
From Writing to Discussion

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The purpose of this paper is to consider ways of using writing to promote student discussion in the college classroom. A survey of the literature shows an abundance of material on writing and discussion for the elementary level, little at the middle and secondary grades, and only a few references specifically for discussion at the college level. Elementary teachers often have trouble with chatter and talking in the classroom, but in undergraduate college courses, instructors often have difficulty getting the students to talk and share ideas. Since classroom discussion is an integral part of the collaborative effort in education, it is critical to utilize strategies such as writing to enhance the discussion process.

In college level classes, students are expected to read chapters in textbooks, articles, journals, and other materials and be prepared to discuss them in class. Discussions are helpful in learning content material and are usually dominated by the instructor. Other discussions are conducted to allow students to share ideas, insights, or observations and are not dominated by the instructor. Sometimes college-level students are also expected to work in collaborative groups to complete projects. Often it is difficult to get students to have conversation without teacher question, student answer, teacher question, student answer, etc. These are not real discussions but actually oral quizzes. No student wants to be the first to say anything.

As stated, different methods of promoting discussion were researched. They are as follows:

Methods

1. Discussion:

Without pre-thought or any writing exercises, students are asked for opinions or thoughts about a subject, usually one-on-one (teacher, student, teacher, student).

2. Pre-Writes:

Students write in their notebooks for three to five minutes on a theme, problem, idea, or question given by the instructor. The instructor models this and also writes. When the time is up, students are asked to share their thoughts. At first students need to be encouraged to respond. After doing this several times students are not as reluctant to talk, since having their written thoughts to refer to provides confidence. All students are provided an opportunity to talk about what they write in the subject. Comments from the instructor are minimal. Pre-writes are not collected.

3. Pre-Writes with Partners:

Both students discuss the issues and one writes comments down; these comments are shared with the class. The same structure is used as in individual pre-writes.

4. Small Group Discussions:

Students do a pre-write, then divide into groups to discuss an issue, problem, or project. One student serves as the scribe and another the speaker. Groups are self-selected or the class is divided by the teacher. The purpose is to have different students interacting each time. Before coming back to the class, the scribe re-reads and adds to the report. This also provides student-to-student interaction.

The above techniques were used with undergraduate and graduate classes.

Results

In using any of these techniques the instructor explained the "rules of the game" to the class. Whether the class is large or small, the seating arrangement should be conducive to discussion. (A circle or semi-circle where all students can see one another and the instructor is best. The instructor should also be sitting in the circle.)

Method one, "Discussion," without pre-thought or pre-writes usually did not result in lively discussions but rather questions from the instructor and one response from a student. Students were hesitant to volunteer answers.

Method two, "Pre-Writes," writing individually, for 3 to 5 minutes on a topic or question without discussion before hand, resulted in better conversational discussions and more students volunteering to speak.

Method three, In "Partner Pre-Writes," the partners had to discuss what they were writing. When it was time to converse with the entire class, they were prepared and less reluctant to speak.

Method four, "Group Pre-Writes" and small group discussions were very successful. This resulted in good discussions and group cohesiveness. Students took turns being the scribe, but usually all the students took notes and were writing.

During the rest of the semester, using the above techniques, we had lively and academic discussions. Later, I explained to the classes what I was doing and why. I wanted to know from them which methods they thought were best to promote discussion in the classroom. The students thought any group method which included discussion with pre-writes took away

the fear of talking to the whole class. The small group discussions with writing were voted the best because they made it easier and less threatening to voice opinions. They also liked the individual pre-writes because they let them collect their thoughts before they spoke. In addition, the pre-writes provided a level of confidence as well as a way to focus thoughts. We concluded by talking about collaborative education and writing; my hope is the students will use some of these techniques in their own teaching.

Rowe (1986) best sums up why group discussion is so important:

A complex thought system requires a great deal of shared experience and conversation. It is in talking about what we have done and observed and in arguing about what we make of our experiences, that ideas multiply, become refined, and finally produce new questions and further explorations.

What better way to encourage these explorations than to use writing in the classroom?

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