Reminders for improving classroom discussion

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Reminders for Improving Classroom Discussion

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Use short, ungraded writing to deepen thinking (and to let people prepare before speaking up):
• Have students write for five minutes, then have them read their writing aloud, or list their main ideas on the board.
• For homework, have students write the questions they have about the reading.
  o “What are you wondering about? What does this make you think of?”
• Use helpers to free yourself up to notice more discussion dynamics.
  o Have a volunteer note questions on the board or flip chart (number them for reference).
• Model the life attitude of vulnerably asking questions by wondering aloud, not knowing.
  o Put on the board or in a PowerPoint document a question for which you don’t have the answer.

Slow the flow, probe deeper:
• Use groups and assign each a different question, problem, or section of reading to report on.
• Probe for more meaning by 1) extending wait time,* 2) repeating the question, and 3) asking for more:
  o “What did you say, Melanie? Hmm, interesting—why do you think that?”
  o “Good. Can you say what your reasoning is?”
• Ask people to “say back” the opposing view to the other’s satisfaction before they disagree.
• Transfer responsibility away from you to class:
  o “Mmm—hmm. What is John getting at?”
  o “If you can’t hear someone, what can you do?”
  o “Others, what does that mean to you?”

*FYI: Most teachers wait less than one second after asking a question. Increasing the wait to three to five seconds yields more and fuller responses, as well as more spontaneous speaking up, use of evidence, and student questions.

Balance students’ voices:
• “Others we’ve heard from less?”
• “If it’s already been said, how would you say it?”
• “Whose opinion on this topic would you like to hear?”
• Regularly remind students: “No question is stupid.” (Say it so much that you as teacher sound stupid.)

Track themes to bring discussion back on track or reframe it:
• Nudge a group to move on: “Why don’t we look at the fourth question you put on the board now?”
• Prompt for links: “Wait, what was the connection between this and Jack’s question?”
• Use evidence to support or challenge ideas: “Do these lines answer Kanisha’s question?”
• Offer your own dawning discoveries to encourage reframing:
  o “Oh, I just realized! Maybe Hector is the real hero of the poem.”
  o “What if we solved the problem this way?”

Comment explicitly on group dynamics:
• “Please, folks, I can’t hear her.” “Let her finish.” “One at a time.”
• “How could we make this discussion better?”
• “What can we do to encourage those reluctant to contribute to share their thoughts?”
• At midterm, email individuals, “I’d really like to hear from you more in class.

As your writing shows, others could gain from the greater diversity you’d bring. Participation counts too . . .”

Summarize what was learned (while valuing uncertainty, depending on the content):
• “Did you learn anything, or are you left thinking about anything?”
• “What struck you?” “What do you want to remember?”
• In general, use open questions (“what” and “why”) over closed questions (“Is this clear?” or “Does that make sense?”) to give practice at putting complex ideas into language.
• At end of class, give a “minute paper” or ask for the “muddiest point” and begin the next discussion by reviewing what students wrote about the previous one.

Further Reading

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