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Breaking down barriers: Practicing silent discussions in the classroom

Author Biography

Kristina Bell is a first-year Doc student in Virginia Tech's Curriculum and Instruction program. Her research interests include teacher induction and teacher collaboration. She has experience teaching English for all grades 8-12, along with experience teaching first-year and remedial writing courses at a two-year college.

Abstract

While full-class oral discussions may be beneficial for some students, there may also be others in classrooms who may feel uncomfortable with participating in discussions such as these for a myriad of reasons. These reasons often extend beyond the negative assumption of students not caring about classroom content. In my own classroom, one discussion practice that I have had the opportunity to utilize with success is that of a “silent discussion,” a discussion that is both independent and silent, while allowing for written interaction amongst peers. Breaking down barriers for students and allowing for greater opportunities for active engagement through a silent discussion may serve students well and may allow educators a better opportunity to meet students in contexts that they may be more comfortable with.

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INTRODUCTION

We have likely all experienced classroom settings where students are tasked with a full-class discussion, in which grades are assigned according to the number of times students orally participate. Inevitably, there may be at least one student who does not participate in the conversation. The reasons for not conversing are not always clear, and perhaps these students are viewed as those who do not care for class discussions. As an educator who has taught grades 8-12, along with remedial and first-year writing courses at a two-year college, I have been that teacher who anticipates full participation in class discussions. I have also been that teacher who finds herself with students who hang back and do not participate, and I find myself tasked with assigning grades to these silent attendees.

In my second year of teaching, I taught at a Title One school in a small city in the Northwest. During that time, I began paying closer attention to students who did not participate in full-class conversations. I brought a variety of well-known discussion techniques to my secondary classroom; I attempted small-group, fishbowl, and concentric circle discussions, all with varying results. However, one discussion I put into practice resulted in full-class participation. This activity, a "silent discussion" (SD), will be detailed and discussed below. I acknowledge that there are similarly-coined discussion practices comparable to my own. An Internet search for a "silent discussion" will yield a variety of results detailing a practice very close to the one I will be explaining. With this in mind, I know that my idea is not novel in nature. However, I hold this to be a practice that may prove beneficial in a variety of classrooms. Depending on classroom, student, and teacher contexts, this may serve as a way to engage those who may have shown discomfort with full-class discussions. The purpose of this article is to

bring awareness to and encourage the practice of a silent discussion in any number of these teaching contexts to the potential benefit of all students.

PROBLEMS WITH WHOLE-CLASS ORAL DISCUSSION

Like other educators, I have repositioned myself after my first couple years of teaching and begun to consider full-class oral discussions as potentially-problematic "best practices." While these discussions may benefit some students, there may also be others in the class who feel uncomfortable with participating for a myriad of reasons. These factors often extend beyond the negative assumption of students not caring about classroom content. Instead, these reasons may include lack of cultural representation in the class and/or linguistic differences among classmates (White, 2011), anxiety causing avoidance learning (Miranda, 2008), feelings of intimidation (Rodriguez, 2021; McKee, 2015), and/or a poorly prepared or disengaged instructor (McKee, 2015), among other factors. Realizing that many of these factors listed also relate to particular contexts, it is important to consider what Neumann and Meadows (2011) relay:

> Educators should keep in mind that any "best" practice is the result of a combination of factors and is ultimately a negotiation among teachers, students, and institutional contexts (p. 105).

With contexts in mind, and realizing that there are no true best practices that exist among all classrooms, Shi and Tan (2020) provide a suggestion for educators: "Given the different types of learning patterns among students, teachers should perhaps cater to different students' learning needs rather than focusing on verbal students" (p. 257). Instead of catering to a discussion format that favors students who prefer to engage orally, perhaps there are discussion formats that encourage more students to interact with their outspoken peers.

BENEFITS AND CONSIDERATIONS OF SILENT DISCUSSIONS

The format of a SD (see Appendix A for SD instructions) is independent and, true to its name, silent. Like traditional classroom discussions, a SD works to encourage students to respond to higher-level discussion questions, while still providing opportunity for peer interaction. Depending on use and grade level being addressed, SDs have potential to address a variety of standards. In my English classroom, I utilized SDs in relation to texts we were reading in class and consequently focused on standards of reading.

However, SDs may be utilized in other disciplines and may additionally be used as an instrument to gather feedback from students. It may be useful for students to participate anonymously in order to provide feedback about a newly-implemented unit in Biology or to provide discussion related to topics they need their Algebra teacher to review before a unit test. If we consider its use before an Algebra assessment, one way an SD may be formatted is to have one Algebra topic written at the top of each SD sheet. As sheets are passed, students have the opportunity to explain their comfort levels with Algebra topics. Instead of a teacher asking a full class how prepared they feel prior to a test and expecting all students to be comfortable sharing, this method of sharing may encourage more students to share their needs in an anonymous, low-stakes activity.

Additionally, I provide vague instructions for the SD to allow for interpretation and differentiation for a variety of contexts. Differentiation for a SD may involve adjusting time between rotations, utilizing background music (or allowing students to listen to their own music), allowing for students to type on/pass devices instead of papers, among other adjustments. The teacher should also keep in mind their own role. Typically, I engage in the SD with my students,

which means printing an extra question sheet. With SD flexibility, educators may find themselves adjusting instructions/expectations for multiple groups in a single day.

Finally, while SDs may not always take the place of oral discussions, in conducting a SD, those students who may find themselves uncomfortable participating orally may find comfort in the silent nature of this activity. There may also be comfort in the opportunity to "piggyback" (Paxton-Buursma & Walker, 2008) off of other students' responses. Piggybacking is a tool utilized "when students expand, elaborate, and extend an idea or clarify an initial idea" (Paxton-Buursma & Walker, 2008, p. 30). For those who may feel intimidation or anxiety related to sharing their ideas, piggybacking during the SD may provide comfort.

SILENT DISCUSSION FOLLOW-UP AND ASSESSMENT

Following the SD, students pass sheets to their original owners. However, the conversation does not end here. As indicated in the SD instructions (Appendix A), I mention how papers are collected following the discussion. Once collected, the teacher may choose from a variety of follow-up activities, including engaging students in a shorter, purely-voluntary oral conversation about the SD questions. In my classroom, another form of engagement I take on is the act of taking pictures of ~four SD sheets and blurring out student names. During the next time I meet with my class, I project the chosen sheets to the group, and I use this practice to highlight strong points/rationales and powerful uses of quotes/evidence. Remember, too, that a SD may provide the teacher insight as to how students are responding to and comprehending concepts; there may be topics for the teacher to address or re-teach in subsequent classes.

When considering assessment, SDs allow for differentiation in one's own classroom. If class participation is desired, a teacher may ask students to sign their names beside their entries, so responses can be counted up, and individuals may be assigned a grade. If comprehension of a

text is a goal, a teacher may read through responses while answering questions of focus: Are students reflecting comprehension of a text? Do responses reflect ability on the students' parts to characterize and make inferences? In my classroom, I would often assess based on contribution and effective use of evidence in responses, sometimes looking for students to successfully incorporate quotes and citations into their responses. Finally, students must always be notified of how they will be graded prior to conducting the SD.

CONCLUSION

Furthermore, SD as a practice may prove beneficial in a variety of contexts, and I will impart the reminder that this is not intended to be presented as a best practice, as I hold that these always-ideal practices are not realistic. Crotty (1998) explains how solutions, similar to best practices, do not exist within humanity:

> Outcomes will be suggestive rather than conclusive. They will be plausible, perhaps even convincing, ways of seeing things-- and, to be sure, helpful ways of seeing things-- but certainly not any "one true way" of seeing things (p. 13).

Solutions to discussion-related challenges do not exist in the classroom; rather, a silent discussion may serve to involve students who may be engaged in class but often choose not to reflect this orally. Breaking down barriers for students and allowing opportunities for active engagement may serve your students well and may allow you, as educator, a better opportunity to meet your students in a context that they are comfortable with.

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APPENDIX A

Before Silent Discussion

1. Prepare questions.
    a. I write the amount of questions to be equivalent to the number of students in class.
    b. For me, these tend to be higher-order questions (levels 3, 4, or 6 of Bloom's Taxonomy) related to the current class text; however, I also include questions that relate to essential questions from our unit (e.g., "How might experiences shape our actions?") and questions that allow for quick mental breaks (e.g., "Describe your dream vacation."). None of the prepared questions should prompt a simple yes/no response. The ideal questions are discussion-based and allow for conversation among responses.
2. On a word document, type prepared questions. Each question should be posed at the top of its own page, leaving the rest of the page blank.
3. Print question sheets (one sheet for each student).

Day of Silent Discussion

4. Explain instructions/expectations to students, detailed below:
    a. Each student starts with their own question sheet.
    b. Students have three-four minutes to respond to the question sheet in front of them.

c. After three-four minutes, students should rotate papers to the next students. Once students have a new sheet in front of them, the timer will start again, and students have options for how to approach this next question:
    i. Students can write their own individual response.
    ii. Students can "piggyback" (Paxton-Buursma & Walker, 2008) off of their classmate's response in their own answer (e.g., "I agree with the reply above because…").
d. Rotations of three-four minutes will continue for approximately a half hour.
    i. Depending on class size, not every student will see every question.
e. Other general expectations:
    i. The classroom remains silent besides the teacher's call for rotation.
    ii. Responses should be school-appropriate.
    iii. Students should try to write for the full 3-4 minutes before each rotation.
    iv. Students should sign their names after their responses.

5. Pass out question sheets to students, establish paper-passing order, and conduct SD using protocol above.
    a. Often, after the final rotation, I allow students to rotate papers back to the original owner of the sheet. This way, students can see how classmates have added to the discussion.
6. Collect papers from students.