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# In Class Discussions, Slow and Steady Wins

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**Classroom conversations should be a refuge from our fast-paced, me-first culture.**

Our culture—in society at large and in the classroom—is one that prioritizes speed. A prudent student comes to quickly realize that the goal of classroom discussions is not so much to understand (because to do that takes a lot of time, and practice, and processing), but to respond—no matter how superfluously. We as educators are often guilty of cultivating this habit when we include participation requirements such as: *Everyone must respond at least two times*. In many discussions, unless we intentionally design them otherwise, savvy students do not listen to comprehend or learn deeply; they listen to respond.

To get to more meaningful and deeper discussions that push learners toward higher-order thinking skills, we might take a tip from a classic adage *festina lente*. This Latin phrase, when applied to learning, means that if you want to make haste, slow down. The point is: We make haste not by driving by in learning but by slowing down. Learning requires sustained and focused concentration. The single most important thing we can do for meaningful discussions is to give them the time they require. Don't race through planning, don't race through preparation, don't race through the discussion, and don't race through the debriefing.

While some believe that today's learners are radically different and require fast-paced and technology-enhanced learning environments, the evidence on effective learning does not support these assertions. In fact, the belief that today's learners are "digital natives" who adeptly multitask is contrary to the preponderance of research. People are not capable of thinking different thoughts at the same time; what they really do is switch between tasks and divide their attention, which reduces their productivity on both tasks (De Bruyckere, Kirschner, & Hulshof, 2015). This finding holds true for youth who have grown up in a digitally infused environment since birth, and there is no evidence that so-called digital natives are suited for different work forms within education (Jones & Shao, 2011). Furthermore, research shows that, in order to maximize student retention of learning, it is more effective to space out interaction with material, require elaboration of deeper ideas, and challenge students to retrieve what they recall. These strategies are often

called *desirable difficulties* and are best suited to an environment that embraces slowing down to get further (Bjork & Bjork, 2011; Weinstein & Sumeracki, 2019).

What other factors can promote meaningful discussion in our hurried age? What other practices can we implement to make haste—*slowly*?

## Avoid Making It All About Them

In contemporary culture and in education, specifically, there is a tendency to encourage what I call the primacy of the personal. That is, we reimagine everything through the lens of the individual—student-centered learning environments, student agency, choice and voice, and so forth. This is not to say that the student should not be at the center of learning—because, in fact, he or she is. However, we need to slow the learning process down to make it meaningful and substantive, and that this often requires preliminary steps before leaping right to the individual. Let me explain.

Teachers often encourage students to make personal connections to everything on the assumption that personal connections are good for learning. It is true that personal connections are helpful, but they are helpful only insofar as the connections are good ones (Krahenbuhl, 2018). When we encourage students to immediately connect every topic to themselves, we are asking them to use a mirror on everything. Try a different approach: Encourage them to look out windows. Push students to study scenes as they are, as the author intended. Respect the hard work required to dive into a text in its full complexity by prioritizing not personal meaning-making, but an understanding of the intended meaning in its *context*.

When you're trying to understand Shakespeare, for example, it is foolish to begin with yourself. If students are reading *Othello*, it is less helpful for them to think about a moment *they* felt jealousy than it is to place primacy on understanding how the *characters* experience jealousy. How does Iago's jealousy motivate him to make certain decisions? In this way, our inferences are bound not to the whims of personal opinion, but to the context provided to us in the text. This is true for other specific texts as well because Shakespeare—or any other text we might use in the classroom—is not about our students; it is about something bigger. We need to understand the material on its own terms and in its own context, first.

So teachers should resist the urge to open the discussion with, "What does this mean to you?" That is, almost all of the time, the wrong question to begin with. You can pull out a single sentence from most texts and make it mean infinite things. However, if you read the sentence along with what is said before and after in the original text, the context provides clues that can help students make more informed interpretations.

When a student pulls out a quote and presents it, pose a question to him: What did the author say just before that? What follows that quote? Through clarification of the preceding or following information, we equip our students to better understand the text in fuller context. Further, you model the fact that learning is not fast, and is not simply accessing a personal opinion. You show them how not to use the text as a drunk person uses a lamppost—more for support than for illumination.

By demanding that a central goal of text-based discussions should be to understand the meaning the author intended first and as the primary purpose, you help your students see that illumination requires time, work, and contemplation. Then, and only then, can you move to asking, OK, now that we have established what *it* means, what does that mean for us?

## Do Your Prep Work

Although there is great pressure currently to provide *choice* in what students read, it's important to take caution here. When a class together discusses many texts, but each student has only read one, or a few, of the books, that discussion will never move beyond surface-level discourse. Although students may *see* connections, the connections will, by necessity, be superficial. To truly engage in deep discussion, everyone should read the same text. Then, the examination can move to the deeper structures within the text (Hirsch, 2017; Wiliam, 2018).

Before starting a discussion, allow a few moments for your students to think about the topic at hand. It would be wise to write on the board the central question(s) and topic for the discussion. Ask students to contemplate what they've read and to organize their thoughts into what they think is important to know, what questions they have, what connections they see, and what challenges they want to offer. This prep phase shows students the importance of taking their time to better understand the material for discussion.

Additionally, it helps the teacher to ensure that sufficient knowledge is in place, because if the essential information—such as who is involved, who the author is, and what the broad context is—is unknown by students, any time spent on discussion will be rewarding ignorance. We don't just jump into conversation; we slow down, we reflect on the text and the goals, and we organize our ideas before we discuss toward the goals.

## Facilitating a Deep Discussion

There is also a tendency for teachers to turn the discussion over to the students. However, if teachers simply let students speak about what is of interest to them, there might not be

any consistency, and the conversation could quickly go off-track. If you've chosen to dedicate class time to discuss something collectively, it should have specific outcomes. If not, why on earth are you doing it collectively?

A wise teacher will guide students in discussion, but not do all the processing for them. The goal is to get the students to grapple with the ideas but also allow for elaboration—with students asking, and attempting to answer, "how" and "why" questions (Pressley et. al, 1987). Circulate during the discussion. Engage consistently and purposefully steer the conversation, but don't run the show.

With three basic questions, you can prompt students to do a great deal of thinking and reflection while moving the conversation skillfully toward your target. The first question you want to use consistently is, "What do you mean by that?" This guides students to clarify their terms and be precise in their language. The second question is, "How did you come to that conclusion?", which asks students for the evidence to support their claim. If you're involved in a text-based discussion, this will require that they go back to the text. A third question to try is, "Have you ever considered ...?" This question prompts them to imagine *what if* and consider alternatives. Each of these questions is incredibly flexible and can—and should—be adapted and leveraged in any discussion.

## Mapping the Conversation

A conversation map is a great tool for assessing the quality of collective discussions. To map a conversation, write down the names of everyone in the room and draw a line each time a person speaks, connecting them to the next person who responds. (For more on conversation maps, see "A Better Route with Conversation Maps," an *EL* online exclusive by Jon Simmons.) At the end of the discussion, the class can review the discussion map and view the patterns of their interactions. It can be incredibly powerful to *see* the frequency with which one speaks and other patterns that emerge, such as back-and-forth conversations. Tracking these discussion maps throughout the year is a productive way to promote student and instructor thinking about the quality of the discussions as a group.

Finally, after a discussion is over, don't hastily wrap up. Allow everyone time to silently process the topic. Then revisit the central purpose for the discussion and create a concept map that recaps the key points that were made. The concept map can also serve as a visual summary of the discussion that can be revisited in a future class.

## *Festina Lente!*

Administrators and teachers feel a great deal of pressure to make sure that students get to the application of knowledge and skills as quickly as possible. However, if you want to

ensure that classroom discussions are meaningful, productive, and get at higher order aims, the first and most important thing to do is to slow down. Only then can students work through their ideas and comprehend—not just respond to—the learning material.

*Festina lente!* Let us make haste, slowly.

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