

Inside Evidence

Issue 5

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Learning through dialogue

How can we enable purposeful talk in the classroom?

If we are not careful students' discussions can progress actively, but aimlessly, with students actually learning very little. So how can we avoid this happening? One study explored in great detail effective tutor's guidance for student discussion. The tutor had decided to use poetry as a basis for developing her foreign language learners' understanding of another culture. Although the discussion involved learners of French, the strategies the tutor used to structure the discussion are applicable to any context.

To begin with, the tutor gave the students copies of a poem written in French, a bilingual glossary of useful terms and a sheet with three questions for discussion. She then guided the 30-minute discussion by directing the students' attention to the most important features of the poem to deepen their response to it. She did this through questioning and asking for information, and providing feedback that was phrased positively. But she refrained from commenting directly on the poem herself. In particular, the tutor:

- made sure that all students were included
- drew out, and helped students to draw out their ideas where necessary
- helped the students link their background experience and prior knowledge to the discussion, and
- made sure that students' contributions were connected and built upon each other through challenging or extending previous contributions.

This excerpt illustrates ways the tutor structured the class discussion

Tutor: Let's look at the third question ... how did this poem make you feel?

Student 1: It makes me feel uneasy.

Tutor: Why is that?

Student 1: It's a question, so you are left to make the answer yourself ...

Student 2:...It's intriguing. You want to read it once more and understand where she came from.

Tutor: OK, so you think it makes you want to understand where she's coming from? And you [looking at another student] how do you feel?

Student 3: It ... makes me feel like I don't know that much about the Ivory Coast ... I wish she [the poet] was talking more about her memories, so we could know more ...

Tutor: So you're saying it makes you want to learn more about the Ivory Coast? It makes you want to investigate further?

Tutor: [Gesturing toward students on the other side of the room]. What do you think?

When students discussed the poem in small groups without the tutor's guidance they merely discussed surface level features of it. They tended to focus on translating the poem and associated understanding the poem with being able to translate all the words. But by carefully structuring the discussion in the ways listed above, the tutor was able to steer the students away from talking about surface level features and encourage them to reflect on the poem's meaning. Interpreting the poem together also helped them make connections between the culture of another country and their own knowledge, perspectives and experiences.

Take action

Could you:

- make a 10-15 minute recording of one of your class discussions, then afterwards note down examples where you helped students to draw out their ideas or extend those of other students etc?
- explore with a colleague the kind of questions you could use to deepen and focus discussion?

Evidence source

Scott, V. M., & Huntington, J.A. (2007) Literature, the interpretive mode and novice learners.
The Modern Language Journal 91 (1) pp.3-14