracted during discussion, which can impair their abilities to listen due to media distractions or concerns about a myriad of social and personal issues. Instructors should establish expectations and guidelines that will allow for respectful civility and attentiveness in the DBL classroom. Furthermore, Brookfield & Preskill (1999) suggest providing students with opportunities to practice listening skills such as the paired listening activity and having a designated listener. In the paired listening activity, two students take turns being speaker and listener. While one student speaks for up to five minutes about a topic they are passionate about (e.g., describing a favorite vacation or movie), the other student practices active listening by demonstrating attentiveness, occasionally asking questions for clarification and repeating key phrases to show their understanding. Another exercise is to assign a student to be the designated listener during a group discussion. Their role is to focus on understanding the views shared by discussants, taking notes, paying attention to the body

⁴ See Appendix for list of sample question stems associated with the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy.

language of participants, raising questions as needed, but not sharing their ideas. At the end of the discussion, they “summarize the main ideas expressed and comment on the participation levels” of their peers (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999, p. 96).

Responding

Choosing how to respond to student contributions during discussion is an equally important but challenging skill. If an instructor is not careful, their response can inhibit student engagement and/or stifle the flow of the discussion. There are at least sixteen techniques for responding to student contributions in classrooms: affirm, evaluate, correct, express wonderment, share gratitude, restate, be silent, use non-verbal cues, explore, extend, challenge, repeat the question, raise a new question, invite, summarize, or make a statement. Rather than elaborate on that list (which may seem extraordinarily daunting), we shall attempt to simplify this significant but elusive skill of responding. Toward that end, instructors should carefully consider Christensen’s (1992) “decision tree” with two branches for discussion teaching: “either continue the teacher-to-student discourse or shift to a student-to-student mode” (p. 167). If the discussion teacher chooses to continue the teacher-to-student discourse, then there are three options: explore, extend, or challenge. Conversely, a teacher can opt to let go of the discussion and encourage student-to-student interaction by restating the question, raising a related question, or directly inviting two students to share their contrasting points of view.

When leading discussions, you should avoid answering your own questions. If you have formulated a well-designed question, be patient, and give students adequate time to process and consider how they will respond. Both teachers and students need to appreciate and utilize periods of silence. By utilizing methods such as those outlined above in Principle #2, students should be prepared and ready to engage in responding to questions that they have had adequate time to consider.

When facilitating discussions, a teacher must also learn how to respond to and manage those students who are dominant talkers, and several strategies can be employed. For example, Howard (2015) suggests slowing down the dominant talkers by limiting those who can respond by using verbal cues such as: “Those sitting in the front of the room have had a lot to say. What about those of you sitting in the back half of the room?” Or, “We’ve had some really great input so far, but I want to hear from someone who hasn’t spoken up yet” (p. 69).

Conclusion

Those instructors who utilize DBL may encounter various challenges, including engaging students in discussion, encouraging high-order levels of thinking (e.g., analysis, evaluation, and creation), and managing dominant talkers. To overcome those challenges, DBL teachers must be willing to invest time and effort in creating safe, inclusive learning environments that will promote and encourage student engagement and a sense of belonging. This can be accomplished by learning students' names and interests and connecting students through using icebreaker activities. Also, instructors should prepare students for DBL, and students must also recognize their responsibility to prepare for quality discussions. Sharing the list of discussion questions before class and utilizing response papers or informal writing will allow students time to process their ideas and formulate responses that can be shared in class discussions. Finally, both teachers and students need to practice and develop the essential skills needed for effective discussions, including questioning, listening, and responding.

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Appendix

Questions for Higher Order Thinking Based on Revised Bloom's Taxonomy

Level 1: Remembering

- How would you define _____?
- List the _____ in order.
- Who were _____?

Level 2: Understanding

- How would you differentiate between _____ and _____?
- What is the main idea of _____?
- Why did _____?

Level 3: Applying

- Why does _____ work?
- How would you change _____?
- How would you develop a set of instructions about _____?

Level 4: Analyzing

- How does this element contribute to the whole?
- What is the significance of this section?
- How would _____ see this?

Level 5: Evaluating

- What is your opinion about _____? What evidence supports your opinion?
- How would you improve this?
- Can you propose an alternative _____?
- Which argument or approach is stronger?

Level 6: Creating

- How can you create a model and use it to teach this information to others?
- What experiment can you make to demonstrate or test this information?
- How can this information be told in the form of a story or poem?

Source: Based on Revised Bloom's Taxonomy and adapted from "Higher Order Thinking: Bloom's Taxonomy," The Learning Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <https://learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/higher-order-thinking/>.