



Study Guide

How to Use Discussion in the Classroom:

The Complete Guide

Mike Gershon

This study guide is arranged by chapter, enabling readers to work their way through the entire book or to focus on the specific topics addressed in a particular chapter. This guide is designed to help you reflect on and apply the ideas presented in the book by providing reflection questions, challenges, and prompts related to each chapter. Hopefully it will serve as a useful companion piece for individuals, small groups, or an entire faculty.

Learning Sciences International thanks you for your interest in this book, and we hope that this guide proves a valuable addition and support to your professional development practices.

Chapter One – Introduction

What role does discussion play in your classroom at the moment?

In what ways do you structure discussion? Do you have particular discussion activities you prefer to use? How do your learners respond to these?

In your opinion, what are the features of a high-quality discussion and what impact does this have on student knowledge and understanding?

Challenge Question:

'Discussion is the basis for a democratic society, therefore it is an essential feature, if not the essential feature, of teaching and learning for children growing up in a democracy.' To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Optional Task:

Plan and then teach a lesson which is purely based on discussion. Think carefully about:

How you will structure the lesson

What activities you will use

How you will ensure progress through the lesson

How you will ensure a high level of challenge for all learners

The questions you will pose to your learners

After the lesson, reflect on what worked and what didn't. Think about learners' experience of the lesson and how this might have been different across the class. (If possible, invite a colleague in to observe the lesson while you teach it, then spend time reflecting with them after the event.)

Chapter Two - Strategies and Techniques

Which of the strategies and techniques do you already use? Why do you use them?
What impact do they have on your learners?

Which of the strategies and techniques would you like to have a go at implementing in your lessons? Why? How might your learners respond to it?

How could you formalize the use of discussion as a prelude to writing/practical activity in your lessons? How might this help learners to articulate and refine their thinking?

Challenge Question:

Should teachers try to facilitate discussion as much as possible, to lead discussion as much as possible, or is it possible to find a balance between these two roles?

Optional Task:

Entry Twelve 'Roles of the Teacher' outlines eight different roles the teacher can play during the course of a discussion. Familiarize yourself with these roles, then select an order in which you want to try them out. Spend eight successive days trying out each role in turn. During each day, you should only lead discussions in the chosen role, and only ask questions in that manner as well. At the end of each day, make a brief note of your reflections on what happened. At the end of the eighth day, review your reflections, along with the descriptions of the roles and consider the different effects the roles can have, positive and negative.

Chapter Three - Twenty Activities

Which of the activities do you find most interesting and why? You can choose activities you already use, or ones you have never used before.

To what extent are you happy to structure the discussions your learners have in your classroom? In what circumstances do you think a high level of structure is beneficial? And, can you have too much structure?

If you were going to pick one of the activities to try out – one you haven't used before – which one would it be and why? How do you think your learners might respond?

Challenge Question:

'Unstructured discussion is like unstructured writing, it works best if learners already have a high degree of knowledge, understanding and proficiency.' To what extent do you agree with this statement? What might someone who disagrees with you say?

Optional Task:

Select one of the discussion activities to trial with your learners. Plan to use this same activity once a week for a period of six weeks. After each occasion, lead your learners in a reflection asking them to think about:

How the activity worked

What it allowed them to do

What it didn't allow them to do, or stopped them from doing

The quality of their discussions

How the activity could be improved

On each subsequent iteration, remind your learners of their reflections and ask them to try and put their ideas about how the activity could be improved into practice. At the end of the sixth week, reflect with your learners on how their understanding and use of the activity has developed during the intervening period.

Chapter Four - Twenty More Activities

How would you characterize the difference between debate and discussion? Is there a difference?

Some learners find it easier than others to throw themselves into discussion activities. What techniques can you suggest for helping learners who find discussion activities difficult?

Can you suggest any strategies for monitoring the quality of discussion in a classroom? Do these strategies involve the teacher monitoring quality, learners monitoring it, or both?

Challenge Question:

What would a school look like in which discussion was the main form of learning? What kind of benefits would this bring to learners? How might it change the curriculum, or the way in which the curriculum is delivered? What limitations would there be? And what difficulties might students encounter?

Optional Task:

Select two of the discussion activities outlined in the chapter. Plan two lessons, each based around one of the activities. If possible, plan to teach these lessons on successive days. In advance, make a note of how you think your learners will respond to the activities, what outcomes you expect and what difficulties you think might arise. After teaching the lessons, reflect first on how things panned out, compared to your predictions. Then, compare and contrast the two discussion activities. Which did you like best and why?