

Understanding classroom discussions

By Margit Szesztay

Background

This article highlights some of the challenges and benefits of learning through group discussion. More specifically, it looks at the kinds of questions which might trigger and sustain a discussion, different types of group interaction, and the learning benefits which may be derived from them.

The main body of this article is based on a conversation among three US public school teachers and myself, a Hungarian trainer of English language teachers. In my role as visiting teacher / researcher at the School for International Training (SIT) in Vermont I became involved in the School's Teacher Knowledge Project (TKP). The Project focuses on understanding and promoting reflective professional development. It has been running seminars for practising teachers for four years now, and has been building a network of teachers committed to reflective practice. Through the many face-to-face and on-line conversations around reflective professional development seminars, and through on-going research aimed at documenting and understanding reflective practice a valuable body of teacher knowledge has accumulated. Looking at discussion transcripts from TKP seminars and stimulated recall interviews with participating teachers, I was struck by the many insightful comments and revealing classroom descriptions.

I was particularly interested in teachers' reflections on using group discussions in their classrooms. Before coming to SIT I had completed a four-year doctoral research project into the learning potential of group discussions in language teacher education contexts. Seeing what school teachers found challenging about using group discussion in their classrooms helped me to realize that the main issues related to group interaction cut across subject matter boundaries, cultural and institutional contexts, and age differences. It seemed to me that dialogue among professionals who use discussions as a teaching tool and who come from various contexts can help to build a many-sided picture of the way group discussions work.

It was to this end that I invited teachers who in their previous project involvement had shown interest and commitment to the discussion method to join me for a discussion on group discussions. In order for all of us to focus our thoughts before we got together, I sent out a number of quotations taken from TKP interviews in which teachers described what they saw as the key features, benefits and challenges of group discussions. These quotations provided a starting point for our conversation.

What follows, then, is an extract from our 90 minute discussion. To me, the way ideas are expressed in the following extract is just as revealing as the ideas themselves. My intention was to capture the process of group dialogue, as much as to express ideas about this process. There is an immediacy to a real, face-to-face discussion that can only be captured by this very medium, I believe. Ideas emerge, develop, and crystallize, through the back and forth of listening and responding. In order to help the reader follow and keep track, I've highlighted what I consider to be the main emerging themes with some key words on the right hand side of the page. While I hope that these will act as useful signposts, I realize that depending on the reader's background, interests and familiarity with the discussion mode, emerging themes might be formulated differently.

In addition, the transcript is followed by some comments highlighting some key aspects of discussions which are highlighted in what follows.

Discussion on discussions

David:

I've always found discussions to be very amorphous. Chaotic. You never know what principles are going to come into play in advance. Who's feeling good, who's sort of alert, who's connected with the material, what's going to spur people on. It's a dynamic situation and it's always been hard for me to try to quantify it, or to formulate some rules or principles around it.

Nancy:

trigger questions

One of the things that seems to influence the way a discussion goes in my classroom is the question that triggers it. Discussions tend to be better if the starting point is a real question. Let's say, there is a topic around which I have a real question, I don't know the answer to it and I can't find the answer myself, I need the students' response.

David:

Are you talking about a discussion around a community concern, an in-class topic, or are you talking about discussions around some learning content?

Nancy:

I'm talking about an in-class topic that comes out of our being a community and interacting together. These discussions feel far more real to me. Students seem far more engaged when we're talking about a concern that affects all of us than they are about a particular content.

David:

Yes, those are definitely the best.

Nancy:

Yeah. And we do seem to be able to come to some resolution, probably because I'm in the background saying, "OK, we've got five more minutes, so what are we going to bring out of this? How is this going to change what we are going to do tomorrow?" These discussions have been really powerful in terms of community life.

*focusing
questions*

Margit:

I was just thinking that it would be really good if learning content could be turned into a community concern somehow, if students could be as involved in content as they are in classroom issues.

Ellen:

I was thinking ... what grades do you teach?

David:

Well, I was just going to ask you the same thing. I teach 5th and 6th grade.

Nancy:

I teach at the high school, 9th and 10th grade.

Margit:

In the past couple of years I've been teaching mostly in higher education.

Ellen:

OK, I teach 3rd grade and so when you were talking about in-class issues I was thinking some of this is true for 3rd graders, there are some hot issues which will definitely get them into the discussion.

David:

Yeah, teasing.

Ellen:

Yeah, teasing, or it could be something like, "How come all our pencils are disappearing?" It can be something pretty mundane. But it's not mundane to them, it's a big issue that they can't find their pencils or whatever. And they get pretty engaged in those conversations. But they can get equally engaged in questions about ... I guess what I would call content. Something that they are wondering about, and it might come out of what we are doing in the curriculum. Some of the memorable discussions to me have been about things like how the world started. The origins of things and how the different stories that they have heard about that stuff fit together. In particular,

*questions which
engage*

where the religious story fits with some of the things they've heard scientifically. They can talk about this forever.

And when I think about what topics really grab them, I think it's partially what you were saying, it's something they're genuinely wondering about. So there is an *element of speculation* in those conversations and they are often about things that I would say are really big questions.

I feel like science probably of all the content areas has been the richest for discussion. Literature is harder for them, though in small groups they've had some really good discussions about literature, as well. I'm thinking of one discussion this fall in a group of three kids when one of the kids raised a question which had to do with perspective. They'd realized that they were actually looking at the story slightly differently, that there wasn't just one way to understand the story. And every time that group met, they kept adding on to that. And the three of them could sustain that kind of real focused inquiry into a book.

David:

I'd be interested to hear how you've reacted to some of the quotations that Margit sent us. There is one in particular that I would be interested to hear what you all felt about, it's in the section on 'What do you find most challenging about leading discussions?' (reads out the quotation):

*types of
discussion*

Eliciting without manipulating

"It's so hard to do this questioning thing because it can start to come across as 'I know the answer and I'm being tricky and elusive about it and so you have to figure out what's in my mind'. So I wish that I could make the situation in my questioning be more like, 'I'm interested in how you're thinking about this'. Instead of, 'I know the answer and you have to try to figure it out'. What I wish is that these questions and answers not to be a test but just an engagement in thinking about the phenomena" (Eric)

When I read this first I thought, 'No, that's not good to do, I don't want to do that', but then I thought, 'Well, I DO do that'. And I think it's OK to do that, as long as this is not the only kind of conversation that takes place in my classroom. So this led me think about different kinds of conversations. ... The other day we were talking about geography in class, we were talking about photo-period,

you know, why it is now getting lighter here in the Northern Hemisphere. And we had discussed before the notion of 'latitude', so I knew that they know 'latitude', and as we were having this conversation I wanted someone to say 'latitude', because I felt that if someone had said that, the 'Eureka!' would have been spread around, a connection would have been made. ... So reading Eric's comments, I found myself questioning the role of this kind of *fishing conversation*.

Ellen:

Well, I think that I do that too, and I feel that it may lead to something productive, but it doesn't generally lead to a productive discussion. I'm creating another kind of form, which also involves give and take, but it's not a discussion. And I think students can tell the difference, they know when I'm asking a real question, and when I'm asking a *teacherly question*, that I actually already know the answer to, and I'm asking the question to get them thinking about something.

David:

So could we say that the Socratic thing is not really a discussion, there's something else that's going on?

Nancy:

I think of a Socratic question as a 'real' question, perhaps bringing a new lens to a topic, but not one where the person asking the question already knows the answer. [...] I prefer the term 'teacherly question' when I actually do know the answer and I'm fishing. [...] And I think that there are times when I need to go fishing, but I think that it's important for me to recognize that, to be aware of these different types of conversation. And I agree with you Ellen that students respond to teacherly questions in a very different way. And I think it's probably important to make this conscious for students, as well.

Margit:

Yes, I think for me that's the key, to be aware of what we are doing when. 'Teacherly questions' can take the conversation in a certain direction, and then it can be hard to move out of there, to regain the openness dimension of a real discussion.

perception gap

When I read this quotation I was thinking that even when I think that I'm asking a 'real' open-ended question, which I hope will lead to exploration of an issue, students might perceive this as a teacherly question. So there might be a perception gap between students and the teacher here. Students might expect me to have 'the answers', on issues where I feel there are no final answers.

Nancy:

Certainly in my high school classes students often think, “We know there is an answer, she wants a certain answer, so if we wait long enough she’ll just tell us.” ... So I have to watch out for this too.

Ellen:

Sometimes my kids will just ask me if they’re not sure, they’ll say, “Do you know?” It’s like they’re trying to figure out where we are at, what’s the real meaning of my question.

David:

There is something about this that I’m still not settled with, but I don’t know what it is. ... I mean, doesn’t it all depend on the purpose of the discussion? ... Sometimes a teacher just has to be like a referee, make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak, but the more difficult aspect of it has to do with content, the teacher’s role in developing understanding of content. ... I’m not really sure what I’m asking. I guess I’m still going back to Eric’s quotation and trying to figure out the nature of a discussion based on content and not about social things, or theoretical things about content. In literature it’s easier, I think, because there is more space for interpretation, but in subjects like science, I don’t know. I don’t know.

*purpose of
discussion*

Ellen:

I guess I’ve never really thought about ... I mean I’m sure I’ve thought about the aim of a discussion, but I’ve never had the question like, in front of my face, but as I’m thinking about it now, one of the aims for the kids, or for myself when I’m involved in a discussion is ... it’s *a way of making knowledge* about something. ... Like right now we’re trying to pull together things we know about discussions and by making knowledge it’s like creating some new edifice ... Edifice is probably too solid an image. Some new understanding of what a discussion is, that we can carry forth and then mull over some more, and maybe talk about with some other people and then write about, or read about. It’s the active side of learning, the making part. And I see that with the kids, too, when they’re having those discussions, they’re trying to put together bits of information, ideas, hearing what somebody else thinks and thinking more about that, does that fit, not fit, do they agree, does it make sense to them. They’re taking the stuff that we are working with and molding it. And David, you know what you were saying before that it’s not quantifiable, I can’t imagine a script that would tell you how to have a good discussion.

Nancy:

Although they're out there.

David:

Or a rubric.

Ellen:

Yeah, I'm sure someone has created it, but I can't imagine that they would ever lead to a good discussion, because there is something that's ...

David:

Artificial...

Ellen:

Well, artificial about the script, but there is something that It's just *unscripted*. You don't know what people are going to bring up, what connections someone might make, what surprises might happen.

David:

That's the dynamism that I was referring to ...

Nancy:

I see a parallel between town meetings and class discussions. I used to think that you go to town meeting so that you can say your piece, but these days I think you go so that your understanding of a controversial question will deepen. So when you speak out at the town meeting you have an obligation to add to the understanding, the joint understanding that's being created, and when it comes to voting, we can all vote in a more informed way. And I guess if I'd ever thought long enough to make the connection, I would hope that that's what happens in my classrooms, too. *We deepen our understanding by having different points of view* on something, and when we walk out the door after the discussion, we see things differently from when we came in.

parallel with town meeting

Margit:

Going back to David's point, I fully agree, that a discussion is not something you can control, but still I think that if you observe it and are able to describe it then maybe you become more aware of the factors which influence it. And then you are in a better position ... not to manipulate it, but to shape it.

Commentary

While you are in the process of discussing it's hard to be fully aware of what is happening. Discussion transcripts can help you to become more aware of what goes on during group interaction as they make it possible for you to analyse the various contributions, and patterns of emerging thought. Below are a few points which I think are well illustrated by the above discussion transcript.

Ideas often get developed in a cyclical way

David starts out with the idea that 'discussions are amorphous' and we return to this point when Ellen notes that discussions are 'unscripted', and then later again when Margit says that 'a discussion is not something you can control'.

Discussions usually have transition points

When a particular idea has been fully explored, somebody needs to move the discussion into a different direction. In a classroom context it is usually the teacher, who asks another question or gives the group a follow-up task. However, in an open discussion where participants feel involved and take the initiative, anyone can take on the leadership role. The extract is taken from a discussion where participants shared the responsibility for moving on the discussion. For example, David takes the discussion into a new direction when he says: "I'd be interested to hear how you've reacted to some of the quotations that Margit sent us. There is one in particular ..."

The dynamics of the group influences the content of the discussion

In this case, although some members knew each other from before, there were no strong links or friendships prior to the discussion. However, all four members were united by a common set of values and beliefs about learning, and there was evidence of this in the fact that we all considered group interaction to be a powerful tool for learning. There was a strong feeling of collegiality and a kind of shared excitement that comes with talking about professional issues which are perceived to be really important.

All members were attentive and picked up on and developed each other's points. As a result, the discussion seemed to 'flow', and to build up in a coherent way. There was a kind of creative coherence that emerged out of the ability to hold ideas loosely. The discussion was free-flowing; it was not restricted to any one aspect of group talk. Still, what helped to create the feeling of coherence was the sustained attention of all four members. They all stayed with it, were really listening to each other, and were open to following up emerging themes, ideas.

The level of ambiguity

This relates closely to the previous point. Exploration of ideas will happen to the extent that members are able to tolerate ambiguity and hold ideas loosely.