Website context: Learning from internationalisation ➞ Teaching Strategies

Discussion as a Teaching Technique
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Overview:
This paper discusses the possibility of making use of group talk (conversation, discussion and dialogue) as a useful teaching tool and one which may be used to develop critical thinking skills. Two adult learning specialists Brookfield and Preskill (1999)[i], focus on *discussion* to explore the role of group talk in teaching contexts. In their view, discussion incorporates "reciprocity and movement, exchange and inquiry, cooperation and collaboration, formality and informality" (1999:5). The paper looks at how discussion can be turned into 'critical' discussion.

Defining the role of discussion
Brookfield and Preskill define discussion as "an alternately serious and playful effort by a group of two or more to share views and engage in mutual and reciprocal critique", the purpose of which they see as fourfold:

1. to help participants reach a more critically informed understanding about the topic or topics under consideration;
2. to enhance participants' self-awareness and their capacity for self-critique;
3. to foster an appreciation among participants for the diversity of opinion that invariably emerges when viewpoints are exchanged openly and honestly, and
4. to act as a catalyst to helping people take informed action in the world. Discussion is an important way for people to affiliate with one another…

Open mindedness - the essence of 'critical' discussion
Giroux (1987)[ii] considers critical discussion in the context of the transformative intellectual role teachers take on when they empower students to probe the problems of society. In his view lecture rooms are sites in which students and lecturers make meaning through interaction by "interrogating different languages or ideological discourses as they are developed in an assortment of texts". In other words, discussion reveals how different cultural, linguistic and philosophical positions may have disempowered some people. Taking on a critical stance encourages people to analyse such positions towards understanding how groups and individuals have been excluded. Such a position reveals how problems are not necessarily idiosyncratic and we are able to strategise more effectively in combating prejudice, ignorance and oppression. A pre-requisite to such discussion is the assumption that those who participate in critical discussion are prepared to interrogate cherished assumptions and to invite question, argument and counterargument.

Some benefits of Discussion
According to Brookfield and Preskill (1999:17) if the above dispositional values are realised, even in part, discussion may have the following benefits:

1. It helps students explore a diversity of perspectives;
2. It increases students' awareness of and tolerance of ambiguity or complexity;
3. It helps students recognise and investigate their assumptions;
4. It encourages attentive and respectful listening;
5. It develops new appreciation for continuing differences;

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6. It increases intellectual agility;
7. It helps students to become connected to a topic;
8. It shows respect for students' voices and experiences;
9. It helps students to learn the process and habits of democratic discourse;
10. It affirms students as co-creators of knowledge;
11. It develops the capacity for clear communication of ideas and meaning;
12. It develops habits of collaborative learning;
13. It increases breadth and makes students more emphatic;
14. It helps students develop skills of synthesis and integration;
15. It leads to transformation.

The above fifteen benefits might be useful in generating evaluative points to be considered in eliciting feedback on the use of discussion as an approach to teaching in any course. Clearly effective discussion work cannot take place unless meaningful ground rules have emerged from the group. This might be developed by encouraging participants to remember the best and worst experiences they have had in group work contexts and to discuss these in small groups before generating a list that represents a consensus.

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Dr Michael Davidson
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[i] Brookfield, S. and Preskill, S. (2009) Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for University Teachers. The Society for Research Into Higher Education.

[ii] Giroux, H. (1987) "Citizen, Public Philosophy and the Struggle for Democracy" in Educational Theory, 37 pp 103-120.

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a785518915> Accessed: 13 October 2009.

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