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Discussion: More than shared ignorance?

In a world where fake news permeates the internet, students bring to the classroom a variety of views on everyday issues. Often prejudice dominates their thinking and they show poor listening skills to other points of view. In these circumstances, some teachers have been reluctant to involve students in group discussion, preferring to use individual student focused teaching strategies or at best paired learning strategies.

It should be noted that group work and discussion are not the same. Group work is an important methodology which often involves students in research where individual members contribute to the whole. Gathering information and presenting it constitutes good teaching but only when students are engaged in reflection on this material. Reflection involves value judgements and some degree of controversy and only then does a discussion occur.

Given the diversity of backgrounds and points of view held by students, can a class discussion, or even group discussions, be more than shared ignorance?

What are some of the reasons for using discussion strategies?

Discussion strategies can:

- Help students to hear other points of view
- Take pressure off the teacher and place it on the students.
- Allow greater student participation
- Develop democratic practices
- Train students to articulate a point of view
- Help students to develop rational arguments
- Give students practice in listening skills
- Assist students to reflect on their own views
- Develop tolerance to differences.

As Christian teachers, providing students with real discussion opportunities opens them up to seeking the truth which is always to be found in God. The better students understand the world, its peoples and themselves, the platform for God to work in their lives and reveal himself to them. Discussion also provides Christian students with opportunities for direct input into the lives of others by expressing their understandings of God and how he works in the world and their lives.

Many of the goals above can be achieved simply by teachers using ask the person next to you, buzz groups and share an idea strategies. These methods will help keep students engaged.

However, these good goals will not simply prevail when opening up a more formal discussion. Discussions need careful teacher preparation to achieve these goals and the teacher will need to:

1. Establish a controlled classroom environment

The teacher must have control so that discipline can be easily exercised should students become boisterous in their arguments, uncooperative, disengaged or disrespectful to others. Without control students will have difficulty exercising self discipline.

2. Prepare

Any student discussion strategy requires considerable preparation by the teacher. The topic needs careful definition and parameters that students can easily understand. When the topic is given and explained, students should not respond by “Miss, what do we have to do?” The task should be clear.

Preparation may also involve resources. If a topic is outside or even marginal to the students’ experience, then the discussion will need input. Materials presented to students will need to carry a variety of viewpoints if the topic involves controversy.

3. Select the type of discussion

Teachers will need to decide if pairs, small groups, large groups or whole class discussion will be the best way to proceed. Whole class discussion can be difficult to manage if the students become disengaged, while pairs limit the input and variety of views available.

Small group discussion (about six students) is a recognised format, but the teacher can add an over lay of structure to assist the discussion by assigning roles. For example: most discussion involves reporting back, so the group needs to decide on who will record the discussion and who will report back to the whole class (not necessarily the same person). The group will need a chairperson to exercise some control over the discussion. It could also appoint a process monitor who is responsible for adhering to an agreed methodology (including discussion rules) about how the group is to progress towards its findings. This role helps the chairperson to keep the discussion on track. Roles: Chair, Recorder, Reporter and Process Manager can make a discussion more productive.

4. Control the formation of groups

The best plans and preparation of the teachers can be waylaid by inappropriate grouping. The regular use of discussion strategy can lead to random grouping as students become familiar with the methodology and other class members. However, within a class there are many little power plays, personal likes and dislikes that can affect discussion. Shy students, insecure students, bullies, selfish students can all derail a group discussion even if the teacher has set rules and employed the best methodology to circumvent such problems.

The teacher could carefully select the groups beforehand and publish them in advance. They could do this and allow some students to negotiate changes. They could also involve the students in the grouping with an overrule option to be used by the teacher to protect some students.

Good grouping can make a discussion strategy work, and the reverse bring on failure.

5. The task, the report and the follow up

Clarifying the task is fundamental to a good discussion. Not only should the topic be clear, the students should have some scaffolding to assist them and this scaffolding should link closely with any input materials. These measures will help groups to stay on task.

Students like to hear their report presented to the whole class, but rarely are interested in other reports where they were not participants in the discussion. Hence, reporting should be kept to a minimum time allocation. A teacher could set a separate task requiring each group to provide a summary of the total number reports. This will focus their listening to the reports and encourage them to take notes.

Given that the discussion was for some curriculum related purpose, what is the teachers' expectation about a follow-up activity? How will students' learning be assessed both in diagnostic terms (what did they learn and how does that inform my next lesson) and in learning outcomes achieved or contributed to? The end of the talking is not the end of the strategy.

Values continuum - One example of a discussion strategy.

A values continuum is a powerful technique if based on a statement that will split a group to include some *strongly agree* and some *strongly disagree* positions. Participants are asked to line up around the room from a *strongly agree* position in one corner through to a *strongly disagree* position in another corner or any other position on the continuum depending on the strength of their feeling. Discourage fence sitters who want to take a dead centre position.

For example: *Australia should close its off-shore detention centres*. Some participants will go to extreme positions and the remainder will take up other positions along the continuum. Next, the teacher asks for one person to volunteer why they have adopted their position on the continuum. They are listened to without comment and then the teacher asks for a volunteer from the other side of the mid-point to say why they have taken their position. Keep repeating while the discussion has energy.

Listening to other people's positions is a key factor in understanding others and may lead to show shifting of opinions. Participants can be asked at the end about what they have learnt and if they have changed any of their thinking on this topic.

Christian teachers should not be frightened to use these strategies as they open students to a variety of opinions that allow them to know more about God and how he works. They also give Christian students greater opportunities to input the discussion and they should be encouraged to participate.

Final note

Discussion is not an appropriate method for just any topic, but it does have the power to expand a students' understanding and to develop an appreciation of other viewpoints even when those views are opposed to their own. It is a powerful teaching strategy that must be used carefully and with full preparation. Following the five points above might make discussion more than shared ignorance.

John Gore

Miracle Schools in Punjab Province, Lahore, Pakistan

This school teaches children of bonded slaves (brick makers). Anglican Aid has been providing clean water tanks and sanitation for some years. The physical needs of slaves are being addressed, and the children are receiving a Gospel centred education.

Ken Silvester will be travelling to *Miracle Schools* for four weeks in January 2021 to teach Biblical Theology. If this project resonates with you and you are feeling God's gentle call to make a real difference in children's lives, you may check out Anglican Aid's project in Pakistan <https://www.waterworks.org.au/page/pakistan> You may also contact Angela direct at angelamiracle1@gmail.com

The venture is self funded. Contact Ken through the TCFNSW office to discuss options for involvement, travel, fund raising or any other inquiries.

Ken Silvester

Faithful membership

Long standing TCF member Margery, has been a member since 1955 and has just resigned as she *is preparing for the next life, tidying up as it were!* The Committee is grateful for her commitment and we honour her faithful service for 65 years. The support of all TCF members is greatly appreciated.

Dates for your Diary:

Free Afternoon Tea: Saturday 28th March 2020 at Lachlan's Café, Parramatta. See separate attached invitation.

AGM: Saturday 20th June 2020 at 1.30pm. Venue to be arranged.

Getaway: Stanwell Tops, Thursday 16th July - Saturday 18th July 2020.

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