Let The Chips Fall Where They May: An Analysis of a Discussion Strategy

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A Paper Submitted to KREX

1 November 2017

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Abstract

This article explores a discussion strategy utilized in a research-based classroom to help promote participation of all students in classroom discussion. The article will establish why the strategy was employed, how best to establish the strategy, the outcomes of the strategy's use, and finally a commentary of best practices in classroom discussions as noted from the implementation of the pedagogical strategy.

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As part of a larger study of a College Methods Professor returning to the classroom to evaluate one's Personal and Practical Theories of teaching (PPT), this study intends to evaluate how a teacher can quickly acquire the knowledge of one's students to enhance the educational experience. The author is an associate professor at a Research I institution located in the Central United States. The research setting is a medium sized high school in a rural setting with approximately 390 students in grades 7-12 and operates within a block schedule. The school is part of a progressive district that is in its first year of a one-to-one iPad initiative for all grades. In the previous year, the middle level students only had iPads. This is the first year of iPads for all grades. The school district has granted access to the professor, a certified teacher, to teach a social studies elective class on Current Issues. The enrollment of the semester long class is 18 students, all of whom are seniors.

One of the components of the author's PPT is to provide a meaningful structure in a discussion where all students get to participate in providing contributions to the conversation. In a discussion early in the semester, the author was frustrated when an open classroom discussion was dominated by 5 of the 18 students, while 9 of the students contributed virtually nothing to the discussion. The discussion occurred early in the semester and as part of understanding more of the students in this research classroom, the author chose to let the students participate in the discussion as they saw fit. While the researcher was frustrated in allowing a short discussion carry on in this way, it was necessary to establish a baseline of how the students would participate in a discussion. In doing so, it provided a means to explore in the quasi-experimental setting how the

discussion strategy in question would improve classroom discussions. In the remainder of this article, the strategy proposed will be outlined and explained. Next, the implementation of the discussion strategy will be explored. Finally, a discussion of its use and other suggested means of discussion and best practices will be explored.

In order to have students participate in a discussion in a meaningful manner, it is necessary to do the following: promote student participation, encourage meaningful contributions, and prevent the domination of discussion by a limited number of students. To do these requirements, the logistics of the classroom must be considered: grouping of students in a manageable manner, encouraging the discussion environment, and preparing students to participate in the discussion (Davis, n.d.). Once established, a teacher can then look at how best to implement a strategy to promote discussion amongst the students.

The class for the study featured 18 students who were seniors in a social studies elective class. The researcher, to promote discussion divided the students into four groups, two groups of four and two groups of five. The student's desks were moved into pods where students had space to be comfortable, yet be in a position where they can hear and see all members of the group without being near other students. The day of the discussion was after two days of research and instruction regarding terrorism in today's world.

As the logistics to setup the classroom was established, the students were given three questions to discuss in a group. These questions were open-ended and higher-ordered questions that focused on the content being explored. The two questions were:

1. What is the threat of ISIS to world stability?

2. What should the role of the United States be in battling world terrorism?

The strategy employed by the teacher is a simple accounting system for student contribution to the discussion of the questions. In each group of students, a student was selected to be the "director" of the discussion. The role of the director, much as advocated in a Kagan Cooperative Learning structure was to run the discussion and keep the group on task (Kagan, 1994). Prior to seating in the groups, the class was given instructions on the classroom screen to go to the teacher's desk and collect poker chips: 3 white, 1 yellow, and 1 red. The researcher had acquired from a local store a simple starting poker set off clearance, providing a useful pedagogical prop.

The instructions to the students for the discussion were rather simple. The "director" was to provide the question being discussed in the group and then recognize who would like to start the discussion. If the group thought a meaningful comment was made regarding the topic being discussed, they were to give a thumbs-up signal. If 3 thumbs-ups were given, a chip was to be given to the director. The students were to exhaust their white chips first, then their yellow chip (to warn them they were almost done), and finally the red chip (which was to tell them to stop talking). After their chips were all used, the student was not to contribute to the discussion. All students were to use their own chips and not share any of them with others. If a student did not receive affirmation from their fellow students, they would be encouraged to contribute again. The contributions were to be either original ideas from the discussion or a comment on a fellow student's comments.

In implementing this strategy, students almost adopted a tactical approach to contributing to the discussion. Students carefully considered their wording prior to contributing to the discussion. While it was somewhat slow at points, this should not be a concern as long as contributions of the students are progressing and are thoughtful (Haugen, 1998). In fact, there were some moments of silence in the discussion groups as students consulted their resources to check for accuracy of both their comments and the comments of others. Additionally, students that had previously dominated the baseline discussion slowed their contributions and made sure that their addition to the conversation was meaningful. Those that saw conversations as "something to win" or had previous speaking experience were less concerned about making someone else's comment be inferior and rather making a superior comment in the discussion. In short, the strategy added meaning to the contributions of each student and with the addition of the role of the director guiding the discussion, an activity that was on task, progressive, and produced superior responses from all students.

DISCUSSION

A simple review of the literature provides a meaningful understanding of what a teacher should consider in preparing for a discussion. To ensure a proper discussion, the teacher should arm students to participate in the discussion by providing a strong introduction and experience with the topic (Vanderbilt Center for Teaching, n.d.). A thoughtful understanding of your students should be conducted in order to provide a sensible grouping of students (UC-Berkely, n.d.). The teacher should take the time to create questions that promote higher order thought (Indiana University, n.d.). Finally, a structure

should be utilized that includes all students (Haugen, 1998). While not an exhaustive listing of teacher considerations to implement a strong discussion, these facets tend to be universally considered when conducting a meaningful discussion.

The strategy met the criteria identified above by providing meaningful preparation leading into the discussion. Establishing an appropriate sized group given the number of chips to be utilized and the composition of the classroom ensured productive discussions. Too often students in large group or whole class discussions can be buried by students who dominate the discussion. By setting up opportunities for students to share in small groups provides the setting for all voices to be heard. Higher order questions guided the work of the students and led to an open ended productive discussion amongst students. With simple prompts to start the discussion and allowing the discussion to be based on the comments of students based upon their resources and not rushing the conversation, higher order comments were provided. Finally, the strategy utilized a structure to promote thoughtful interactions amongst the students due to the limiting of frequency of contributions and the peer-review involved. By having students providing a set number of comments that were vetted by their group, students did not want to "waste" any contribution to the discussion, but also desired to have good comments. What was very beneficial was that the students held one another to a high standard, thus each student was contributing strong comments. Through the use of a rather inexpensive prop and assigning of a structure, the students were able to focus more intently on their contributions to a discussion.

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