INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

ENGAGING AND EMPOWERING STUDENTS IN CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

As an English instructor, I use classroom discussions, both large- and small-group, to facilitate collaborative inquiry, analysis of text, and construction of knowledge. Further, I employ dialogues to model and provide a practice space for academic literacy. Through dialogues, students verbally practice skills I expect to see in their essays—the ability to listen and respond to ideas posed by peers; analyze, evaluate, and synthesize ideas; respectfully challenge ideas; and engage in inquiry. Discussions are spaces to engage in critical thinking and learn how to demonstrate critical thought.

The problem I encounter with classroom discussions is low-level student engagement. In large-class discussions, 10 students out of 30 regularly contribute; in small-group discussions, I observe reluctance to engage, minimal time on task, and awkwardness. I recognize that all students have the potential to learn in classroom discussions, even when not verbally contributing to a discussion, but it still bothers me that in these discussions only a few students actively demonstrate their skills.

To address the problem of minimal student participation and engagement in class discussions, I create a culture of respect. I expect students to engage in dialogue, and I provide scaffolded discussion exercises that focus on increasing students' abilities to engage in all discussions.

Culture of Respect in the Classroom

My syllabus includes a class agreement that outlines my expectations for respectful interactions. I include student and instructor responsibilities that name the behaviors that achieve active, respectful engagement.

Transparent Expectations and Assessment Criteria

When definitions of success are unnamed, then students who know the codes and rules for participating in a course will be successful. Students who do not already know the codes will not be.

The goal of curriculum should be to help students recognize their current level of development and, most important, establish a plan to scaffold learning. To achieve this end, I state my discussion expectations in the form of a course learning outcome and assessment criteria. This transparency lets students know exactly what I expect them to learn and be able to do.

Scaffolded Discussion Activities

I employ a variety of strategies to facilitate students' ability to engage actively in classroom discussion. Three of these strategies are fishbowl, all-class, and student-facilitated discussions. I employ these three discussion methods developmentally. Each targets the stated discussion learning outcome and criteria for class discussion, and provides guided, scaffolded practice.

Fishbowl Discussions

A fishbowl is small-group discussion held in a public venue. Participants of the discussion are observed, as if they are in a fishbowl.

In a classroom, fishbowls isolate discussions and provide instructors with opportunities to pinpoint select skills and outcomes to facilitate student achievement. The fishbowl makes the expectations for discussion transparent and provides students with formative feedback to improve and develop skills necessary to engage successfully and actively in small-group discussion.

In our first fishbowl, I separate the class into six groups of four to five students, with no more than two groups in the classroom at a time. One group will discuss while the other observes. Having one fishbowl at a time gives me the opportunity to observe each student, so I can provide students with detailed feedback on their performance and areas for growth.

Before the fishbowl begins, all students are given the discussion rubric as a reminder, and then I ask the first group to discuss its pre-selected topic in a 10-minute discussion, while the other group observes. Each person observing is asked to focus on one participant

and provide comments to the participants, based on the rubric; students evaluate the performance of their peers against the stated assessment criteria. After the 10-minute discussion is over, the group switches places, and another 10-minute discussion happens. Following this set of discussions, the next pair of groups is invited to participate in the fishbowl, and the process is repeated until all six groups have had their turns in the fishbowl.

I ask students to engage in fishbowls weekly. I play with the arrangement of the fishbowls following the first. I may ask students to repeat the sequence of the first if I think students need more direct feedback from me, or I may ask a particularly strong group to engage in a fishbowl while the entire class observes. Eventually, I will have three separate fishbowls occurring simultaneously in the classroom. Each group within the fishbowl will have another group observing and providing comments. Ultimately, I will have six fishbowl discussions occurring simultaneously without any observers.

As students become more comfortable and adept at managing their performances within a small-group discussion, I begin to draw them into large-class discussions.

All-Class Discussions

All-class discussions begin with one student who either poses a question in response to a pre-selected reading/topic or responds to a question I pose. Then the peer sitting next to the first student will respond to the idea, analyze it, evaluate it, synthesize it with another idea, respectfully challenge the idea, or ask an inquiry question. These options are written on the board to help students select their moves.

Immediately after the student comments, we pause and have a meta-level discussion about the comment. I ask students to name the skill just demonstrated, which helps to facilitate student understanding of the skills. They are provided examples of each skill to help them perform the skills later. Then we repeat the process with another student; eventually, the entire class will have a chance to practice the skills. Students have the option to "pass" and then take their turns after the rest of the class has had a chance, or they may request help from the class.

While observing each peer, I direct students to listen, decide which skill(s) the current student is demonstrating, and consider the possible ways the student could have responded, based on the previous comment. These observations and ideas are documented in writing journals.

Once students are comfortable with this technique, students who want to respond next will raise their hands, rather than just moving to the next person. I will select the next student based on the order hands were raised. I give priority to students who have not had a turn and who have direct responses to comments that have been made. We will practice this process one to two weeks longer, and then I will introduce student-facilitated discussions.

Student-Facilitated Discussions

In student-facilitated discussions, I pose a question or topic and call on a student. Then after the student comments, I direct him to call on the next speaker.

Results

After practicing fishbowl, all-class, and student-facilitated discussions, all students are able to engage in small-group and large-class discussions. They are interested, take responsibility for their own learning, and demonstrate their acquisition of discussion skills. Scaffolding, by using these three discussion methods, makes the expectations for the course more transparent and provides all students with a chance to learn and achieve success.

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