Questioning for Classroom Discussion: Grades 6–12

Classroom discussion is a high-impact learning strategy. John Hattie (2012) found discussion to have a high effect size—among the top 10 variables identified in his studies.

New standards, including the Common Core State Standards; New Generation Science Standards; College, Career, and Civic Life Standards; and English Language Proficiency Standards Core, feature discussion skills such as speaking, listening, collaborative thinking, deep cognitive processing, and text-based dialogue. And popular teacher assessment systems, such as Charlotte Danielson’s Framework for Teaching, also include discussion skills.

Yet researchers and practitioners observe that teacher talk continues to dominate in most classrooms. Student opportunities for extended talk or interaction with one another is rare. Furthermore, teachers report that neither they nor their students have been prepared for the complexities of discussion.

In this course, you are embarking on a learning journey designed to open up new vistas and offer new insights that you can use with your students to make classroom discussion a manageable process. First, you’ll explore four quality questioning practices that drive productive discussion:

- Framing a focus question
- Promoting equitable participation
- Scaffolding student responses to deepen thinking
- Creating a culture for thoughtful discussion

Then, you’ll learn the discussion skills that comprise the DNA of meaningful discussion. Typically, students don’t arrive at school prepared to engage in productive discussion, so developing these discussion skills is crucial. You’ll explore research-based skills in three key categories: social,
cognitive, and use-of-knowledge. Then, you’ll learn how to decide which skills are most appropriate for your students given their ages and developmental levels and the subject you teach. Using the threefold framework can help you plan disciplined discussions in which students’ skills are intentionally targeted for development.

Well-planned discussions serve two purposes: to support students in deepening conceptual knowledge and transferring it to different contexts and to sharpen skills associated with thoughtful discussion. To accomplish these purposes, discussions must be both well-planned and skillfully executed, which you’ll learn how to achieve using the five-part stages of discussion framework. You’ll also learn about three types of classroom discussion, with a module devoted to each: teacher-guided, structured small-group, and student-driven. You’ll access tools, techniques, and protocols to support each as you move through these modules.

In each module, readings are augmented by classroom videos showing teachers and students using all these frameworks, tools, and techniques to increase learning and achievement through discussion. Throughout the course, you’ll have structured opportunities to apply these strategies to a selected class of your own students.

This course aspires to both motivate you to incorporate discussion into your classes more frequently and intentionally and provide you with the tools, techniques, and other resources to support this effort. Welcome to this journey!

Reference

Course Objectives

After completing this course, you should be able to

Module 1

• Deepen your understanding of discussion and its value to students’ academic and social outcomes.
• Assess the extent to which your current lessons incorporate opportunities for students to engage in discussion.

Module 2

• Connect the four practices of quality questioning to productive discussion.
• Help your students understand and use think times to sustain their thinking and engagement in discussion.
• Use the three important steps in the framing of a question for discussion in your selected classroom.

Module 3

• Understand how skills within the social, cognitive, and use-of-knowledge skill sets support student engagement in disciplined and thoughtful discussion.
• Assess proficiency in the skills and dispositions within each of the three skill sets (social, cognitive, and use-of-knowledge) that are most relevant and appropriate to your students, given their age and developmental level and the content area.

Module 4

• Deepen your knowledge of the strategies, skills, and habits of mind teachers employ to successfully orchestrate a teacher-guided discussion.
• Match specific scaffolds and strategies with common challenges that emerge during classroom discussion.
• Use the Cycle of Discussion and related resources to plan, guide, and reflect on a discussion for your selected class of students.

Module 5
• Understand the value of structured small-group protocols in engaging all students in deepening their understanding of content being studied and helping students learn, practice, and develop proficiency in key discussion skills.
• Select and use structured small groups with your students for the dual purposes of advancing their mastery of content standards and their proficiency in targeted discussion skills.

Module 6
• Understand the features of student-driven discussion that enable students to assume responsibility for their own learning and deepen their understanding of academic content.
• Identify behaviors that will help students assume responsibility for directing their own discussions.
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Resources


**Video**

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