

Characteristics of the Discussion Method

1. Experiential Learning

- We learn best when we are actively involved in the learning process.
- Using the discussion method, a student's concrete, personal experiences are followed by observation, reflection, and analysis of these experiences. This process leads to formulation of abstract concepts and generalizations, which, in turn, leads to hypotheses to be discussed and tested in future experiences.

2. Emphasis on Students

- Students' experiences serve as the basis for the discussion
- Although the teacher must have a specific goal in mind and a general framework for reaching the goal, student input determines the specific direction the discussion takes

3. Focus on Critical Thinking

- Developing critical thinking skills involves consideration of three areas: instructional design, a focus on learning by doing, and strategic teaching.

Phases to Foster Critical Thinking

- Identify the students' existing ideas
 - Could be done through a series of questions or a diagnostic test
- Focusing Phase
 - Students and the teacher clarify the students' initial ideas
- Activity or situation that challenges the students' initial ideas

- “What if...” questions are used to stimulate student thinking about the consequences of the criteria used
- Application Phase
 - Students can practice using the new material in a variety of contexts
 - At this point in the critique unit, students could view videotaped speeches, critique them, and then discuss their critiques

“**Strategic Teaching**” calls attention to the role of the teacher as a strategist, making decisions about the what, when, and how of teaching and learning

- **What** decisions involve the substance of instruction – the content, skills, and strategies
- **When** decisions involve the conditions under which it is appropriate to apply a given strategy or skills and about teaching students this information
- **How** refers to making decisions about the particular procedures needed to implement a given strategy or skills about teaching those procedures to students

The **strategic teacher**:

- Is a model and mediator
- Demonstrates how to think through a given task, how to apply the strategies, and “what to do when you don’t know what to do”
- Intercedes between the students and the learning environment to help students learn and grow
- Anticipates problems in learning and plans solutions to solve them
- Guides and coaches students through the initial phases of learning

to independent learning

4. Use of Questions

- When we vary question levels, probe, rephrase, prompt, wait for student responses, ask process questions (“How did you get that answer?”), and stress students’ understanding of meaning, we promote critical thinking

Questions according to Bloom’s Taxonomy

- **Knowledge:** Questions that require simple recall of previously learned material
- **Comprehension:** Questions that require students to restate or reorganize material in a literal manner to show that they understand the essential meaning
- **Application:** Questions that require students to use previously learned material to solve problems in new situations
- **Analysis:** Questions that require students to break an idea into its component parts for logical analysis
- **Synthesis:** Questions that require students to combine their ideas into a statement, plan, product, and so forth, that is new for them
- **Evaluation:** Questions that require students to judge something based on some criteria

Probing Questions

- *Exploratory questions* – probe facts and basic knowledge
- *Challenge questions* – examine assumptions, conclusions, and interpretations
- *Relational questions* – ask for comparisons of themes, ideas, or issues
- *Diagnostic questions* – probe motives or causes

- *Action questions* – call for a conclusion or action
- *Cause-and-effect questions* – ask for causal relationships between ideas, actions, or events
- *Extension questions* – expand the discussion
- *Hypothetical questions* – pose a change in the facts or issues
- *Priority questions* – seek to identify the most important issue
- *Summary questions* – elicit synthesis

Guidelines to help you develop and improve your questioning skills

1. Have a commitment to questions
2. Write out a sequence of “major” questions
3. Have a clear purpose
4. Phrase questions clearly
5. Know your subject matter
6. Keep all students on-task
7. Don’t answer your own questions
8. Seat students in a semicircle

Ask **probing questions** in order to...

- Initiate a discussion, change the subject, or modify the direction
- Lead a member toward a particular statement or generate a logical sequence of steps toward a conclusion
- Clarify a statement, help a member make a succinct statement, establish whether listening was accurate, or permit a member to amplify statements
- Probe for more information, generate, a more extensive response, or turn the discussion back to a member of the group

Guide the flow of the discussion by asking questions in order to...

- Suggest that the discussion might be wandering
- Encourage consideration of the personal significance of a discussion and to relate it to members' individual frames of reference
- Avoid working over the same issues without fruitful results to assess the group's position, if any
- Elicit a response when a conclusion or consensus is near, but no one is willing to state it, or to suggest that it's time to move on
- Suggest that a group is not ready to act
- Get a student to take the initiative if the group is experiencing a momentary lull
- Respond in a way that fosters the discussion process

Response Styles- How we respond to students will stifle or enhance the discussion process

- Respond to student answers positively and constructively
- Accept and develop students' feelings
- Praise rather than criticize
- Encourage
- Use active listening
- Encourage student input
- Metacommunication
- Accept student mistakes
- Use a variety of responses
- Encourage quiet students
- Discourage students who monopolize the discussion
- Provide wait time

Responses that can interfere with wait time and communicate unwanted

Beebe, S. A., & Masterson, J. T. (1986). *Communicating in small groups: Principles and practices* (pp. 77-87).). Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.
Cooper, P.J., & Simonds, C. (1995). *Communication for the Classroom Teacher*. (6th ed.).
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messages to students

- “Think!”
- Mimicry
- “Yes...but...and...though”
- “Isn’t it?” and “Right?”
- “Don’t you think that...?”