



Discussion practicalities 1

Get everyone involved

Promoting an environment where everyone feels confident and has an opportunity to participate is essential for a good discussion. Here are some useful tips and practicalities that can help everyone to get involved.

Ground rules

Ground rules create a safe and constructive environment for a group discussion. Keep the rules to a minimum – three to five rules will be easier for the group to remember – and consider using rules that are used in other curriculum areas in your school. Some suggestions include:

- Respect everyone's opinion, even if it is not the same as yours.
- Views can be expressed without interruption; only one person at a time may speak.
- Be conscious of body language and non-verbal responses – these can be as disrespectful as words.
- Challenge the idea, not the individual.

Get everyone involved

There are many simple techniques that can be used to help enforce your ground rules and to ensure that there are opportunities for everyone to participate. These can be used to support any discussion format.

Talk tokens

To give everybody the opportunity to contribute to the discussion on an equal standing, 'talk tokens' can be issued. All members of the group are given a set number of tokens which they 'spend' when they make a contribution to the discussion. Each token can be given a time limit, such as 30 seconds or a limit of one comment per token, and students can be encouraged to spend a minimum number of tokens.

Good examples of tokens are objects such as plastic counters, playing cards, small toys or coloured pieces of paper. Talk tokens are a useful tool to limit dominant voices or to encourage participation from the quieter students in the group. They are also a useful indicator to see who has participated in the discussion.

Talking object (conch)

To enforce the ground rule that only one person at a time may speak, a 'talking object' can be used so that an individual is only allowed to talk when he or she is holding the object. A generic object such as a microphone or a ball can be used, or the object could be themed to the discussion; for example, a toy polar bear could be used when discussing the effects of climate change.

Car park

If issues arise during the discussion that are off topic or if an individual has a lot to contribute to one area of the discussion, then the point can be 'parked'. Write up the issue or comment on a board or sheet of paper at the front of the room and come back to the points if there is time at the end of the session or on another day. This is a good technique which acknowledges a student's contribution without letting the discussion go off topic.

Group sorters

Group size and group dynamics can have a significant impact on a discussion. Groups can be pre-selected or they can be picked at random. Random sorting can remove feelings of unfairness and over time establish a culture in which everyone has to work with everyone else in the class.

There are many ways to pick and sort groups. Simple ideas include: making a set of playing cards that includes one card for each student's name, which can be mixed and dealt out to create groups; assigning students numbers or picking names or objects out of a hat. There are also many electronic random name generators that can be used on the interactive whiteboard. One method using Microsoft PowerPoint is detailed below.

Random name generator

- Put the names of your students into a PowerPoint presentation (one name per slide).
- The last slide should be looped to the first to make the presentation continuous. To set this up, click on the **Slide Show** drop-down, select **Set Up Show...**, then check the box **Loop continuously until 'Esc'** and click **OK**.
- To select a name at random, hold down the down arrow key (↓) to run through all the names – when you let go, the slides will stop and a name will be selected.

Peer observation

Peer observation is an empowering tool for students and gives them an active role to play in the discussion and helps them to understand what the outline and objectives of the discussion are. Divide the class in two, so that one half of the group can observe and record the participation in the discussion whilst the other half explores the issues – then swap roles half way. Suggested observations to make:

- Did anyone say anything you had not considered? Explain.
- With which person did you most agree/disagree? Explain.
- Was there anyone who appeared to dominate the discussion? Explain. Was this positive or negative?
- Was there anyone who did not appear to be listening? If yes, explain.

This is also a good tool to halve the number of students talking, making the discussion easier to manage.

Keeping on task

Individual roles can be allocated within a group to support the quieter students and help focus dominant participants. Some suggested roles include:

Chairperson/Facilitator – to run the discussion in a small group or whole class.

Group Observer/Reporter – to observe and record who has contributed in a group discussion.

Speaker – to report back to the whole class what has been discussed.

Recording the discussion

It can be a concern that students are not focused on the discussion task set and become distracted with other issues. As it is impossible to listen to every group, a mini tape recorder can be placed on each table to capture the discussion. The recorders can be concealed in a sealed box to help prevent tampering. This is also a good technique to record and capture the discussion for a follow-up lesson or for student assessment.