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Developing Discussion Skills for Cooperative Learning Tasks

Kirsten Schaetzel

Introduction

Today, educational institutions all over the world are being criticized because they do not produce students who can think in the way required in many jobs. What characterizes this way of thinking? Students, and potential employees, need to be able to examine ideas logically, socially, emotionally; to think of new ideas and explore them; to create alternative possibilities when problem-solving and to think in “webs” rather than straight lines—to see that answers to a question can be varied and legitimate possibilities at the same time. The ability to think in these ways has been shown to develop through cooperative and participatory learning. According to Kim, Parks and Beckerman (1996), “Well-designed participatory learning activities allow students to think critically, to improve their communication skills, and to implement action projects” (p. 171).

In addition to this, “numerous research studies ... have revealed that students completing cooperative learning group tasks tend to have higher academic test scores, higher self-esteem, greater numbers of positive social skills, fewer stereotypes of individuals of other races or ethnic groups, and greater comprehension of the content and skills they are studying” (Johnson, Johnson and Holubec, 1993; Slavin, 1991; Stahl and VanSickle, 1992; as quoted in Stahl, 2003, p. 1). Thus, cooperative learning tasks, in which learners actively participate in building a body of knowledge, enhance their development as learners and also as human beings.

However, some researchers have found that when students first embark on cooperative, participatory learning, they may not have the necessary skills. According to Lipman (1991), "the cognitive skills enquiry, reasoning, information organizing and translation are all seen within the context of dialogue or constructing meaning" (as quoted in McGrath, 2003, p. 613). Many students do not know how to engage in dialogue and discussion of a topic. Kim, Parks and Beckermann (1996) found that "some small group discussion facilitators were unclear about what they were expected to do" (p. 175). For some students, the skills of discussion and dialogue are not skills that they use competently and confidently.

This article examines the teaching of discussion skills so that students can more fully participate in cooperative learning tasks. Five areas crucial to teaching discussion skills are delineated: (1) factors which discourage the development of discussion skills; (2) creating a classroom climate for discussion; (3) guiding principles for deciding what to discuss; (4) ways to prepare students for discussion; and (5) monitoring discussion and giving feedback. If teachers can help students develop the discussion skills they need, then students will be able to have more meaningful and fulfilling cooperative learning experiences.

Factors which Discourage the Development of Discussion Skills

There are many reasons why students do not develop good discussion skills in classrooms today. A major problem is that when an educational system depends on "right" answers to all its questions, linear thinking results. Linear thinking is defined as "to continue to look at something from one point of view" (Arnold Publishing, 2000). These linear patterns of thought are caused by many factors and they exist in all societies of the world. Sometimes they are good, especially when a specific answer is needed; for example, when patients go to the doctor and tell him/her that they have a temperature of 37.8°C. However, too much linear thought can inhibit the ability to think creatively or critically or to offer alternative solutions to problems. It is in response to a predominance of linear thought that governments and business leaders are calling for more creative, analytical graduates. This is being talked about much in the press in Singapore, where in January of this year the front page headline in the *Straits Times* newspaper was: "Pre-school plan puts play on top. Never mind neat handwriting;

switch to activity-based learning promises to turn out confident children who speak up". One sentence from the article reads, "Children will be encouraged to ask questions and talk to their classmates". The fact that this is a front page news article shows just how pervasive the problem of linear thinking has become and what one possible solution to the problem is.

The Chinese education system, which has been very influential in all of Asia's classrooms, has two significant characteristics which seem to contribute to "linear thinking". The first characteristic is the hierarchical nature of society in Confucian thought. Reagan (2000) in his book, *Non-Western Educational Traditions*, writes:

... Confucian moral thought is grounded in the concept of the five basic human relationships: ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, and between friends. Each of these relationships is hierarchical... However, it is important to understand that each of these relationships, as envisaged by Confucius, was to be one of mutual responsibility. ... This reciprocity, although very much affecting both parties in the relationship was nonetheless in no way intended to be one of equality. (p. 107)

The second characteristic of the Chinese education system influencing classrooms today is the heritage of the imperial examination system. This examination system began in the Han period in 206 BC and was abolished in 1905 AD; it lasted over two thousand years and China has only been without it for a little over one hundred years. It was, according to Reagan, "a highly effective, meritocratic means of providing a reasonably fair and objective means by which officials could be chosen" (p. 113). It consisted of three levels of examinations, district, provincial and metropolitan, and doing well on these examinations guaranteed a good place in the civil service. For many years, it ensured that the empire would have the best possible civil servants and, in theory, it allowed civil servants to be chosen by objective standards from all walks of life and all levels of society.

These two aspects of Chinese education have contributed to the teacher-student hierarchical relationship and the "there is always a right answer" mentality. These two aspects impede creative and critical thinking and discourage discussion in the classroom. Lest we think that these two

aspects of education are characteristic of Chinese education alone, consider the following from the United States:

Some students' need for security leads to a further, equally flawed assumption: every question has but one correct answer, and the teacher knows what it is. A study undertaken some years ago by William Perry at Harvard College suggests that most entering freshmen subscribed to this comforting belief, confirmed by the multiple-choice examinations most of them had encountered in high school and on their SATs. (Wilkinson and Dubrow, 1991, p. 250)

Thus, the problem of always looking for one "right" answer needs to be addressed by many educational systems the world over.

How do these problems, the teacher–student hierarchy and the "right" answer mindset, exhibit themselves in classrooms today? In the following sights with which we are all too familiar: quiet students, too afraid to speak; students clamouring for the "right" answer; and students who cannot voice simple opinions.

Classroom Climate

In order to change these students into active participants and discussers, we must first change the classroom climate in which they study. Scholars and researchers examining discussion all feel that a discussion cannot take place unless the classroom climate is right for it (Bateman, 1990; Christensen, 1991; Palmer, 1993; Shaw, 1992). Jin and Cortazzi (1998) document the teacher-centredness of classrooms through their research in China and the UK. However, the climate which discussion proponents espouse will not occur in a teacher-centred classroom. A climate in which students feel free to discuss issues, problems, solutions and to examine different and divergent points of view has the following characteristics:

1. It is an "open" classroom—open, firstly, in that students are free to say what they think about something without fear of disdain, embarrassment or becoming an object of ridicule. Open, secondly, in that students are free to change their opinions and change their minds.
2. It is a "supportive" classroom—supportive in that one of the goals of the teacher and the students is to help speakers clarify their ideas, both to

- themselves and to others. Students and teacher work together to help each other elucidate and refine their ideas.
3. It is a hospitable place. According to Palmer (1993) "A learning space needs to be hospitable not to make learning painless but to make the painful things possible, things without which no learning can occur—things like exposing ignorance, testing tentative hypotheses, challenging false or partial information, and mutual criticism of thought" (p. 74).
 4. It is an agenda-free classroom. Teachers do not push political, religious or social agendas in the classroom and they allow students to explore ideas and put forth opinions that may be different from the teacher's personal views. If we are to get away from the "right" answer aspect of education, teachers cannot have a "right" view for the way an issue or idea is considered.

A classroom climate suitable for discussion should, thus, be open, supportive, hospitable and agenda-free. What can we do to foster such a classroom climate? First, we can give students ample opportunities to get to know each other at the beginning of the class. Instead of simply having students greet each other in pairs, interview each other and then introduce each other to the class, if we take the time to have all students interview everyone in the class, including the teacher, students feel more at ease with each other from the beginning. One class period is usually needed for students to get to know one another. One way of arranging this is to have students interview each other and fill out a grid, such as the following:

Student name	E-mail address	Contact number	What you like about	What you do not like about
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- 1.
2. etc.

This can, of course, be adapted to the environment in which it is done. Students can express what they like and do not like about the place they live, or about food, hobbies, etc. This gives the students their first opportunity to express an opinion to one of their classmates.

It is also very important for every student to meet every other student in the class and to "force" them to make eye contact with every other student in the class, because eye contact is the basis of the "posture" for

discussion and the exchange of ideas. At the beginning of a course, students are most often strangers to each other and some students may come from cultures in which they do not make eye contact readily with people they do not know. According to Ritts and Stein (2002), "Eye contact, an important channel of interpersonal communication, helps regulate the flow of communication" (p. 1). This grid-filling exercise gives all students the opportunity to make eye contact and talk to each other, and it gives the teacher the opportunity to talk to all the students individually. Though this exercise usually takes a full class to complete, the classes in which it is done have a much better environment for discussion.

In addition to this get-to-know-you exercise, Wilhelm (1999) suggests in her article "Collaborative *Dos* and *Don'ts*" that teachers "throw a class party at the beginning of the term rather than at the end, as is customary" (p. 15). This is another way of helping students to get to know one another earlier rather than later and it enables students to feel at ease with each other, thereby creating a good classroom climate for discussion.

Another means of creating a good classroom climate is to overtly let students know that the teacher values different opinions and ideas about topics. One way this can be done is by having students discuss slogans such as the following: "Everyone is entitled to his/her opinion." "We agree to disagree." and "If two people agreed on everything, one of them isn't necessary."

Also, teachers can credit students for their contributions to discussions, as Wilkinson and Dubrow (1991) suggest: "Referring to 'John's theory' or 'Mary's important observation' later in a conversation shows that we [teachers] remember and value their efforts" (p. 252).

Another suggestion for creating a good, open, supportive climate for discussion is to set boundaries, or rules, for students just learning the skills of discussion. These boundaries should focus on what are appropriate and inappropriate ways to react to others' ideas, and how to listen to others' ideas. If students do not naturally use English, the use of English can also be a rule for class discussion. Rules work best if they come from the students themselves. So, it is helpful to devote one lesson, early in the term, to a pair or small group discussion to focus on what class criteria are needed for a good, polite, supportive discussion.

A final suggestion for creating a good climate for discussion is that teachers need to keep their views to themselves. A good climate for discussion is one in which the teacher's views are usually not known and not stated and students are free to explore their own ideas and views without the "fear" of disagreeing with the teacher. If a student, beginning to learn the skills of discussion, feels that his/her opinion is "wrong" because it differs from the teacher's opinion, then that student will not contribute his/her own ideas. A teacher's role in a discussing class is to facilitate the learning of discussion skills; this cannot be accomplished if teachers are participants in the discussions themselves. Teachers need to be observers and provide the scaffolding students need to be analytical and creative.

Selecting Material for Discussion

There are several principles that should be followed when finding material for students to discuss. However, students should have some autonomy in deciding what to discuss. Students write better when they write about topics they know and enjoy; likewise, students learn discussion skills better when they discuss topics of importance and interest to them. However, when students are first learning discussion skills, they may not know of topics to suggest. Later, when they are at ease with each other and have developed their discussion skills to some extent, they should be able to discuss topics of importance and interest to them. So, when teacher-facilitators have to choose discussion topics, what principles should be kept in mind?

The overriding principle for selecting discussion materials is that students should learn only one skill at a time. When they are learning the skills of discussion, they should be able to concentrate on learning those skills, not learning about the topic to discuss. Therefore, teachers should bear the following principles in mind:

1. Teachers should try to ascertain which topics are of interest to students and have students discuss those topics. They should try not to discuss topics that students are not interested in and/or do not know anything about.
2. Teachers should not have students discuss societal "high-stakes" topics. That is, they should not discuss topics that students, just learning to give opinions, will have difficulty stating an opinion about. Students may be uncomfortable discussing topics such as capital punishment, freedom of

the press, gay marriages, women's rights, etc. If students at a later part of the course decide for themselves that they want to explore these topics and discuss them, then fine; but if students are trying to learn how to state opinions in "public" for the first time, then allow them to discuss topics with which they are comfortable.

3. Teachers should introduce topics about which students can easily form opinions. In light of this, short stories and novels provide good fodder for discussion. First, they provide "low-stakes" topics because discussions centre on what is in the story or novel. Students can have a good, interesting discussion about something that is "outside" themselves and their society and they can choose whether or not that is applicable to their lives. Second, as the story/novel unfolds, opinions about characters and outcomes can change and this teaches students the changing nature of opinions. Often, students are afraid to give an opinion because they feel that by stating that opinion, they are bound to it for the rest of their lives. Discussing the characters, their motivations and actions, for instance, shows students that their opinions can change; what a character does halfway through a novel may change our opinion of him/her. Third, if a short story or novel is interesting, even those students reluctant to speak will get involved in the discussion.

Preparing Students for Discussion

After the materials have been selected, the students should then be prepared for discussion. To be prepared for discussion, students should be ready to say something that will contribute to the discussion. They cannot simply be put into groups and told "Discuss topic X/this story". Ensuring that students are prepared for discussion can be done in the following ways:

1. Teachers can give assignments that allow students to think about what they will discuss in advance. When teachers are first helping students to develop their discussion skills and assign them something to read for discussion, they might give students one or two discussion questions and ask them to write one or two more. Then, support can gradually be withdrawn when students start reading articles and stories and see on their own what they want to and can discuss.
2. Teachers can assign "roles" for discussion, such as facilitator and participants, and give students responsibilities that accompany these roles. For

example, the responsibilities given to the discussion facilitator might be the following: to read the selection thoroughly and think of several discussion questions and follow-up questions to ask; to make sure that everyone in the group participates in the discussion; to listen to how group members answer questions and to ask follow-up questions to help them clarify their ideas. The responsibilities for group participants could be the following: to read the selection carefully and thoughtfully; to participate in the discussion by answering the facilitators' questions by stating their opinions and ideas; to listen to what group members say and ask them questions about what they say.

3. Teachers can give demerits for those who come unprepared. This can be done by taking note of who discusses and who does not while a discussion is observed, or by having students do a written response to a reading selection before having a discussion about it, or by giving a short true/false quiz on the reading selection prior to the discussion. It is not fair to the discussion facilitator to have participants who cannot take part in the discussion because they did not read the material or do the assignment; it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that a student who is trying his/her wings as a facilitator has group participants who can discuss the reading selection.

Monitoring Discussion and Giving Feedback

If students are learning pronunciation or grammar skills, teachers monitor their learning as they learn these skills and give them feedback as to how they are doing. Discussion skills deserve the same monitoring and feedback. Monitoring and feedback of discussion should be done by both the teacher and the students.

Teachers can monitor discussion as they listen to groups having discussions. They can give facilitators, and if time allows, participants, feedback on notecards, jotting down a facilitator's strengths and weaknesses during a discussion. Teachers can also observe discussions and give facilitators grades for their skills in fostering a good discussion.

Students can reflect on their experience as discussion facilitators. They can write short reflective pieces or journal entries and reflect on their discussions: what went well, what went poorly, what they would like to do the same way, what they would change, etc. Students can also be videotaped

as discussion facilitators and, after viewing a videotape of themselves as facilitators, they can write a reflective report on their strengths and weaknesses, and how they felt while facilitating the discussion.

Summary

In this article, five areas crucial to teaching discussion skills have been examined: (1) factors which discourage the development of discussion skills; (2) creating a classroom climate for discussion; (3) guiding principles for deciding what to discuss; (4) ways to prepare students for discussion; and (5) monitoring discussion and giving feedback. It is hoped that through consideration of these five areas, teachers will be able to help students develop discussion skills and, thus, enhance the quality of cooperative learning activities.

As Brown (2003) states, "Authentic learning requires the learner to communicate an in-depth understanding of a problem or issue rather than memorize sets of isolated facts, and it must result in achievements that have relevance beyond school" (p. 2). Good discussion skills used as part of cooperative learning give students authentic learning experiences; this both aids them in their education and also prepares them for the worlds of business, government, teaching or whatever profession they choose.

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