

Questioning for Classroom Discussion: Grades K–5

Classroom discussion—also known as dialogue and academic conversations—is a high-impact learning strategy. John Hattie (2012) found discussion to have a large effect size—among the top 10 variables identified in his studies.

New standards, including the Common Core State Standards, New Generation Science Standards, and English Language Proficiency Standards, 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. Early elementary teachers, who often face the challenges of harnessing student impulsivity and keeping students on topic, are understandably reluctant to relinquish control.

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, and
- Creating a culture for thoughtful discussion.

Then, you’ll learn the discussion skills that compose 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 have the opportunity to decide which skills are most appropriate for your students given their ages and developmental levels and the subject(s) you teach. Using the threefold framework can help you plan disciplined discussions in which specific student skills are intentionally targeted for development.

Well-planned discussions serve two purposes: to support students in integrating new knowledge into their existing schema, and to sharpen skills associated with thoughtful speaking, listening, and collaborating. 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 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 specific class of your own students. This course aspires to both motivate you to incorporate discussion into your lessons more frequently and intentionally and provide you with the tools, techniques, and other resources to support this effort. Welcome to this journey!

Course Objectives

By the end of the course, you will 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 chosen 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 related to successful orchestration of a teacher-guided discussion.
- Match specific strategies and scaffolds with common challenges that emerge during classroom discussion.

- Understand and use the Cycle of Discussion and related resources to plan, guide, and reflect on a discussion for your particular class of students.

Module 5

- Understand the value of structured small-group protocols in engaging all students in deepening their understanding of content and helping students learn, practice, and develop proficiency in key discussion skills.
- Select and use small-group structures 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.

Course Syllabus

<p>Module 1</p>	<p>Why Focus on Questioning for Discussion?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Module Welcome • Video: Questioning for Classroom Discussion • Reading 1: Making the Case for Questioning for Discussion • Reading 2: The Defining Characteristics of Discussion • Qualities of a Good Discussion: Game Review • Reading 3: Rethinking Teacher and Student Roles for Discussion • Knowledge Check • Application: Taking Stock of Student Discussion in Your Classroom • Post-Module Reflection
<p>Module 2</p>	<p>How Does Quality Questioning Drive Purposeful Discussion?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Module Welcome • Reading 1: Quality Questioning: The Heart of Thoughtful Discussion • Video: The Four Practices of Quality Questioning—An Overview • Reading 2: Going Deeper into the Four Quality Questioning Practices • Reading 3: <i>EL</i>: A New Rhythm for Responding • Review: The Four Practices of Quality Questioning • Knowledge Check • Application 1: Framing a Quality Focus Question • Application 2: Design and Teach a Mini-Lesson on the What, Why, and How of Think Times • Post-Module Reflection

<p>Module 3</p>	<p>The DNA of Productive Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Module Welcome • Video 1: The DNA of Productive Discussion • Reading 1: Capacities Required for Productive Discussion • Reading 2: Dispositions That Support Productive Discussion • Video 2: Inside a 5th Grade Classroom: A Focus on Dispositions • Reading 3: Scaffolding Tools to Develop Discussion Skills • Scenarios: Which Skill Would I Scaffold? • Knowledge Check • Application 1: Selecting Student Discussion Skills • Application 2: Identifying and Assessing Student Discussion Skills • Post-Module Reflection
<p>Module 4</p>	<p>The Five Stages of Discussion and Teacher-Guided Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Module Welcome • Video 1: Discussion Cycle Overview • Reading 1: The Five Stages of the Discussion Cycle • Reading 2: The Teacher as a Coach During Discussion • Video 2: Teacher-Guided Discussion in Action • Reading 3: The Challenges of Sustaining Student Discussion • Matching Strategies to Common Discussion Challenges • Knowledge Check • Application: Modeling, Scaffolding, and Coaching to Focus and Sustain Student Discussion • Post-Module Reflection

Module 5	Structured Small-Group Discussions <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Module Welcome• Reading 1: Introduction to the Value and Variety of Structured Small Groups• Video 1: Classroom Examples of a Paired Activity that Helps Students Both Listen and Speak, Learning Together• Reading 2: Learning to Listen Carefully Through Silence• Reading 3: Learning to Question• Video 2: Classroom Examples of Small-Group Structures That Help Students Learn to Pose Questions• Reading 4: Learning to Appreciate Multiple Points of View and Deepen Understanding of Text and Content• Video 3: Inside/Outside Circle to Learn Multiple Points of View and Deepen Understanding of Text and Content• Reading 5: Tips for Using Structured Small Groups as Arenas for Student Discussions• Review: Instructional Strategies for Discussion Skills• Knowledge Check• Application: Use One or More Small-Group Structures with a Class; Reflect on the Effectiveness of Structured Small Groups as a Form of Discussion• Post-Module Reflection
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Module 6	<p>Student-Driven Discussions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Module Welcome • Reading 1: What Are Student-Driven Discussions? • Reading 2: The Changed Roles of Teachers and Students in the Cycle of Discussion: Preparing for and Opening a Student-Driven Discussion • Video 1: Preparing for and Opening a Student-Driven Discussion: What Are the Changed Roles of Teachers and Students? • Reading 3: How Do Teacher and Student Roles Change to Sustain a Student-Driven Discussion? • Video 2: Students Take Responsibility to Sustain a Productive Discussion • Reading 4: How Do Teacher and Student Roles and Responsibilities Change in Reflecting Upon and Closing a Student-Driven Discussion? • Video 3: Students Share Responsibility to Reflect Upon and Close a Student-Driven Discussion • Knowledge Check • Application: Use and Assess Student-Driven Discussion • Post-Module Reflection
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