Learn About Discussions

Teacher-to-student and whole-class discussions are great ways to activate students’ prior knowledge by allowing them opportunities to orally share their ideas and discuss their opinions. The art of discussion is an important piece in the learning process. A common mistake many teachers make is to throw out a question or idea and expect most of their students to respond and discuss. It’s frustrating and a waste of time for both the teacher and students to listen to a select few students have a discussion.

To conduct successful discussions, teachers need:

- To be armed with the right types of questions and ready to respond to various answers.
- To be able to use “teachable moments” to spark student interest and keep the discussion lively.
- To use the discussion as a jumping off point for new content.
- To pose questions that directly relate to students and their prior knowledge.
- To allow the students to lead the discussion with teacher facilitation and probing.
- To accept all appropriate answers as correct and added responses by others should be encouraged.
- To permit “think time” and use think-pair-share strategies to think about answers before having students respond.

Whole Class Discussions

Using whole class discussions to tap prior knowledge can benefit all students who are participating and listening by connecting what they already know to what they are going to learn. The discussion, if engaging, can get students excited about the new content and how it relates to them. Teachers can also use the discussions as a way to direct and redirect teaching based on student response and interest.

Example Discussion:

Teacher-Whole Class Dialogue: High School

Teacher: Does anybody know what we mean when we use the term “in the trenches”?
Mark: It means like they’re really there.
Teacher: Like who’s really there?
Mark: Like someone who is where it’s down and dirty.
Teacher: Can anyone give me an example of someone who’s in the trenches?
Juana: Like a policeman who works on the street. He’s right there with the thieves and the drug dealers.
Liz: Not like some politician who says a lot of stuff but doesn’t know what it’s really like. The cop is really in the trenches.
Teacher: Do you know where the phrase “in the trenches” comes from? (No answer, so the teacher waits for a response.) Can anyone guess?
David: Was it maybe from a war?
Teacher: Good guess. Trench warfare was fought in World War I. The soldiers had to dig deep trenches and then stay in them for protection. All the fighting was done in the trenches, so that’s where the saying came from. Does anyone know anything else about World War I?

Russ: Weren’t the soldiers called doughmen?
Teacher: Close. They were called “doughboys.”
Jenn: Like the Pillsbury Doughboy.
Teacher: Uh-huh.
Jenn: Why were they called that?
Teacher: Good question. Let’s write that one down to find the answer to. What else do you know about World War I? Who fought in the war?
Luke: It was fought against Hitler.
Xavier: No, that was World War II.
Teacher: That’s a common mistake that people make about World War I. Does anyone have any idea why?
Liz: Because we fought against Germany in both wars?
Teacher: That’s true. Any other thoughts?
Micki: Was the Red Baron in World War I?
Teacher: Who was the Red Baron?
John: He was a famous fighter pilot.
Teacher: That’s right. Anything else? Does anyone know why the war started? (No responses)
How about who fought in the war?
Corey: Well, the United States and England and France.
John: And Germany.
Teacher: Any other countries?
Mark: I think that maybe I have World War I and II mixed up in my brain. Were there Jewish concentration camps in World War I? Were there Nazis? I’m not sure.
Teacher: It sounds like you all have some bits and pieces of knowledge about World War I, and some of it might be wrong. While we’re studying that war in the next unit, you’ll learn more about the War itself and also more about the role that the United States has played in foreign affairs since then.
Teacher: I want you to think about some reasons why countries go to war. In your learning logs, describe some reasons and some examples you could use to demonstrate these ideas. I will respond to them this week.
Juana: What if we don’t know of any examples?
Teacher: Not a big deal. Just make some predictions as to why countries go to war and if you don’t have examples that’s okay. You will as soon as we get further into the unit.

Student-Teacher Discussions

Individual student-to-teacher discussions are another way to tap students’ prior knowledge on a smaller scale. Setting aside time to discuss needs and interests helps students to make personal connections to content. While students are working, sitting down and discussing work one-on-one is an excellent way to make individual opinions and knowledge noticed and recognized. These discussions can be quick and informal, but they let the student know what they have to say is important. It also gives the teacher an insight into the student’s thoughts and shows how to direct further teaching of the topic.

Example Discussion: Elementary

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Teacher: How are you doing on your K-W-L chart?
David: Fine. I know a lot about weather. My mom and dad watch the Weather Channel.
Teacher: That’s great! I see you wrote that you know about tornadoes and how they are created.
David: Yeah. I know about air currents and how tornadoes happen on land and hurricanes are created over water. I learned about that from a book I have at home.
Teacher: It sounds like you know a lot about weather and like to read about it. Do you have any books about seasons?
David: Yeah. I have a great one. I can bring it in to share. It talks about all four seasons and the changes that happen in weather and with animals and all that kind of stuff.
Teacher: I think you are going to have a lot to share about seasons when we start this unit. I am so excited I can look to you as an expert. Great work, David.