

Information Sheet. Promoting Discussion

Organising a discussion

Discussion is particularly useful as a way of exploring conceptually demanding areas before a teacher brings in definitions, formulae, etc. Definitions do not make sense until the concepts are understood.¹

What does 'discussion' mean in the classroom?

Discussion in the classroom can take many different forms. However, it does not mean asking a big, general question and leaving learners to debate among themselves. On the contrary, discussion-based activities are highly structured, and have a very specific focus that relates to the learning you want to emerge from your lesson.

“ *Structure is important. A lot of teachers shy away from discussion because it can get shapeless and lose direction easily. If you're going to have productive discussion you need to have a clear idea what you want to get out of it.* ”

Professor Robin Millar,
University of York

'Discussion activities' will often be just 5-10 minutes long, and might require learners to:

- work in pairs or small groups;
- bring together existing knowledge and apply it in a new way;
- jointly solve problems, try to explain phenomena or work out answers to questions;
- test their knowledge, and monitor each other's responses.

Group work is excellent for encouraging discussion between learners. They enjoy it and evidence points to its effectiveness in promoting learning. There may be a formal structure to the discussion - it could even be a debate - or it could be as informal as a short question for pairs of learners to wordstorm.

Whether you're planning a formal or informal discussion, there are a number of things to consider. For example, you will need to plan:

- how you will introduce the activity, so that learners understand the desired learning outcomes;
- how you will ensure that all learners are involved, especially those who are quieter and less confident;
- how you will check that learners understand what is required before they start work;
- the size and composition of groups;
- how long the discussion will last;
- what resources you will give to each group;
- seating within each group, so that learners can face one another and you can move

¹ See chapter on 'Guided discovery' in Petty, G. *Teaching today: a practical guide*, 2004, Cheltenham, Nelson Thomas

between groups.

In more formal group work where there is discussion, it is worth considering how you will:

- assign roles to group members;
- monitor the interactions between learners and the accuracy of the learning;
- provide support if learners are having difficulty working together;
- bring the discussion to a conclusion and summarise the key points;
- share the findings of different groups.

Possible consequences

Promoting more discussion in the classroom may mean:

- raising the expectations you have of your learners;
- providing more opportunities for learners to be active and in charge of their own learning;
- rethinking your role in the classroom.

“The temptation is to give the students as much information as you can, so you tell them what they need to learn rather than allowing them to develop the skills.

The new approach has enabled me to not want to take control. Once I can address why students are making errors, then I can help them address the errors themselves.

The majority of students appreciate that what you're trying to do isn't just simply give them information but to give them information plus skills”.

Terrence Thomas,
Chemistry teacher, Barnet College

