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Discussion Strategies for Teaching and Learning

John O'Laughlin

Walden University

EDUC-8100-7 Foundations: Higher Education and Adult Learning

October 3, 2009

### Abstract

This paper explores discussion strategies for teaching and learning. The perspective is from an instructor or facilitator for the purpose of increasing learning effectiveness through applied discussion strategies for students. The interactive nature of discussions and the proactive strategies presented can be applied beyond the classroom to communication settings for business or personal interactions. Let us begin our dialogue.

## Introduction

The use of effective discussions can edify learners and instructors together. To understand the benefit of this interactive approach to learning, let us first consider the options for content presentation. Studies regarding retention of learning by Edgar Dale show a higher capacity to recall subject matter based on the active role of the learner (Dale, 1969). At the low end of learner involvement and participation are passive activities such as receiving a lecture, reading, and viewing audio visual presentations. At a higher level of engagement are activities such as participating in a discussion, doing hands-on activities or teaching someone else a skill. While many charts have been published to demonstrate the range of learning experiences and retention based on the work of Edgar Dale, it should be noted that applied percentages to those activities was not quantified by his research (Thalheimer, 2006; Molenda, 2004). A discussion can stimulate thinking on a topic and prepare the way for other higher involvement activities by the learner. With that in mind, let's explore the strategies for preparing and participating in effective discussions.

### Preparing for discussions

Stimulating participation, clarifying goals, encouraging higher level thinking and creating an environment where the learners feel empowered are important contributions by an instructor in setting up discussions. Using recall questions to start the dialogue may have a reverse effect than the intention of a warm-up. Some perceive simple questions as a turn off. This can be

remedied by clarifying the first portion of the discussion as an opportunity to begin with answering some straight forward questions (Brown & Atkins, 1988). Setting proper expectations in the process can help the participants gain a role. An observed example of this comes from a work environment where a marketing consultant opened a dialogue with the sales team by helping them understand that some of the questions they would come up with may go unanswered in order to focus on the core subject matter. This clarification avoided loss of credibility later in the presentation by establishing realistic expectations early. The idea of building rapport with the learners is included in the work of Paul Ramsden's focus on improving teaching in higher education. The first two key principles he identified include generating interest in the subject matter and demonstrating concern and respect for students and their learning (Houghton & Warren, 2004). Preparing questions in a way that stimulates higher level thinking will help students generate more responses in a discussion. Consider the difference between the questions "What happened at the end of Hamlet?" and "How would the story of Hamlet be different if he had not revealed the location of the body of Polonius to King Claudius" (Shakespeare, 1877). As a facilitator, an instructor can benefit the discussion by not answering questions directly but by guiding the group in finding answers. Encouraging the group to be comfortable with extended time to respond will also allow students to probe deeper thoughts rather than being expected to provide quick answers.

#### Facilitating discussions

In a recent experience observed with small discussion groups, eight different groups were able to come to similar conclusions about the sequence of the curriculum they would use over the term. The instructor's role in the process included outlining the objectives and eight topics. It was then up to the students to prioritize the sequence. One conclusion from using small discussion groups is that the students benefitted from interactions with each other to refine their thoughts and to prioritize the lists. This process of refinement in a discussion is very much like the process of David Kolb's learning cycle which includes: reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation and concrete experience (Mumford & Gold, 2004). A group can benefit from an iterative discussion in a similar way that single loop learning adds experience to refine a process by observing, planning, doing, and evaluating (Beard & Wilson, 2006). This iterative process can be facilitated in a discussion by allowing students to observe and listen, then plan and consider what they will say, participate by doing, and evaluate the feedback from the other members of the group guided by the instructor acting as a coach and guide.

### Conclusion

Discussions provide a low barrier to entry by an instructor because of the required participation of the student. The potential for a high return of learning by the student comes from active involvement in the discussion with coaching and facilitation by the instructor. To best prepare for the active involvement in discussions, the instructor should provide clear direction and expectations, reduce barriers to participation by students and serve as a guide in the process.



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