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Classroom discussion: a method of instruction and a curriculum outcome

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine teachers' thinking about classroom discussion. Teachers have multiple conceptions of classroom discussion, but these conceptions often intersect with two purposes for using classroom discussion: (1) discussion as a method of instruction, where the purpose is to help engage students in a lesson, and learn academic content by encouraging verbal interactions; and (2) discussion competence as the subject matter, where the desired outcome is for students to learn to discuss more effectively. To better understand teachers' use of discussion in the classroom, this study examined teachers' thinking about discussion with these two purposes in mind. Six high school social studies teachers were purposively selected to permit data collection from a theoretically interesting sample. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and a think-aloud task, and were analyzed using grounded theory's constant-comparative technique. Implications of these findings for teachers, teacher educators, and researchers interested in classroom discussion are examined. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Using classroom discussion as a method of instruction and for teaching students how to interact verbally with others is not new. Over forty years ago, Schwab (1954) was clear about his belief that classroom discussion was imperative for developing in students the "intellectual arts" of thinking and communication:

In a curriculum concerned primarily with specific understandings of specific objects, discussion as a device of instruction may be defended as a peculiarly powerful teaching instrument ... but it cannot be maintained that for a curriculum so oriented discussion is indispensable. It is merely one of several usable techniques. In a curriculum, however, which aims to impart intellectual arts and skills and habits and attitudes, as well as bodies of information, discussion is not simply efficient or powerful, but indispensable, for the same reason that the act of swimming is indispensable to teaching that art and practice on the piano indispensable to

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teaching that. Discussion is an engagement in and a practice of the activities of thought and communication (pp. 54–55).

The purpose of this paper is to examine teachers' thinking about classroom discussion. Prior studies (Larson, 1997; Larson & Parker, 1996) clarified that teachers' thinking about discussion is complex; teachers have multiple conceptions of classroom discussion. While these studies examined teachers' conceptions, they led me to believe that a re-analysis of the data was necessary, because teachers' *conceptions* of discussion often intersect with two *purposes* of discussion: (1) discussion as a method of instruction, where the purpose is to help engage students in a lesson by encouraging verbal interactions; and (2) discussion competence as the subject matter – as the desired outcome of instruction and an end in itself. To better understand teachers' use of discussion in the classroom, I analyzed teachers' thinking about discussion with these two purposes in mind.

2. Literature

2.1. *Purposes for classroom discussion*

While the majority of all classroom talk is synonymous with recitation-style approaches, significant social and cognitive changes have been reported to occur in students when classroom talk shifts more toward adult “conversations” (Cazden, 1988). Cazden explains this move away from recitation and toward discussion:

One important shift is from recitation to something closer to a “real discussion”... talk in which ideas are explored rather than answers to teacher's test questions are provided and evaluated; in which teachers talk less ... and students talk correspondingly more; in which students themselves decide when to speak ...; and in which students address each other directly (p. 55).

Discussion is thought to be a useful teaching technique for developing higher-order thinking

skills – skills that enable students to interpret, analyze, and manipulate information. Students explain their ideas and thoughts, rather than merely recount or recite memorized facts and details. During discussion learners are not passive recipients of information that is transmitted from a teacher. Rather, learners are active participants. As they interact during the discussion, students construct an understanding about the topic (Johnston, Anderman, Milne & Harris, 1994; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

For discussions to educate students, they should be serious interactions where students “support their ideas with evidence, where their opinions are subject to challenge by their peers as well as the teacher, and where the teacher's ideas are equally open to criticism” (Engle & Ochoa, 1988, p. 47). The purpose of probing questions and discrepant viewpoints is to encourage interactions and to encourage students to respond with the most powerful evidence available to them.

The very process of discussing a topic may facilitate abstract learning processes (Bridges, 1979, 1987). Bridges suggested that discussions contributed to discussants' understanding of a topic by expanding each discussant's information on a topic with information from other discussants; fostering different perspectives on a topic; providing opportunities for discussants to present alternative ideas about a topic; providing opportunities for other discussants to criticize, accept, or refute these alternative ideas; and encouraging mutual modifications among discussants' opinions to produce a group decision or consensus. Group interaction is the important component for each of these as it shapes and directs the exploration of a topic.

2.2. *Classroom discussion as a curriculum outcome*

When considering discussion as a curriculum outcome, students' participation in the actual discussion becomes an end in itself. By teaching students how to discuss, the benefits for using discussion in the classroom can be extended to all areas of students' lives. The research on how teachers “teach discussion” is limited. Most that is available is related to citizenship education because discussion provides one way for citizens to interact.

The argument has been made that a central characteristic of a democratic community, in addition to the free election of representatives, is the formulation of policy through free and open discussion (Barber, 1989; Bridges, 1987). Such discussions can be characterized by “creativity, variety, openness and flexibility, inventiveness, capacity for discovery, eloquence, potential for empathy and affective expression” (Barber, 1989, p. 355), and are comprised of “discussion skills” such as clearly making claims, supporting claims with facts, helping a group move through obstacles, critiquing ideas and not individuals (keeping a high respect for human dignity), and developing together a shared understanding of the problem or issue (Barber, 1984; Larson, 1997; Mathews, 1994; Parker, 1996). Discussion with these characteristics becomes a process that promotes understanding and improved perspectives on issues (Mathews, 1994; Parker, 1996). Teachers encourage students to learn this process.

2.3. *Teachers’ thinking about classroom discussion*

I examined teachers’ thinking about discussion because of the impact teachers have on instruction, curriculum, and students. Others in an educational setting could have been examined, namely administrators, students, or parents. However, the classroom teacher plays a powerful role in determining what, and how, subject matter is taught (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985, 1988; Goodlad, Soder & Sirotnik, 1990). Examining teacher thinking about discussion is important because of the diverse types of classroom interactions that teachers label as discussion (Cazden, 1988; Dillon, 1984, 1990; Gall & Gall, 1990; Swift & Gooding, 1983; Wilen, 1990).

Research on discussion in social studies revealed that the primary mode of data collection when examining discussion was through observations of classroom discussions (Wilen & White, 1991). Teacher thoughts or ideas were not examined. Understanding teachers’ thinking about discussion is a needed step in discussion research if we assume that teachers’ thoughts underlie their classroom action (Clark & Peterson, 1986). If discussion is to be used as a way to help students construct know-

ledge and to help students learn how to go about the process of “discussing,” then teachers are a crucial variable in creating such a context.¹ The following statement by Wood and Wood (1988) reveals the need for additional insight into the uses of discussion in the classroom:

And what is discussion anyway? A precise definition which we can all agree upon seems to be extremely elusive. Teachers, dissatisfied with the incessant “chalk and talk” routine, have turned to more interactive modes of teaching for at least some of the day. If we could specify exactly what teachers hope to achieve in these sessions, then we might be able to devise evaluation procedures to measure how far these aims had in fact been fulfilled. How and why do teachers choose a discussion as opposed to paper and pencil tests, essays, lectures, or set reading, etc.? (p. 295)

3. Method

This study examined six high school teachers’ conceptions of classroom discussion, and their purposes for using classroom discussion. Data were gathered during in-depth interviews and a think-aloud task in which teachers rank-ordered five vignettes of classroom interaction.

3.1. *Participants*

Of the six teachers who participated in this study, three taught social studies in a suburban high school, and three taught social studies in an urban high school. These teachers were purposively selected (as opposed to randomly selected) to encourage the collection of data from a theoretically interesting sample (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The teachers were nominated by their building’s principal, or their department chair, as teachers who were

¹ For example, if teachers only think of discussion as a recitative interaction between teacher and student, then recommendations for using discussion to develop democratic citizenship abilities would be futile.

effective and thoughtful. Also, each teacher claimed to use discussion frequently.²

Similarities in a sample were helpful for generating initial categories (conceptions of discussion) and properties, and for establishing conditions under which a category exists (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This was my approach when choosing my first sample; the three teachers at the suburban high school. Alex, Bill, and Cathy taught at this school. “Alex” had taught US and world history and advanced placement US history for 22 years. “Bill” had taught 11th grade US History and 12th grade current events courses for 18 years. “Cathy” had taught US and world history, psychology, and sociology for 22 years. The initial categories were best expanded, refined, and elaborated upon by adding a second sample that was different from the first sample. The teachers at the urban school were chosen for this purpose. They taught students living in a community that was different socio-economically and ethnically from the first sample group. Table 1 shows the enrollment and ethnic composition of these two sites:

Table 1

Suburban high school		Urban high school	
African American	7%	African American	47%
Asian American	13%	Asian American	34%
Hispanic	5%	Hispanic	6%
Native American	1%	Native American	1%
White	74%	White	12%
Student enrollment	1200	Student enrollment	800

The three teachers at the urban high school were Deborah, Elaine, and Frank. “Deborah” had taught for 14 years, but for the past five years she had taught US history in self-contained, special education classrooms. “Elaine” had taught US history, and sociology for 20 years. “Frank” had

taught advanced placement US history, honors American government, and regular-track US history courses for 25 years. The two sample groups provided data from teachers who worked in diverse communities, and with diverse students. For example, Deborah, from this second set of teachers, taught history to students in a “pull-out” special education course. She was selected for the second round of data collection because the first group of teachers alluded to the idea that the academic ability of students was a factor that influenced classroom discussion. I examined conceptions of “honors” social studies teachers, so it was necessary to also examine teachers’ conceptions from a “basic” or special education point of view.

Since I intended to generate categories that encompassed differences among my sample of teachers, I do not describe how the differences of each teacher led to different conceptions of discussion when I present my findings. Instead, the emerging categories incorporate the conceptions held by my diverse sample of teachers. Thus, differences in my sample were a predominant concern during sample selection, but were not an emphasis in the presentation of findings.

I suggest that two factors influence teachers’ curricular and instructional practices: student differences; and, characteristics of the community in which a school is located (e.g., socioeconomic status, ethnicity, cultural traditions, etc.). Let me briefly explain each.

3.1.1. Student differences

An exploration of teachers’ methods of instruction (Talbert & McLaughlin, 1993; Talbert, McLaughlin & Rowan, 1993), revealed that teachers determined goals and selected activities for their classes according to their students’ prior academic achievement and motivation. Instructional and curricular decisions were influenced by the context of the classroom and the ability level of the students:

(teachers) adopt different and seemingly incompatible teaching goals, strategies, and techniques over the course of the teaching day or week. Reasons (for these differences) might include...beliefs that they are adapting to

²This was important because the teachers needed to recall and describe lessons when they used discussion and how they planned for classroom discussion. Since they used discussion frequently, they were able to answer questions such as: what are advantages and disadvantages of discussion, how do teachers believe their students learn with classroom discussions, and why is discussion selected instead of other methods of instruction.

different student achievement levels, or that different class periods have different dynamics' (Talbert, McLaughlin & Rowan, 1993, p. 49).

3.1.2. *Community differences*

The community surrounding a school also influences course content and methods of instruction (Goodlad, 1984; Kozol, 1992). When examining the "effective school model," for example, Witte and Walsh (1990) determined that two very different educational worlds exist, "one in the city and one in the suburb" (p. 192). This supports Porkey and Rutter's (1987) claim that teachers in urban schools "encounter a less positive educational environment, and teaching is a more difficult task" in urban than in suburban schools (p. 388).

In sum, teachers' individual conceptions are likely influenced by their particular educational context or setting. The two groups of teachers in this sample taught a diverse range of students in diverse settings and teaching environments. They were purposively selected to examine conceptions of discussion from teachers in schools that were different in student ethnicities, student ability levels, and community economic levels.

3.2. *Data gathering*

Data were gathered from responses to an interview schedule and responses during a think-aloud task.

3.2.1. *Interview*

The interview consisted of four primary, open-ended questions. Each question was followed up with probes to clarify the teachers' responses. The first question asked the teachers directly about their notion of discussion, or what they envisioned discussion to be. I asked for specific illustrations or images of discussions, either experienced or observed, that exemplified characteristics important to discussions.

The second question asked the teachers to describe an ideal discussion. Descriptions of ideal discussions attempted to reveal characteristics and expectations the teachers had about discussions in their classroom. Having teachers focus on a specific

event (an ideal discussion) revealed what they think happens during classroom discussion. This prompt was based on the assumption that, while teachers might not be able to directly state their underlying expectations of discussion (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986), their descriptions of discussion would offer insight about teacher expectations, influences acting in the classroom, and teacher and student roles during discussions. To further examine their thinking, I also asked for descriptions of failed discussions. As with the ideal discussion, failed discussions illuminated defining characteristics a teacher has of classroom discussion, because failed discussions lack some or all of these characteristics.

During the third and fourth prompts, I first requested the teachers to list classroom activities that incorporated discussion (Prompt 3) and educational purposes of discussion (Prompt 4). These lists served as a stimulus for the teachers to recall details of particular discussions. When the teachers returned to each list and gave examples for each item on the list, they were required to recall specific discussions and their characteristics. I requested that they think about their most recent discussion, since self-report data is more valid when it relies on short-term memory of an event (Ericsson & Simon, 1980).

3.2.2. *Think-aloud activity*

During the think-aloud activity, I provided five vignettes of teachers using discussion. The teachers ordered the vignettes from "most" like an ideal discussion to "least" like an ideal discussion. The process of ordering the vignettes forced an evaluation of the discussions, and provided me with descriptions of their evaluations and insight into their views of discussion as instruction. This is a variation of a method of inquiry called "policy capturing" (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Shavelson, Webb & Burstein, 1986). During this method, participants are asked to make judgements and decisions about pre-written materials (e.g., vignettes). This method relies very little on teachers' self-reports, and was included as an additional way to access information about teachers' conceptions of classroom discussion. I developed the five vignettes to present a range of possible classroom

behaviors.³ The five vignettes offer a continuum of possible discussions in the classroom. At one end of the continuum instruction is text- or teacher-centered; the teacher is the holder of predetermined answers to questions. At the opposite end, instruction is student centered, with everyone having their own right answer. The vignettes incorporate two theories of using discussion in the classroom: Bridges' (1987) three conditions for discussion and Roby's (1988) five models of discussion.

3.3. *Data analysis*

The analysis of data consisted of four stages: (1) I generated categories by examining collected data, attempting to identify common themes in the data. (2) The categories were integrated. During this stage, I compared similarities and differences among the categories created in stage one. (3) I further integrated the data around fewer, more encompassing categories, in some cases creating new categories, refining categories, and elaborating (further illustrating) existing categories. (4) A "theory in-process" of teachers' conceptions of discussion was written. The first three stages followed a repetitive process of coding, comparing, and refining (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This process is the very nature of generating theory. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) wrote: "When generation of theory is the aim ... one is constantly alert to emergent perspectives that will change and help develop ... theory ... The published word is not the final one, but only a pause in the never-ending process of generating theory" (p. 40).⁴

4. Findings

Teachers' conceptions of discussion are based in part on what they hope to accomplish during a lesson. Six conceptions of discussion emerged

from the data. Discussion was conceptualized as recitation, a teacher-directed conversation, an open-ended conversation, a series of responses to challenging questions, a guided transfer of knowledge to the world outside the classroom, and as practice with verbal interaction skills. Each conception of discussion becomes more or less viable as a method of instruction in relation to teachers' purposes.

In this section, I describe how teachers' conceptions of discussion intersected with two purposes of discussion: (1) discussion as a method of instruction, where the purpose is to help engage students in a lesson by "sparking a reaction," "making analogies," "bringing alternative ideas to the topic," or "making them think a little bit more instead of just regurgitating information," whatever the subject matter of the lesson might be; and (2) discussion competence as the subject matter – as the desired outcome of instruction and an end in itself. Here, as one teacher said, "the process of dialogue, or exchanging ideas, is fundamental to a democratic society. If they can do it in this artificial environment, then I think I'm guaranteed that they will continue those kinds of dialogues (in other settings)." While I differentiate between these two purposes, the participants in this study often incorporated both in their lessons at the same time. That is, they use discussion to teach subject matter, and they direct their students to develop the skills needed to interact during a discussion.

According to the canons of the grounded theory approach, I present my findings hypothetically, pending additional rounds of data gathering and analysis. They provide another step toward understanding teachers' thinking about discussion. The two purposes of discussion are presented with segments from the interview and think-aloud transcripts. I provide data to illustrate each category, and to reveal how the categories were developed. Segments of field notes and quotations provide evidence that the categories are well grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To provide further evidence that the patterns I found incorporated all of my sample and cut across school types, I note whether each quotation was from a teacher in the suburban or urban school.

³ These vignettes are presented, and described further, in a previous article (Larson, 1997)

⁴ This analysis procedure has been illustrated with data from the first sample set in a previous publication (Larson & Parker, 1996).

4.1. Discussion as a method of instruction

Teachers have multiple conceptions of discussion. This conclusion, however, does not fully credit teachers with the amount of thought they give to classroom interactions. When knowing facts is important but not sufficient, teachers in this study want classroom discussions to go beyond transmitting information. These teachers believe the process of discussing is one way to encourage students to use, apply, and evaluate information. As one teacher said, “students have to have knowledge of a topic before they can talk about it.” In this Section I focus on two reasons teachers report that they use discussion as a method of instruction: encouraging students to build their own knowledge of the subject matter, and exposing students to multiple perspectives.

4.1.1. Building knowledge

A distinctive value of the interactions that occur during discussions can be summed up in the following idea: the very act of discussing allows students to connect what they learn in school to their own life in ways other methods of instruction may not. It allows students to interact with the subject matter. As Cathy (suburban) said, it involves students “in problem solving ... the talk is about what is in the book and is then *applied* to current events” (emphasis hers). She continued:

[My] main point for discussion is that ... you can effectively use the inductive process. How does what we learned about “there and then” relate today? How is it similar, how is it different, and what are some conclusions we can draw?

In other words, the process of discussing encourages students to carry historical and background knowledge (the “then and there”) from school settings to their lives outside of school (the “here and now”). To make such generalizations, students must develop a knowledge base about historical and current events. Alex (suburban) reported using discussions to help students “make analogies and ... connections between the past and the present.” He used discussion to help his students recognize links between problems that seem uncon-

nected on the surface, but share a similar underlying problem. He continued:

as far as I’m concerned that is what makes history come alive ... What’s so different about the problems that the Greeks dealt with, and ... what we deal with today?

Bill (suburban) commented similarly, “I am a real proponent of taking what you do in class and making sure there is a link to the political realm. A real, not a make-believe, a real link.”

These teachers reported that students must be intellectually engaged in a discussion if knowledge is to be built. In other words, the topic of the talk has to be of interest to the students. It is the engagement that teachers believe encourages students to develop deeper understandings of the subject matter. Deborah (urban) alluded to this by stating, “[D]uring the discussion, [students] fed off of each other. That’s what discussion ought to be. It ought to be people who are just bursting with a contribution or a question that leads to something else.” Additionally, engaging discussions increase student motivation to make connections between what they talk about in school and what is happening in the world around them. Elaine (urban) referred to this directly when she said, “Discussion causes students to feel they have a voice now, and they start taking interest in *Time* magazine or reading the newspaper because it has something in it that we talked about in class.” She continued:

Parents have given me lots of positive feedback because their kids are coming home and talking about stuff that they learned. Because now it’s their own. They heard another person say something that they disagree with, or that they don’t know about, and suddenly they are motivated to go check it out ... A lot of times they [students] will still be talking about the issue on the way out the door. And I like that because that shows me that the discussion meant something to them. That it matters to them.

This motivation is believed to help students recognize connections between topics and concepts rather than memorize facts. Or, as Deborah

(urban) found, “during [discussion] I think you hear yourself saying things you didn’t know you thought. Talking clarifies your thinking, your thoughts.”

While teachers believe that discussion clarifies students’ thinking, they report that students need to read and research the information they will be discussing. Bill’s (suburban) comments represent the thinking of several of the teachers. He analyzed one particular discussion that he felt was very successful by stating:

What has really made this dialogue, this discussion, as rich as it was is the painful research that we did. [The students] went in and they may have looked at two hundred articles between them, and then ultimately brought all of that back into this arena.

He continued:

These young people can’t walk in just cold, [with the teacher] saying “OK, just talk.” There’s something that is predetermining the topic of discussion. The teacher has to provide the students with some form of a catalyst – a reading, a quot[ation], a passage – and they’re supposed to read it, consider it, and be super critical of it before they walk into the arena [classroom].

Frank (urban) suggested that informed students help each other build knowledge:

[When students] are interacting with each other they’re pooling their skills and knowledge, and their ability to present ideas verbally ... they are bringing in reading materials and using their initiative for bringing material, as well as their own research development.

As students build knowledge, a role for teachers during discussion is to monitor inaccurate or incorrect comments. Alex (suburban), for example, clarified students’ thinking by directing discussions away from “faulty” or “incorrect” facts contributed by students.

[I]f that is not addressed, then the discussion will not serve the purpose of giving information to the students. The teacher needs to have the factual knowledge in mind in order to make sure the information being discussed is accurate and correct.

Cathy (suburban) said she wanted to keep her students’ discussions close to the content they were reading: “What I like about using discussion is that ... it is tied to the subject matter and content ... the talk is about what is in the book.” Classroom discussion helps students “think a bit more” about the topic. As Alex (suburban) said, discussions require students to develop a “higher level of thinking skills” about the subject under discussion. He described higher-level thinking as the ability to organize a collection of information about one topic so it could inform a different, related topic.

While discussion is used to clarify subject matter for students, teachers in this study also use classroom discussion to present subject matter to students who are not prepared for class. Four teachers mentioned their frustration that students often come to class without having completed their research or reading about a subject. These teachers admitted to a form of defensive teaching where they lowered their expectations for student preparation, and spent time during class discussions to explore the subject matter. Alex’s (suburban) comment typified the other teachers’ comments about this: “you can’t rely on the kids to read these days, or to take very good notes ... so they need to be able to interact and play with the information to figure it out.” Elaine (urban) planned “choral readings” with her classes before discussions: “I know that [reading together out loud] sounds ‘babyish,’ but I do it with them because those who haven’t read are at a loss. So, I feel like, let’s just do it right then and there.” Cathy (suburban) recalled that she increased the frequency of discussions about “textbook information” as a way for students who have read to share information with those who have not: “Students are reading less and less. If they are going to read less, then they are going to have to discuss more.” Frank (urban) suggested that listening to the classroom discussion may allow students to

learn information: “I hope that they’ll be able to make connections... if the folks who have not done any preparation... are listening, they can glean something from the comments.”

Finally, recitation was reported to be a valid type of classroom discussion and a technique to increase student knowledge. The teachers transmit knowledge to their students and assess their students’ understanding through recitations. Elaine (urban) reported using recitation during activities she called “quiz shows.” Teams of students competed to answer her questions correctly. She described the interaction and purpose in the following way:

If we are having a quiz show, where half of the class is on one side and half on the other, then I’ll read the question and see who can get the answer. I can cover the same thing [privately with] textbook questions that I cover [publicly with] the quiz show discussions, but they have to prepare for them so their team can win.

Cathy (suburban) suggested that recitations were, perhaps, not as effective in building student knowledge as other types of discussion, but still found value in using them:

This is not my choice of how discussion is to be used, but it does serve a definite educational purpose if I were reviewing for a test, or after a chapter/unit had been covered. It is an effective way to make sure the students... read the textbook and understand the main points.

4.1.2. *Exposure to multiple perspectives*

A second reason these teachers consider teaching with discussion is to expose students to multiple perspectives of the subject matter. The interactions among the students and the teacher allow for the consideration of several ideas and points of view. The teachers plan discussions in an attempt to expose multiple perspectives, and to determine how well students understand perspectives other than their own. Some of the perspectives are presented when students share findings from reading and research, and when students share from a personal point of view. Cathy (suburban) reported using such discussions by bringing up topics on which

her students had an array of knowledge. Her goal was not to reach a consensus or draw a conclusion but to “engage” students and draw out “alternative ideas to the topic.” She thought this kind of discussion helped to give her students practice understanding classmates’ viewpoints. Elaine (urban) felt similarly:

I want them [students] to at least look at other sources of information, other points of view, other experiences... [to] see things from a larger point of view... I want them to become critical thinkers, and to realize that they can learn from a lot of different sources, not just... what they agree with or are familiar with.

Frank (urban) recalled that he also discussed topics familiar to his students. His purpose was similar: students’ points of view would be explored through the talk.

[I]f they are involved in... talking and reacting with me, then we are going to wind up, if all goes well, with several points of view, many points of view, between boys and girls and different ideas.

Frank wanted to direct students toward several points of view without “parading” the facts past them during a lecture. Frank explained how using discussion “in this part of town” (the inner city) had the potential of exposing students to different points of view:

I think it is easiest for us in this part of town to see real differences in the traditional facts that are placed in the history texts, or different sides of the issues. I mean we have many points of view represented here, right? And that’s the joy of working here in this part of town. Different issues are always here in the classroom, and I have to think of them too. For example, just the way people see the world and people react to different things like who’s in power, how you present yourself, and different definitions about the rightness of a society, and appropriate behavior.

These teachers also use discussion to explore multiple points of view by assigning a role, or

viewpoint, to a student. Bill (suburban) took this approach when he reported engaging his class in an examination of different historical perspectives. He set up “contrived” discussions from particular time periods in American history and then used role-playing and questions to challenge students’ understanding of how decisions were made and what people believed. For example, his students role-played discussions among congressmen in 1789. Students researched a role, assumed that character, then reenacted a congressional hearing. Some students represented people from the present day as well, and entered the discussion by bringing knowledge that was different or unknown in the 1700s. As this diverse group tried to question, negotiate, and converse on a specific topic, students addressed multiple points of view across multiple eras of history. Elaine (urban) also used role-playing, through mock trials and mock editorials, for this purpose. She directed the discussion by placing the students in very specific roles. In turn, these roles served as a constant guide for the interactions during the classroom discussions.

Teachers report that discussion is useful when they detect that their students are biased, have not considered other points of view, or have a shallow understanding of what is being discussed. Frank (urban) told of a current events discussion where students were only providing a “Democrat’s argument,” so he questioned their comments from a “Republican’s perspective:”

I’ve had enough experience with it [presenting alternative perspectives], and I know what I need to do to challenge students, or to make them angered or opinionated about a viewpoint.

Deborah (urban) and Bill (suburban) used strategies similar to Frank when presenting their students with different perspectives.

Deborah:

I guess I use this [presenting alternative perspectives] because I am trying to get them to see that there are other points of view because they [the students’ perspectives] are so narrow. They hide behind this “I know this is right” attitude.

So I will say something like, “Well, what if it were different than you believe?”

Bill:

I see myself coming in and engaging people in almost a Socratic dialogue ... Throw questions, prompt. I do that an awful lot in ... large groups especially ... I take on a persona, I take on a position that I know will spark a reaction from the [class] ... to elicit dialogue and a reaction from them.

These teachers see student diversity – differences in areas such as cultural background, ethnicity, gender, race, learning styles, and ability – positively and negatively relative to exposing students to multiple perspectives. Diversity offers the potential for an increased awareness of different perspectives and ideas during the classroom discussions. Students with different backgrounds may provide a wide range of viewpoints about an issue. As Alex (suburban) mentioned, if no one had a different perspective or point of view than his, then the discussions would quickly end. Diversity also has social benefits because it requires students to interact with classmates with whom they typically may not have contact during the school day.

However, teachers in this study think that student diversity increases conflict and disagreement when students question and challenge one another. This often results because students do not understand other students who are different from them, be it in point of view or ability level. The teachers report that they talk more, and begin to dominate the classroom interactions, when their students become embroiled in conflict. By limiting student talk, teachers control the voicing of different ideas and opinions. While discussion is used to expose students to different perspectives, teachers monitor the interactions closely and are quite concerned about any negative results of controversy.

4.2. *Discussion competence as the subject matter*

These teachers use classroom discussion to teach their students how to discuss. As students discuss subject matter, teachers will provide guidance and

feedback about their “discussion skills.” The classroom becomes a location for students to experience and engage in discussion, with the purpose of encouraging students to discuss issues and ideas on their own. In this section I first describe reasons teachers gave for *teaching* discussion, then I describe the strategies teachers used when teaching students to be discussants.

4.2.1. *Reasons for discussion competence*

The teachers report that they want students to learn “how to” engage in fruitful discussions for many of the same reasons that they teach with discussion. If students will engage in discussions outside of the classroom, then the possibility of students building knowledge and thinking in-depth, or exploring multiple perspectives about issues also extends outside of the classroom. Teachers report benefits from teaching with discussion, and they report *potential* benefits for their students from teaching how to engage in discussions. According to Bill (suburban):

You’re building confidence. Most of these people [referring to his students] don’t have the confidence right now to stand up in front of the school board meeting or public library committee ... If I can show students that [an] intellectual exchange of ideas is enjoyable, I mean, dialogue – that kind of an exchange in a non-malicious environment, in a non-threatening environment – can be fun, then I think I’ve done them a service in terms of building a participatory citizen who’s going to be more active in the community. And, I equate activism with human happiness.

Cathy (suburban) made a similar point with her observation that her students “know a lot of things, but they haven’t the experience.”

Another theme that emerged related to citizenship education. During their interactions students practice with discussion skills and ultimately make decisions as a group. As such, they begin taking the role of democratic citizens. Bill (suburban), for example, outlined this theme directly:

it is the *process* [of discussion] that I’m most intrigued with. I think the process of dialogue, of

exchanging ideas, is fundamental to a democratic society. If they can do it in this artificial environment [a classroom], then I think I’m guaranteed ... that they will then continue those kinds of dialogues at their places of employment, at the dinner table at home, or in a public forum. (emphasis his).

Frank (urban) said he believed that discussion skills help citizens in a democracy communicate better, and that he used discussion to teach future citizens the “lost art” of conversing with one another:

Discussion is almost a type of democracy. I think that we are at the point now where we yell at each other, the way this country is going. I would hope that from what they do in here they would see this and say “wait a minute, it’s OK even if I don’t agree with someone else.” And from that point of view the discussion is defensible.

To support this line of thinking, Elaine (urban) reported her belief that practicing discussion skills helped students in nonschool, social settings:

Kids who go through my classes are learning communication skills so they are becoming better speakers, they are more confident with guests at home, for example, or more able to raise questions to their parents, or more able to find other points of view. So it’s kind of a liberating thing for the kids to learn these personal, social skills. It’s one thing to be grappling with [course] content, but they are also growing personally.

Similar to the purpose of preparing citizens, these teachers think discussion skills will help students who may not interact with peers. Students may refuse to engage in classroom discussions, believing their contributions are not valued by the class. Teachers report that one reason students do not participate is that they feel they are “different” from the rest of the class in some way; They are shy, intimidated, represent a minority view, differ racially from the majority of the class, or believe they do not have a voice in the classroom or larger community. This concerns teachers because discussion is meant to encourage participation and learning,

not thwart it. Bill (suburban), for example, was quite direct about gender, commenting that girls and boys talk differently. He said boys talk more frequently, but when girls do talk it is after more reflection. He explained that “boys tend to just spout off and not necessarily think through what they are going to say whereas girls really have thought through it ahead of time.” He attempted to overcome the high frequency of talk from boys by directing his comments to girls and telling his classes about his observations of gender differences during discussions.

Elaine’s (urban) comment was similar: “Women aren’t as willing to voice opinions ... I think that unless you teach the boys to listen to the girls, and teach the girls to speak, we won’t lose the gender thing.” She mentioned that girls may feel especially intimidated when they are in discussions with exuberant, loud boys. She recounted a time when two girls were asked to give an opinion after three loud boys gave theirs: “you hardly heard the girls who followed them, real quiet, real hurried, like they didn’t think anybody was listening.”

Teachers in this study teach discussion directly because they believe that students need skills in discussing and that these skills require instruction. Bill (suburban) suggested that all students are capable of discussing, but they need to know “how to participate” in classroom discussions, and they require “quite a bit of practice in learning how to discuss.” Similarly, Elaine (urban) described how previous experience with classroom discussion helps students become more mature discussants:

They are not used to us (teachers) giving them the ball. So often teachers will present the stuff and not have very many people answer (the teacher’s) questions ... So then, when we want them to think on their own, they get really nervous.

As students develop discussion abilities, they are better prepared to participate in discussions that have an objective. After describing a class session during which students shared varied and diverse opinions, Alex (suburban) reported that opinions are important, but

they have to lead to something. For example, if the discussion is on abortion, and all that is thrown out is a bunch of opinions about abortion, then the result doesn’t necessarily lead to any end goal.

To provide students with the skills needed to participate in fruitful discussions, teachers teach them explicitly.

4.2.2. *How discussion is taught*

These teachers think of discussion as a skill that requires practice sessions. At times they plan discussions so students may practice engaging in verbal interactions with one another. They believe that students become better discussants when they watch the teacher model appropriate behavior during a discussion, then receive opportunities to participate. Because discussions rely on student input, and require “quite a bit of practice in learning how to discuss,”⁵ teachers become highly involved in teaching students directly about necessary discussion skills. Bill (suburban) explained that “[Discussion] is nothing you walk into. It is something you literally teach the students to do over a period of time.” When teaching students “how to” discuss, teachers provide direct instruction and coaching on the particulars of interacting with others.

Deborah (urban) said the development of students’ “social skills and the recognition of their abilities ... is an absolute requirement” for successful discussions, and these both occur as students practice discussing. Elaine (urban) also found that students needed practice speaking and interacting:

when I want them to think [and talk] on their own, they get really nervous. [Some] say “we are too nervous, don’t make us talk.” We have a topic of the day or a question of the day. It may be anything from a topic in the news such as “How do you feel about gays in the military,” to “What was the best thing about your three-day weekend?” It doesn’t matter, it is whatever they choose. And I model it first ... Then [a student]

⁵ A comment made by Bill, during an interview.

introduces a topic and has to give their example or their answer. Then we go around the room.

Teachers reported that they often pre-teach discussion skills to their students in an attempt to front load behaviors, attitudes, and interactions they consider are critical for classroom discussions. Elaine (urban) recalled that she sets time aside to prepare students for discussions, beginning the first day of school. She reported that students needed to be told about courtesy, respect, and manners when talking, and possibly disagreeing, with classmates. She accomplished this through explicit instruction:

I spend a lot of time at the beginning of class teaching them about respect and about listening, and that it is important to have a voice and also to let others to have a voice, and the whole process of discernment.

Generally, teachers in this study require students to adhere to surprisingly few rules during discussions. Other than a requirement to listen and respect their classmates' rights to share their opinions and ideas, these teachers often do not teach a specific list of "do's and don't". They emphasize the intent of rules, rather than the rules themselves. Alex (suburban) recalled telling his students to respect others and not offend classmates:

it's very essential that they respect each others' ideas...I tell them I don't care what you say as long as it's not personal, against anyone here at school, anybody in this classroom, against your teacher, and it's within good taste, you can go ahead and say it. OK? and that's kind of the ground rules. Also, you must listen to other people.

But Alex also reported that he limited the topics and opinions students put forth, especially at the beginning of the year:

I think you have a right to express your opinions, but there are acceptable and not acceptable opinions to express. If someone starts talking about how to remove the current form of government and replace it with an Aryan Nation type of

a government, then that is not an acceptable opinion to put forth.

While diversity in a classroom may concern teachers because they perceive a greater potential for controversy, teachers reported they anticipated problems. They taught students to listen to classmates' comments, and not pre-judge a comment based on an opinion or belief they held about a student. Inherent in this is the idea of a classroom community. "Community," as described by these teachers, is comprised of attributes such as trust and respect for one another, feelings of personal safety, an appropriate size of the group, and common goals for exploring issues and course-content together. Teachers tell students to view the class as a community. Doing so, teachers report, will make students more inclined to interact with one another. This is something that does not happen without effort by the teacher and willingness by the students. Teachers make efforts to earn students' trust, and students are held accountable to respect their classmates. Frank (urban) explained:

I don't think I need that same trust for a lecture [as I do for a discussion]... Kids have got to trust me, and they have to trust each other. Because if they don't trust each other, then they will never share their real ideas.

Teachers also reported that they reminded their students to consider the discussion as a whole and analyze the interactions. The teachers hope to instill in their students the ability to consider the "type" of talk that is occurring. Elaine (urban), for example, recalled that she reminded her students about the purpose of the discussion with prompts such as: "This isn't a debate right now, it is hearing everybody's point of view." Bill (suburban) expressed this idea when he explained that students need to develop the ability to "step away from the discussion" and not be solely focused on presenting their personal view.

4.3. *Summary of findings*

Below is a brief description of the two purposes of discussion: discussion as a method of instruction, and discussion competence as the subject matter.

4.3.1. *Discussion as a method of instruction*

Teachers report that they use discussion as a method of instruction for two primary reasons. First, it encourages students to build their own knowledge of the subject matter. Second, discussion exposes students to multiple perspectives.

Teachers in this study believe that the process of discussing increases student motivation to make connections between what they talk about in school and what is happening in the world around them. The result is more in-depth learning about a topic, which helps students recognize connections between topics and concepts rather than merely comparing facts. The teachers believe that discussions will help students understand the subject matter more clearly, because the process of talking clarifies their thinking. Teachers plan discussions in an attempt to expose their students to multiple perspectives on a topic, and to determine how well students understand perspectives other than their own.

4.3.2. *Discussion competence as the subject matter*

The teachers in this study use classroom discussion to teach their students how to discuss. When discussion is a curriculum outcome, teachers have purposes for *teaching* discussion, and they explicitly teach students how to be discussants.

Teachers report that they want their students to develop discussion skills for many of the same reasons that they teach with discussion. If students will engage in discussions outside of the classroom, then the possibility of students building knowledge and exploring multiple perspectives about issues also extends outside of the classroom. An additional purpose for teaching students how to engage in discussion related to citizenship education and preparing students to discuss issues and policies.

Teachers think of discussion as a skill that requires practice sessions. At times they plan discussions so students may practice engaging in verbal interactions with one another. They believe that students become better discussants when they watch the teacher model appropriate behavior during a discussion, then receive opportunities to practice engaging in discussions.

5. Implications

The teachers in this study do not plan and use classroom discussion only as an alternative method to group work, lecture, recitation, or other methods of instruction. They also “teach discussion” to their students, emphasizing the skills and dispositions needed for this unique form of classroom talk. Here, I focus on four implications of this study: (1) teachers’ use of classroom discussion; (2) teaching students how to discuss and the role of teachers as discussion leaders; (3) suggestions for educating teachers about classroom discussion; and (4) areas for future research.

5.1. *Teachers use of classroom discussion*

Teachers are not fully credited with the amount of thought they give to classroom interactions. Prior research on classroom discussion claimed that teachers consider “discussion” to be any form of teacher–student interaction (Cazden, 1988; Dillon, 1984, 1990; Gall & Gall, 1990; Wilen, 1990). While this study confirms that teachers consider most classroom interactions to be a discussion, teachers conceptualize discussion in a variety of ways, and structure the interactions to have characteristics and purposes that meet specific lesson objectives.

Recitation is the most frequent form of interaction between teachers and students, and teachers believe it to be a viable type of discussion. The teachers I examined also use discussion to promote higher-level thinking skills such as exploring conflicting viewpoints, evaluating data, and making policy decisions. These teachers lead these discussions so students have opportunities to better understand the topic or issue being discussed. They also plan discussions that have more of an assessment purpose. During the discussion, teachers evaluate student understanding of the topic, and they assess their students’ discussion competence. While I draw a distinction between discussion as method and discussion as outcome, the teachers in this study often combine these two purposes; They use discussion to teach subject matter, but they also teach students the skills needed to discuss during these same discussions.

5.2. *Teaching students to discuss*

Teachers in this study assume a variety of roles during classroom discussion. If students lack the skills and dispositions needed to talk about an issue, then discussion becomes the curriculum goal. While the teachers suggest that they monitor the content of the discussion and assess students' capabilities at discussing an issue with classmates, they agree that fruitful discussions of important issues only occur if students know how to discuss. These teachers must consider discussion to be a curriculum outcome if they plan to use it as a method of instruction.

Teachers need to be involved in the classroom interactions. Teachers comment that students talk differently, and that the gender, ethnicities, and races of the students often are the cause of these differences (Larson, 1999). During discussions, teachers must be aware of who is talking as well as what is being said. As teachers monitor the classroom discussion, their goal is to provide an atmosphere that encourages participation from all students and to promote a discussion that is content rich. For example, at times teachers may limit the talk of the "talkers" in a class so those who are not participating are put in a position to verbalize their thinking; or the teacher may request a student to support an opinion with facts.

5.3. *Teacher education*

Teacher educators and administrators might consider that teachers have multiple conceptions of classroom discussion, and that each conception serves a different educational purpose. Rather than focusing on teaching particular "types" of discussion, teacher educators might concentrate on the purposes that each serves. Discussion is unique to other methods of instruction. The teacher must assess students' mastery of content, *and* the teacher must assess the students' mastery of the instructional method. Discussions will only enhance student learning of an issue if students are skilled at the process of discussing. Pre-service teachers need to develop techniques for assessing both the content and the process of a classroom discussion.

If teachers are going to use discussion, they need to understand how to lead it and have evidence that it will work with students. Teacher educators can model how to lead discussion and think out loud with their students about the decisions being made during a discussion session. Practice leading discussions seems important, especially since discussion may be used both as a method of instruction, and as the content of the lesson. My sample of teachers used discussion frequently, and smoothly moved from teaching with discussion to teaching the abilities needed when learning "how to discuss." However, they were also experienced teachers, having led many discussions in many settings.

5.4. *Future research*

As is the nature of grounded theory research, companion studies, with increasingly diverse samples, are needed. This new data might prompt the revision of the suggestions presented in this study by adding to them, refining them, and elaborating on them. I suggest three areas of research that will extend this study.

Further research is needed to determine how teachers assess classroom discussions. If teachers consider two purposes for discussion (a method and an outcome), then how do they assess whether their purposes have been met? Rubrics and rating scales for determining if a classroom discussion met an "objective" would be welcome additions to the discussion research base. This assessment could determine whether student learning of academic content is enhanced through discussion, and whether students gain "discussion competence."

A second possibility for future research pertains to student diversity and its influence on discussion and student participation. Student differences likely influence how discussion is used in the classroom. When a classroom of students differ in areas such as race, culture, or socioeconomic levels, are the discussions affected? Teachers' descriptions might allow for a better understanding of potential factors that influence the use of discussion and may provide insight into ways teachers might encourage more student participation, even when outside influences make discussion difficult.

A third research area is to move beyond social studies classrooms and begin to determine how teachers use classroom discussion to teach in the humanities and sciences. Do teachers of these content areas have similar conceptions of discussion? What purposes do they believe classroom discussion serves? How do they teach students to become competent discussants?

For each of these three suggestions classroom observations of discussions are also needed. Descriptions of what classroom discussions “look like” will provide additional information about using discussion as an instructional method. Observations and teachers’ conceptions/thinking are a needed step in helping teachers address the intricacies of using discussion effectively.

6. Conclusion

My goal has been to explore the distinction between discussion as method and discussion as outcome. If pre-service and in-service teachers consider their purposes of discussion and assess their students’ ability to engage in discussion, then discussion can serve a “two-pronged” function: (1) to enhance student learning of content; and (2) to improve students’ skills and abilities at interacting with others. The objectives for using discussion, the kinds of explicit instruction that are provided to student discussants, the rationales for teaching or using discussion, the relationship of classroom rules to discussion rules, and teachers’ skills as discussion leaders all hinge on this difference. Considering how teachers use discussion is insufficient when exploring teachers’ purposes for classroom discussion. Instead the focus should explore how teachers *use* and *teach* discussion.

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