

# TALKING IN CLASS

USING DISCUSSION TO ENHANCE TEACHING AND LEARNING



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## 3 An Activity to Learn How to Facilitate Discussion

Our conversations with the supervisors of preservice teachers suggest that facilitating meaningful discussions is a common and serious difficulty for beginning teachers. How does one learn to be skillful at leading discussion? The problem is a complex one. The ten tips suggested in Chapter 2 are a start, but much more is ultimately involved. A teacher certainly needs knowledge about a particular subject and needs to have in mind some worthwhile purposes for the discussion. As with any skill, one's craft develops over time as a teacher has many experiences that allow him or her to anticipate, draw from previous successes, and avoid past failures. Textbooks and methods classes can offer advice, which will make some sense after attempts, assessment, and refinement. We offer here a beginning model for facilitating classroom discussions. A close look at one activity reveals something about the nature of discussion, and can suggest some additional behaviors that will influence discussion to be active, purposeful, and thought-provoking.

In 1982, Johannessen, Kahn, and Walter offered a scenario activity developed by Hillocks and called "What Is Courageous Action?" as a tool that would engage students in learning defining strategies. The activity presents the learners with a set of specific situations and challenges the learners to decide the extent to which the behavior of the characters conforms to the requisite conditions of a concept. For example, one of the eight "Courageous Action" scenarios poses this situation:

Corporal Jewkes is lost in the woods near a village that, unknown to him, is in enemy hands. The village is heavily guarded and the surrounding area mined. He makes his way through the mines, of which he is unaware, and into the village. Not knowing what is inside, he enters the first house he comes to. It contains a gun emplacement, but the guards are asleep. Jewkes quickly kills the guards and takes the guns. To this point, should we consider Jewkes' actions courageous? Why or why not? (Johannessen, Kahn, and Walter 1982, 35)

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Using a scenario activity of the sort that Johannessen, Kahn, and Walter share can provide the means for training teachers to lead meaningful discussions. The scenario activity was a key element in the work of Hillocks, Kahn, and Johannessen (1983) when they helped students to learn and use strategies for composing extended definition. While a scenario activity can engage students in attempting to define an abstract concept, it can also serve as a *gateway* activity to prepare students for discussing the concept as it applies to situations and characters in the subsequent reading (Hillocks 1995; Smagorinsky, McCann, and Kern 1987; Johannessen, Kahn, and Walter 1982). We propose here that if a teacher can engage students in the discussion of a specific scenario activity, he or she can learn much about the craft of leading any authentic discussion.

### **A Brief History of the Scenario Activity**

One must acknowledge the importance of the work of Hillocks, Kahn, and Johannessen (1983) and Johannessen, Kahn, and Walter (1982) in their design and sharing of scenario activities, especially represented by one about *courageous action*. Hillocks (1995) reports that the “What Is Courageous Action?” scenarios are based on an examination of courage in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, which provides a framework for defining an abstract concept. In the kind of discussion that the “Courageous Action” scenarios invite, a conversation begins by raising doubt in regard to a concept about which participants may have assumed thorough understanding. For example, everyone in a sense “knows” what courageous action is. Another participant challenges that assumed understanding by posing questions or offering certain conditions for testing rules that apply to that concept. As a participant attempts to refine a position, the conversational partner offers additional examples to test any rules that one might assert. Many English teachers would be satisfied with class discussions that include these features. Here is a sample portion of an interchange about the scenario above:

*Milicent:* Jewkes is being courageous. He’s in a war. It’s a dangerous situation.

*Franklin:* But he didn’t know about the dangers. He was lucky the guards were asleep.

*Esme:* What if he knew about the mines? Then wouldn’t that be courageous?

The scenario activity, then, promotes the kind of close examination of concepts that one sees in the work of Aristotle and Plato and encourages participants to think critically.

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### **A Sample Scenario Activity**

Sample scenario activities are available in the work of Johannessen, Kahn, and Walter (1982) and in Smagorinsky, McCann, and Kern (1987). The construction of a scenario activity is relatively simple, yet it requires some careful preparation. Presumably one would choose to explore some concept with which the students have some knowledge and experience rather than an idea that is irrelevant or esoteric. Situations in the literature that students typically study in school will invite them to make judgments about such concepts as justice, romantic love, and friendship. One can be assured that students have knowledge and opinions about such concepts. In contrast, such concepts as *deconstruction*, *trends*, *conflicts*, and *transportation* may be abstract, but they are not likely to represent unifying thematic issues in imaginative literature, nor are they likely to be themes about which students are personally invested.

For the scenario activity to support discussion, each scenario must be problematic and raise doubt about some aspect of the concept that is the focus of the current inquiry. For example, a set of six or seven scenarios might help students explore a key concept. The following scenarios provide examples of situations that challenge students to tackle the difficult concept of justice. The activity appears here out of its instructional context. Teachers are not likely to engage students in exploring an abstract concept for its own sake. In a coherent unit of instruction, the discussion of the scenarios might serve as a gateway activity (Hillocks 1995) to help students activate prior knowledge and form concepts so that they have a critical framework on which to rely for subsequent judgments and discussion about a reading that raises questions about the justice of characters' behavior. Examples of conceptual units organized around questions about justice can be found in Smagorinsky (2002) and in Smagorinsky and Gevinson (1989). Although the concept of justice is a tough one, it is also something about which students have often thought: "Are my parents justified in grounding me for coming home after curfew?" "Is a teacher justified in assigning homework over a holiday break?" The situations that are described in the scenarios are familiar to the students. The problematic nature of the scenario and the familiarity of the situation promote wide and active participation in the discussion. The discussion later in this chapter is based on the use of the following scenario activity.

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### Justice at Floodrock High?

#### *Your Group Task:*

The Student Council at Floodrock High School seeks your help in judging the justice of the behavior of the faculty in the following situations. With two or three other students, examine each of the situations and answer the questions that follow. It is important that you explain your decisions. After you have examined all the situations, you should have a list of guidelines that would describe just action.

#### *The Situations:*

1. In a first-hour Health class, Mr. Phalva, a veteran teacher, discovered Karla Gluko chewing bubblegum. Mr. Phalva had announced at the beginning of the term that he would not tolerate anyone bringing food, drink, or candy into the class. Mr. Phalva did not like the idea that Karla would violate his classroom discipline policy, and he was especially disturbed that Karla would be chewing sugar-sweetened bubblegum after the class had just finished a unit in which they studied the dangers of consuming too much processed, refined sugar. Mr. Phalva insisted that Karla stand up in front of the class while he lectured her about chewing gum in class, noting her lack of thoughtfulness and sensitivity. Furthermore, he predicted that by the time Karla was twenty-one, she would have no teeth. As part of Karla's punishment, Mr. Phalva ordered her to write a ten-page report about the dangers of consuming refined sugar, and he would not allow her to return to class until the report was complete. Were Mr. Phalva's actions just? Explain.

2. During World Geography class, as Mr. Strata lectured, Harlan Fleming noisily wadded a sheet of notebook paper into a ball and sailed it across the room and into the wastebasket next to the teacher's desk. The wad of paper rattled around the metal wastebasket before falling to the bottom. Mr. Strata stopped his lecture and filled out a disciplinary referral form about Harlan. Harlan protested: "You never said we couldn't throw paper away during class." Mr. Strata responded, "You should know by now what kind of behavior is appropriate for class." Harlan went immediately to the dean's office where he was assigned a three-day in-school suspension. After Harlan's departure, Mr. Strata told the class, "From now on, if anyone throws a wad of paper across the room, he or she will

be sent to the dean's office and will probably be suspended." Were the actions of Mr. Strata and the dean just? Explain.

3. At the beginning of the school year, several bathrooms were vandalized: graffiti on the walls, wads of wet tissue paper stuck to the ceiling, broken tissue paper dispensers. Mr. Gristmeyer, an English teacher, identified three students who he thought he saw coming out of a bathroom at the time that it was vandalized. The three students—Frank Roscoe, Bob Bellamy, and Alejandro Mosca—were brought to the dean's office. Mr. Swift, one of the school's deans, decided that Alejandro was the culprit, noting his record of many discipline problems while attending Floodrock High. When Alejandro protested, Mr. Swift said, "I don't want to hear about it. You've done enough already." Mr. Swift then suspended Alejandro for three days and assigned him to a Saturday work detail to help clean the washrooms. Were Mr. Swift's actions just? Explain.

4. As part of the initiation to the varsity football team, new members are expected to perform a challenging task. Seniors design some awkward and sometimes dangerous actions for the juniors to complete. This year, two students—Mario Candida and Salomé Brown—were directed to climb to the roof of the school, take down the U.S. flag, and raise several old football jerseys on the flagpole in its place. The seniors told Mario and Salomé that if they didn't follow orders, they would be ostracized: that is, no one would talk to them, no one would give either of them the ball during a game, and all the seniors would torment them in the locker room. Around three o'clock in the morning, Mario and Salomé climbed to the roof of the high school building to complete their mission. Two police officers who were patrolling the area soon spotted Mario and Salomé and arrested them for trespassing. Later, a judge assigned the two boys to complete one hundred hours of community service by working in a food pantry for the homeless. Did Mario and Salomé receive a just sentence? Explain.

5. When the principal at Floodrock High School learned that students were buying drugs on the school grounds, he solicited the aid of the county sheriff's Drug Enforcement Task Force. The sheriff sent two undercover officers to investigate the problem. The officers dressed in casual street clothes and approached selected students, offering to sell them marijuana. At first they found no one interested.

They focused attention on one student—Albie Cummin—who usually wore a concert T-shirt and torn blue jeans and had very long hair. Three days in a row, the officers approached Albie and asked him if he would like to buy some marijuana. On these three occasions, Albie said that he wasn't interested. On the fourth day, when the officers approached him again, Albie agreed to buy one ounce of marijuana. The officers immediately identified themselves as sheriff's police and brought Albie into the dean's office. During questioning, Albie could not provide any more information about the buying and selling of marijuana on the school grounds or anywhere in the community. Albie was suspended for three days and forced to enter a substance abuse rehabilitation program at Floodrock Community Hospital. Was Albie treated justly? Explain.

6. Floodrock High School has had a very extensive intramural sports program. Last winter a new basketball that the athletic department purchased for use in the intramural games was discovered missing and presumed stolen. The intramural director and the principal were so disturbed with the theft that they decided to cancel all intramural activities indefinitely. The principal announced to the whole school that there would be no more intramural activities until the missing basketball was returned. Is the principal's action justified? Explain.

It is important to consider the construction of a scenario activity because it says much about the spirit of the discussion that one would want to promote. A few years ago, we shared a scenario activity at a session of a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) convention. After the session, one of the participants asked if we could provide the *answer key* for the activity. Obviously there was no answer key because the problems represented in the activity prompt many reasonable responses. A key point in using a scenario activity to promote active discussion is that the conversation cannot be scripted to conform to preconceived answers. This fact is an exciting feature and a significant challenge. The discussion can go in many different directions, as Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen (1984a, 1984b) remind us about discussions of controversial topics. The point of the discussion is not to recite the answers but to promote certain habits of mind that could be labeled critical thinking, analysis, evaluation, and argument.

## **Modeling the Process**

Obviously, one does not simply distribute a scenario activity and encourage the students to follow the directions and discuss each situation. The teacher needs to connect the discussion to some related outcomes: perhaps the scenarios will lead to the expression of criteria that can be developed into an extended definition; perhaps the criteria will be used as a framework for judging the behavior of characters in literature or film and writing an analysis of the behavior. Students need to know the context for their efforts. Beyond attending to these basic considerations, the teacher also needs to show students *how* to discuss a scenario. The teacher would be wise to use the first scenario as a means for modeling the kind of talk that one would expect in a small group.

The following transcript reveals a teacher leading the discussion of the first scenario in the “Justice at Floodrock High?” activity. After describing a purpose for the discussion and reviewing the procedures, the teacher turns the students’ attention to the first scenario, which she reads aloud. In this case, the teacher anticipates that the students will derive a set of criterion statements, such as “The punishment must fit the crime,” but she does not have in mind a specific set of criteria to impose on the class. The following dialogue represents only a portion of an extended discussion about one scenario. The teacher sets the context for the activity and starts discussion by asking the students to react to a character’s behavior. The teacher might begin by saying something like this: “In the play we will be reading next week, a central character claims that he has been the victim of injustice, although he does not explain his claim. We are invited to judge for ourselves whether or not the punishment that the character suffers results appropriately from his own actions. Our discussion of the scenarios today should help us to develop a framework for judging the character’s behavior and for evaluating his claim that he is the victim of gross injustice. So, Juan, what did your group decide in the first scenario?”

*Juan:* There’s no reason to push it that far. She did something pretty minor.

*Teacher:* Okay. Sheila.

*Sheila:* I agree with Juan, but I would also like to say that he didn’t hear her side of the story. Maybe it just sort of slipped her mind, because I’ve done that before, because I can’t chew gum in my French class, and it’s slipped my mind before because I forget, and then my teacher just gives me a warning, which I think he should have done because there

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are possibilities, and I think you should always hear both sides of the story before taking action.

*Teacher:* Okay. So part of it—you mean, in your class, you got a warning because it was like the first instance of this violation, and so you would expect that, and so that would be a more appropriate response, and then in addition, if someone—you're found out, you're found violating the rule, you have a chance to defend yourself.

*Sheila:* Yeah.

*Teacher:* Okay. Nadia.

*Nadia:* I think when he told the class that they can't chew gum that he should have also told the consequences of it, because I'm sure if she would have known how severe the punishment would be, she would have never considered chewing gum.

*Teacher:* It's not enough to know there's a rule, but you have to be aware from the beginning of the consequences for violating the rule. Okay, that seem like another rule there. Bernice.

*Bernice:* It's not like she disrupted the class at all by chewing gum, but he made it so it was a disruption, maybe made a mockery of her, just yelling at her in front of the class. I think that's really wrong. That's overstepping the boundaries as a teacher.

*Teacher:* So to add to what Juan said, he is—it's overkill, especially in the sense that he's publicly humiliating her, and that's—there is no cause for that. Okay. Gunther.

*Gunther:* While I agree with most of what's being said here, I would disagree that you would have to know the exact punishment to go along with the rule, because often there are different circumstances, like, there is a difference between having a little piece of gum shoved in the corner of your mouth and someone sitting in front of the class blowing huge bubbles and stretching it out, whatever. I think there are different circumstances and different things which would determine the punishment after these facts.

*Teacher:* You wouldn't want the system of justice to be so rigid that if you do this, you automatically get this punishment with no possibility for leniency or no flexibility.

*Gunther:* Right, the punishment should match the offense, and creating general umbrella rules like "no chewing gum or this will happen" often doesn't match the intended situation.

*Teacher:* Would you want someone to give a sense of the severity of the punishment, like, how serious I see this kind of an infraction?

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*Gunther:* Yes, but I don't think you should be rigid.

Although the teacher may endorse many of the students' observations, she has not imposed on the students a set of rules to define justice. Apparently, the teacher begins with the assumption that the students already know something about justice; and the teacher apparently believes that given the right circumstances, the students would be able to derive reasonable criteria and work with each other to express the precise wording of each rule. Gunther notes that "the punishment should match the offense." Juan notes that the teacher met a due process requirement because "he did tell them not to have candy in class," but Nadia adds that "he should have also told the consequences." Furthermore, Sheila observes that "you should always hear both sides of the story before taking action."

Not only are the students able to offer rules, but they readily invent additional examples, or scenarios of their own, to check the validity or accuracy of a statement. For example, Sheila recalls her own experience to argue against rigidly imposing punishment: "Maybe it just sort of slipped her mind . . . because I can't chew gum in my French class, and it's slipped my mind before because I forget, and then my teacher just gives me a warning." Gunther invents an example to illustrate the idea that one must judge the appropriateness of punishment by knowing the circumstances for the offense. "There is a difference," he says, "between having a little piece of gum shoved in the corner of your mouth and someone sitting in front of the class blowing huge bubbles and stretching it out."

In these few exchanges, the students expressed at least three criteria for determining justice. They have challenged each other and have tested each other's claims. As Smagorinsky and Fly (1993) observe, the teacher's behavior in the large-group discussion provides a powerful model for the students' behavior in small-group discussion. What is the teacher's role in the interchange, and what behaviors are students exhibiting that they can build on in small-group discussion and in subsequent large-group discussions?

Obviously the teacher gets the ball rolling by posing the initial question to prompt a reaction to the scenario. In Christoph and Nystrand's language (2001), a teacher makes a "dialogic bid" to prompt the involvement of other thinkers. In response to a student's contribution, the teacher does not make evaluative statements, like "That's right" or "Very good!" or "That's not quite it." Nor does the teacher pose questions to direct the students to express the criteria that she already has in mind. Instead, she occasionally poses questions to prompt students

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to substantiate or illustrate the general claims that they make. The teacher paraphrases often and asks the speaker to verify the accuracy of the paraphrase. The teacher's paraphrases apparently do not discourage the students from participation, and although the teacher sometimes acts as conduit, the students also respond directly to each other. Sheila begins her comments by reacting to her classmate's statement: "I agree with Juan, but I would also like to say that he didn't hear her side of the story." The teacher models the same behavior by connecting parts of the discussion: "So to add to what Juan said . . . it's overkill, especially in the sense that the teacher is publicly humiliating her and that's—there is no cause for that." In the next conversational turn, Gunther follows the pattern by acknowledging the contributions of his classmates: "While I agree with most of what's being said here, I would disagree that you would have to know the exact punishment to go along with the rule."

If the question that is the focus of the class's inquiry is an authentic one, then the teacher's role as discussion leader at this point appears to be a relatively simple one and involves the following behaviors:

- The teacher initiates the discussion and manages the order of the contributors.
- The teacher poses appropriate follow-up questions to prompt students to extend their thinking by providing support or illustrations for their general claims. In other words, the teacher asks questions to encourage the students to be reasonable.
- The teacher paraphrases often to check for clarification.

All of these teacher behaviors serve as models for the students who continue the discussion in small groups.

### **What Happens in Small-Group Discussion?**

After the teacher has modeled the kind of discussion that she hopes students will have in their small groups, she organizes and directs the students into their groups. The small-group discussion allows everyone the opportunity to participate, whereas in the large-group discussion, the more diffident students might hold back from any aggressive and disputatious interchanges. Participation in the small-group activity allows one to try out ideas and refine thought before engaging in the large-group discussion. One would expect to see some of the same behavior that the teacher modeled with the initial scenario as three students tackle another situation. The following dialogue involves three students who are analyzing the second scenario in which a teacher, Mr. Strata, pun-

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ishes a student for throwing a wadded up piece of paper into a metal wastebasket. The student questions the fairness of Mr. Strata's punishment.

*Nadia:* Three days? I think, "Excuse me, sir, go out in the hall," would be satisfactory.

*Ned:* Or maybe, like, a simple detention thing. Three days—I mean, I understand he's yelling at him because he's interrupting the—throwing the paper is not the problem. The problem is that he's making noise and interrupting the lecture.

*Leticia:* Well, maybe he had to make an example of him so that this wouldn't happen again, but I don't think that it was outlandish what he did. I mean . . .

*Nadia:* Yeah, but look at what he says, "From now on, if anyone throws a wad of paper across the room . . ." Okay, *now* he tells the rule, you know, that you're going to be sent to the dean's office. Why didn't he say that prior to, you know?

*Leticia:* Because he didn't think he needed to. You don't expect someone to . . .

*Nadia:* Stuff happens though.

*Ned:* He's probably just saying, "No throwing of anything."

The dialogue represents only a small portion of the talk among the three students. They discussed five scenarios in all, and remained on task for the allotted twenty-five minutes. As the group works toward refining a rule, Nadia asks, "Why didn't he say that prior to, you know?" Nadia's implied claim is that a just teacher should inform students about the rules before he holds anyone accountable for breaking the rules. Leticia cautions, however, that some rules are so well known, that no one needs to repeat them: ". . . he didn't think he needed to. You don't expect someone to. . . ." The students in the small-group exhibit some behaviors that are appropriate for the teacher in the large-group discussion: they let everyone participate; they ask appropriate questions to challenge each other; they invent examples to test claims and extend thinking; and they work toward closure by searching for rules that would represent their thinking about the central concept.

### **What Happens in the Large-Group Discussion?**

The whole-class discussion represented in the dialogue below followed the small-group work with the justice scenarios. One would expect that the students have used the small-group experience to collect their

thoughts, to test their claims under public scrutiny, to defend their positions, and to refine the articulation of concepts. The teacher's role in the subsequent discussion would be to manage the turns in the conversation and provide the forum for the expression of the ideas that the students have recalled or formed. The following discussion focuses again on the second scenario. The teacher does little more than pose the initial question and paraphrase the responses. Note the length of the students' turns, especially compared to the exchanges in the small-group discussion.

*Teacher:* You're claiming that the boy should be punished?

*Leonard:* Like, he threw the paper across the room, like, he should probably just assume that there would be a rule not to do that.

*Teacher:* Okay.

*Leonard:* Like, kill someone or something.

*Teacher:* All right. So certain rules we don't have to be told; we should know. Okay. Sheila.

*Sheila:* He should have been told, because even if some people may know the rules, other people don't really think of it. It may be common knowledge, common sense, but other people, maybe they just didn't think about it because some people don't think about it. I don't think he should have been punished. He should have been warned that if he did it again he would get punished for it.

*Teacher:* All right. So since this is—it might have been disruptive, the teacher should have, because it's the first time, presumably, just given a warning and then moved on. Okay. Violet, what were you going to say?

*Violet:* Well, I was going to say what Sheila said, but, like, also, I mean, I think it's hard because, I mean, yeah, the teacher should have maybe said something, but it's kind of common sense. I mean . . . you're supposed to know what you can or can't do in the classroom. You know you're not supposed to, like, disturb the class. I think a lot of teachers say that, and they don't say, you know, exactly what, they just say, "Don't make any classroom disturbances," and, obviously, you know, throwing a wad of paper across the room into the garbage can is going to make a lot of noise and is going to be a disturbance . . . . but I think the punishment is too harsh.

*Teacher:* So . . . we had an earlier rule that before someone is punished that person should be informed about what the rules are and possible consequences. You're saying in this

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case that you don't have to spell out every rule and every consequence because there might be a general rule—like you don't disrupt the class—and [Harlan's] violated that. Okay. Gunther.

*Gunther:* I basically agree with what has been said.

*Teacher:* So it would be reasonable to expect a student to know not to do that?

*Gunther:* Students have a right to learn, and teachers have a right to teach, and you shouldn't disturb that. I think it was fairly obvious that . . .

*Teacher:* Okay. So if this person has had nine or ten years of experience in school, he should know something about the appropriate decorum in class and would know that's a rule that he was violating. Okay. Sean.

*Sean:* I can't remember what I was going to say.

*Teacher:* All right. Maybe it will come to you; we'll come back to you. Sheila, then Violet.

*Sheila:* I think—I mean, I can hear what Gunther is saying, but I think throwing away a piece of paper isn't always necessarily always a distraction, because, I mean, I've done it before, and I've never disrupted the whole class. I mean, maybe . . .

*Teacher:* Okay.

*Sheila:* I mean, I've done it before and disrupted the class.

*Teacher:* Okay. Sheila's making a confession here today. There might be a case where someone gets up to sharpen a pencil and that sawing away at the pencil causes a disruption, but it's not such a big deal. Some teachers would just say, "Could you just save that for later?" and wouldn't [feel it deserves] any punishment. Okay. Violet.

*Violet:* You wad up a ball of, like, paper, he threw it all the way across the room, causing a distraction, you know, I mean. It's going to be a distraction throwing it across the room.

*Teacher:* It would cause everybody's attention to be focused on that rather than something else that's going on. We might laugh about it. It might fall short, hit Gunther, Gunther would get angry and go after Paul and. . . . Okay. Jeannie.

*Jeannie:* I think that it is common sense that you shouldn't do it, but, like, the person—the person does have a point that, you know, he never said that he couldn't do that. So, I mean, even though it says, "oh, you can't, like, disrupt the class," I think that he should have just gotten a warning, like, if you were talking or something, some classes when you sharpen your pencils—I mean, I don't think you suspend someone for that. So you would just say, you know, "Would you

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please not do that while I'm talking?" I mean, that's the same thing the teacher could have said. He could have said, just, like, "Don't throw away"—like, "Don't throw anything across the room while I'm talking"—and so I think the punishment was too harsh, but he still needs to just give a warning first and then, like, they do it again, like, right after he said don't do, suspend them or do whatever.

In this second large-group discussion, the teacher selects a student to initiate the discussion and then does little more than manage the turns in the conversation. The teacher does not have a long list of questions to drive discussion. The teacher is not probing students to recite the predetermined "correct" answers. The teacher makes no evaluative comments and makes no substantive contributions of her own. Instead, the teacher paraphrases frequently and asks questions to determine if she accurately represented the speakers' contributions.

The teacher merely paraphrases in this exchange. But paraphrasing is an important and developed skill. It requires, first of all, that the discussion leader listen actively and carefully. The leader's function is not to judge the correctness of the responses and search for accurate answers. Instead the discussion leader in the whole-class discussion is trying to understand what the contributors are saying and is attempting to represent the responses as accurately as possible, and to the speaker's satisfaction, before other contributors respond.

One has to wonder, however, if the students actually say anything of substance without the teacher providing corrective feedback or guiding students to correct answers. What do the students do in the large-group discussion when the teacher does little more than paraphrase? In the discussion above, Leonard provides an explanation of his group's analysis of the scenario. He suggests that while a person should be informed of rules, there are certain rules that should be common knowledge and do not need to be reiterated. Sheila and Violet explore Leonard's idea further by noting that there may be exceptions. They work from Leonard's initial observation to note that there is some difficulty in determining when one can assume knowledge of rules and laws and when one must report the rules and laws explicitly. One speaker builds upon the other. Leonard speaks; then Sheila restates what Leonard says but notes an exception; then Violet begins by saying "Well, I was going to say what Sheila said, but. . . ." As the discussion continues, the students offer contexts for their own contributions. Before Gunther offers his own contribution, he notes, "I basically agree with what has been said." When Sheila has her next turn, she begins, "I mean, I can hear what Gunther is saying, but. . . ."

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By the time Jeannie comments, she attempts to put several considerations together in one extended contribution: “I think that it is common sense that you shouldn’t do it, but, like, the person—the person does have a point that, you know, he never said that he couldn’t do that, so, I mean, even though it says, oh, you can’t, like, disrupt the class, but I think that he should have just gotten a warning . . . He could have said . . . don’t throw anything across the room while I’m talking . . . I think the punishment was too harsh but he still needs to just give a warning first . . . ” It appears that the exploration of ideas in the discussion has allowed Jeannie to determine that achieving justice necessitates adhering to several rules: The punishment must fit the crime. One should be held accountable only for the rules or laws about which one has been informed, although there are times when one has to judge whether or not the rules or laws are common knowledge and do not have to be explicitly reiterated. It appears that the discussion has supported Jeannie in reaching these reasonable conclusions about justice, even though the teacher did not pose the series of questions that would guide her down a path to reach teacher-sponsored correct answers. Because Jeannie’s contribution is lengthy and developed, it is uncharacteristic of typical classroom discussions. She is not reciting. Instead, she has measured the observations of others, incorporated the ideas with which she agrees, refined the expression of her ideas, and generally synthesized her own responses and the statements that other students have made throughout the large-group discussion.

The scenario activity described above could engage a class for several days. In some classes, and with some scenarios, it appears that the discussion could go on endlessly. How would anyone know how to bring the discussion to closure after a reasonable period of time? If class discussion is actually no more than recitation, determining closure is easy: the discussion ends when one has heard all the “correct” answers. In a more open-ended discussion, however, several factors guide closure. One would want to judge whether the discussion has become tedious, with students saying more or less the same thing over and over. The discussion leader listens to note signs that the students are demonstrating certain thinking skills. For example, are the students defining a concept by noting reasonable criteria and illustrating or testing the criteria with examples that they are able to interpret? The discussion leader also needs to have in mind some long-range goals. The discussion of justice might be useful in itself. Exploration of the concept might help students to be more articulate, more reasonable, or even more responsible; but the discussion also prepares students for subsequent read-

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ing and writing. Closure might be determined by judging whether students have accessed relevant declarative knowledge and demonstrated appropriate procedural skills to be able to complete subsequent tasks successfully.

### **Conclusion**

We began with the claim that if teachers use a scenario activity as a basis for initiating and developing class discussion, they can learn much about discussion in general. How does the scenario activity help a teacher to develop some skills at leading discussion? Inherent in an activity like “Justice at Floodrock High?” is an assumption that a genuine discussion will begin with the *doubt* raised by an authentic question. The goal is not to repeat the correct answers but to deliberate in a civil and reasonable way about tangible problems. The teacher’s role as discussion leader is not that of a quizmaster; rather, he or she is a manager of the conversation that goes on among the students. The teacher initiates the discussion, keeps track of turns in order to include as many people as possible, poses some follow-up questions to extend the thinking, and occasionally contributes examples to test claims. A key behavior for the teacher is to paraphrase what the students say. Paraphrasing forces one to listen carefully and to avoid making evaluative comments that might stifle contributions. The teacher works toward closure by making judgments about the development of thought and about the progress toward subsequent learning. Apparently simple behaviors, like paraphrasing, take practice; and it is always useful to seek the aid of an observer to help one reflect on the refinement of skills.

One would expect English classes to involve active discussion almost every day as teachers and students examine literature and language and explore significant concepts and themes. The talk should support discovery, promote diversity, and engage students in thinking processes, such as defining, analyzing, and arguing, that transfer to students’ writing and to their interpretation of literature. Few English teachers enter the profession with an easy facility for engaging groups in meaningful discussion. It would be useful for the preservice or beginning teacher to use a scenario activity as the basis for discussion, reflect on the structure and behaviors that promote active involvement in the discussion, and attempt to apply regularly the same structures and behaviors to fashion a classroom environment in which student talk is more than mere recitation.

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Although we have focused here on *techniques* for initiating and sustaining discussion through the use of a scenario activity, the power of discussion accrues over time when the conversation leads students to new and broader understandings. The *substance* and *process* of the discussion are important. It is relatively easy to introduce a topic that many adolescents will want to talk about, but most teachers hope that the conversation is substantive, linking knowledge, transferring to new learning, and creating pathways to new fields of inquiry. The process of frequently conferring with others to tangle with thorny issues and difficult questions exposes students to the benefits of thinking with others and gaining insight from the collisions with alternative and sometimes competing perspectives.

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*“The authors have brought their combined seventy-plus years of classroom experience to bear on making this book an important and delightful read. . . . [I]f you are concerned with good discussion in your classes, you will want to try some of the many fascinating, surefire materials and activities included. The book is a must-read for every teacher, neophyte or pro, concerned with discussion, whatever the subject matter.”*

— George Hillocks, Jr.,  
Professor Emeritus,  
University of Chicago

Experienced teachers know—and new teachers quickly learn—how challenging it is to spark and sustain effective classroom discussions. How can we avoid asking leading questions that make students try to read our minds for a “correct” answer? How can we foster meaningful, focused conversation that produces deeper insights into a specific work or topic?

*Talking in Class* guides readers in developing skills that promote and facilitate *authentic* discussion within the English language arts classroom. Speaking from their own classroom experience, the authors introduce some basic considerations for planning, managing, and evaluating large-group and small-group discussions. Examples of both instructional activities and classroom practices illustrate the ways that discussion prepares students for subsequent learning, specifically in connection to writing and to the reading and interpretation of literature.

The authors also explore how discussion can

- connect many phases and components of the curriculum;
- promote and support inquiry and critical thinking;
- incorporate current, popular technologies, such as blogs and discussion boards;
- and connect students to issues that are important to them and to the broader world of thinkers.

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