Fostering Meaningful Classroom Discussion: Student-Generated Questions, Quotations, and Talking Points

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Although classroom discussion can increase students’ critical thinking and communication skills, teachers may be reluctant to use a discussion format if students do not participate or if their contributions lack substance. This article describes the use of daily response papers in which students prepare a question, quotation, and talking points (QQTP) prior to each class session to serve as the foundation for meaningful discussion. Students rate the QQTP, especially the questions and talking points, as an effective method for enhancing their understanding of the reading material and preparing for class discussion.

Classroom discussion can be a powerful teaching tool to enhance students’ problem-solving expertise, communication skills, and mastery of subject matter (Bunwell & Eison, 1991; Gall & Gall, 1990; Garvin, 1991; McKeachie, 2002; Nilson, 1998; Wilen, 1990). However, most faculty and students know "the dark side" of class discussions, characterized by minimal participation or superficial comments that lack substance or focus.

Students sometimes resist discussion because they perceive no reward for participating (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999); active participation is much riskier than simply listening to a lecture (Garvin, 1991). Fear of embarrassment is one of the most compelling forces behind student passivity in class (McKeachie, 2002). Often, students have not read the material or processed it sufficiently to be able to make meaningful comments in class (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000; Connor-Greene, 2000a; Karp & Yoels, 1976; Sappington, Kinsey, & Munsayac, 2002).

To participate in a substantive discussion, students must move from a “safe” role of passivity to an active stance of articulating and supporting their ideas (McKeachie, 2002; Wilkinson & Dubrow, 1991). Writing prior to class can help students focus ideas to bring into the discussion (Bean, 2001; Ventis, 1990). Writing is more than expression; it is a way of thinking and discovering ideas (Young & Fulwiler, 1986). Writing fosters deeper involvement with the reading material (Connor-Greene, 2000b; Snodgrass, 1985), and active engagement and personal investment maximize student learning (Angelo, 1995).

Learning to ask meaningful questions is a key component of critical thinking (Wade, 1995). The quality of questions asked in a class determines the level of thinking that occurs (King, 1995). Research on the teaching of psychology emphasizes teaching students to develop questioning skills as a way to process and understand ideas more fully (e.g., Carroll, 2001; Gray, 1993; Keeley, Ali, & Gebring, 1998; Sternberg, 1999, 2003; Yanchar & Slife, 2004).

The QQTP Approach

To encourage students to read carefully, interact with the readings, articulate their ideas, and make meaningful contributions to class discussion, I assign daily response papers, “question, quotation, and talking points” (QQTP). The typed one-page QQTP includes (a) a question prompted by the assigned reading for that day; (b) a quotation from the reading, selected as particularly compelling or controversial; and (c) a brief outline of ideas prompted by the readings that the student can use as “talking points” in class discussion. If the reading assignment includes multiple articles or chapters, the question and talking points should reflect a synthesis of ideas across readings. To help students construct questions reflecting Bloom’s (1956) levels of analysis, synthesis, or evaluation, I use part of the first class to describe and give examples of questions at each of Bloom’s levels.

I began developing the QQTP after attending a workshop on student-generated questions (Steirer, 2002). Like Steirer, I ask students to create questions that have “one foot in the reading” but cannot be answered simply with facts from the reading assignment. I modified Steirer’s method (e.g., he grades each question on a 100-point scale; I use a 0 to 3 scale) and added the quotation and talking points that comprise the QQTP method.

Asking students to identify quotations they find provocative can increase their involvement in the reading material (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Van Ments, 1990). Thinking involves affect as well as cognition, and both positive and negative emotions can be a catalyst for critical thinking (Brookfield, 1987; Halonen, 1995). Giving students a forum to express subjective reactions to the readings demonstrates that their ideas and opinions matter. Selecting compelling or controversial quotations invites engaged rather than passive reading and helps generate material for class discussion.

Writing talking points encourages students to construct, organize, and focus their ideas prior to class discussion. As Dunn said, “Students don’t always realize what their opinions are until they put them on paper” (Goddard, 2002, p. 331). Talking points ensure that even the most reticent students have something to say in class, which may help reduce their anxiety about participating.

Each day, I ask for two volunteers to put their QQTP question on the board as a catalyst for class discussion; a posting computerized courseware management system would also be possible. I keep records to ensure equitable rotation among the students; no student posts a second question until all have posted one. To vary the format of the class and encourage students to evaluate each other’s work, I sometimes ask
students to work in small groups to select a question, quotation, or talking point that they found especially engaging.

To keep the daily grading load manageable and return papers by the next class session, I select, on a rotating basis, eight QQTPs to read, grade, and write comments on each day in addition to the two posted on the board. In a class of 30 students, each student receives written feedback on the QQTP at a minimum of every third class session. All students must bring a QQTP to class every day; I do not announce which students’ QQTPs I will collect until the end of each class. Students maintain a portfolio of all QQTPs, which I read and grade when they turn them in at the end of the semester.

I grade QQTPs on a 3-point scale: 3 = outstanding (a thoughtful question that invites analysis, synthesis, or evaluation, or makes connections between this reading and previous discussion or readings), 2 = good (goes beyond the reading but prompts little discussion), 1 = poor (confusing question or one that can be answered simply from the facts in the article), or 0 = not handed in on time. I write comments and questions on each QQTP to highlight compelling points or ask for clarification. Because the QQTPs sometimes contain insightful ideas that were not discussed in class, I read selected questions or talking points aloud as I return QQTPs during the next class. Referring to students’ comments reinforces creative and critical thinking and provides a catalyst for future discussion, questions, and talking points.

The QQTP portfolio grade (the average of all QQTP grades at the end of the semester) constitutes 25% of the final grade. Consequently, the quality of students’ written evidence of preparation for discussion has a substantial impact on their final grade.

Student Perceptions of QQTP

Using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much so), students anonymously reported their assessment of the value of the QQTP components in understanding and processing the reading material and preparing for class discussion. Table 1 shows data from two undergraduate courses, a women and psychology class and an honors seminar on the social construction of madness. The consistency across ratings from the two courses is striking. Both classes gave their highest ratings to the talking points and to creating a question as helping prepare for class discussion. In both classes, questions and talking points received higher ratings than did quotations in enhancing both understanding and preparation for class. This finding is not surprising; constructing questions and preparing talking points are more cognitively challenging than selecting a quotation. A student might not complete all of the reading assignment or have a relatively weak grasp of the material but still identify a compelling quotation. Overall, students rated all three components of the QQTP positively.

Discussion

According to McGovern and Hogshead (1990), the four key reasons for assigning writing are to (a) assess students; (b) promote learning; (c) enhance student writing skills; and (d) encourage creative, analytic, and problem-solving skills. The QQTP reflects each of these objectives, inviting students to interact with the reading material, articulate ideas, and raise meaningful questions. As Postman and Weingartner (1969) wrote, “Asking questions is behavior. If you don’t do it, you don’t learn it. It really is as simple as that” (p. 24).

Table 1. Student Evaluations: Question, Quotation, and Talking Point Method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did creating a question for each class help you</th>
<th>Class 1a</th>
<th>Class 2b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understand or process the reading material</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did selecting a quotation for each class help you</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand or process the reading material</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did writing talking points for each class help you</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand or process the reading material</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Ratings were based on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much so). Class 1 = Women and Psychology; Class 2 = Honors Seminar on the Social Construction of Madness. *a n = 30. *b n = 16.

References

Sternberg, R. J. (1999). Teaching psychology students to be savvy consumers and producers of research questions. Teaching of Psychology, 26, 211–213.

Note
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Assuring Accuracy of Student Self-Scored Quizzes

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Some instructors allow students to score their own quizzes and tests to provide students the educational advantage of immediate feedback on their performance. Instructors, however, want to be confident that this self-scoring is accurate and fair. We describe an analysis of the accuracy of a self-scoring technique that we use with short multiple-choice quizzes. Results revealed that students are accurate in scoring and reporting their quiz scores. In addition, student attitudes toward the self-scoring approach are positive. This technique can offer an instructional benefit for students and a workload reduction for faculty.

Providing timely feedback on quiz and test performance is an important component of student learning. One way to provide students with rapid feedback is to reveal quiz or test answers as soon as all students have finished the assessment. Friedman (1987) described such a test feedback procedure for introductory psychology in which students marked their answers on the test and on a separate answer sheet. Students submitted their answer sheets when they finished the test, but they retained the test itself. The instructor then provided the test answers at the end of the class period. Friedman suggested that this approach offered the advantages of immediate feedback for students, efficient use of class time, and reduced pressure for the instructor to grade the tests quickly. Smith and Wight (1988) conducted a student evaluation of Friedman’s approach and found that students liked the immediate test feedback and believed that it enhanced their learning.

Epstein, Epstein, and Brosvic (2001) described an innovative immediate quiz feedback procedure called the immediate feedback assessment technique in which students completed multiple-choice quizzes with answer sheets that were similar to scratch-off lottery tickets. Students scratched off their answer choice for each question, which immediately revealed whether their answer was correct. Epstein et al. conducted an experiment with introductory psychology students in which they compared student final exam performance between groups of students who did or did not use the immediate feedback assessment technique. Although their results showed no overall difference in final exam performance between the two groups, they did find that students who received the immediate feedback were more likely to correctly answer questions on the final exam that they had answered incorrectly on previous tests during the semester.