

# Discussion-based Teaching Methods in English Literature Courses

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Why do senior, more experienced faculty members tend to utilize discussion-based teaching within their classrooms? (Lei, 2007) One reason is that group discussions are the best method for teaching in various curriculums ranging from medical science to high school math (Christensen, et al., 1992). Another reason is that discussion-based teaching most closely resembles our natural way of communicating in every other social environment—work, home, talking to friends—that we participate in (Wilén, 2004).

While both reasons appear straightforward, reasonable even, they don't explain why less experienced instructors rely more on lecture-based teaching methods. Discussions require experience and confidence on the part of the instructor to allow for his or her ideas, questions, and comments to be openly examined by students. To make matters worse, teaching via discussions is hard. The method is characterized as “messy, uncontrolled, and far more difficult than lecturing” (Christensen, et al., 1992). Lecture-based instruction imposes an “obvious gulf or barrier” between the instructor and student that less experienced instructors use to maintain control of their classroom (Omatseye, 2007).

The idea of teaching through classroom discussions can be summed up with the well-known phrase, the Socratic Method—the method of instruction by which the instructor asks a simple question and then spends classroom time allowing the students the opportunity to orally present opinions and evidence in an attempt to answer the question satisfactorily. Socrates passed this method of instruction down to Plato, who then passed it onto his pupil Aristotle; thus, the philosophical originators of Western Civilization believed that teaching was personal, that there should not be a forced barrier between instructor and student. Because we here at West Point like to think that anything good somehow started in our little corner of the Hudson Valley, we refer to this same method of instruction as the Thayer Method (Tribus, 2007)—named after the man considered the Academy's founding father, Colonel Sylvanius Thayer, the Academy's Superintendant from 1817 to 1833.

So, discussion-based instruction is not a new concept. Academically-researched articles that begin to define the differences between discussions and other forms of oral communication in classrooms, such as recitations, can be traced back to late sixties (Hoetker and Ahlbrand, 1969) with a marked spike beginning in the eighties (Mehan, 1984) and lasting through the late-nineties. Most of this research was conducted in the social sciences, though its relevance to any teaching discipline did not go unnoticed.

Research in the past ten years has moved on to different pastures. Go to any academic server and you'll find thousands of recent articles that explain new instruction methods, particularly methods that make use of recent technological advances; all of which promise to produce more efficient classrooms and in turn, better-taught students. Discussion-based

instruction is not material that researchers are looking to make a reputation on; it's simply no longer exciting and there's not much left to say. Most of the information that needed to be exposed was plowed up over a decade ago.

In summarization, discussion-based instruction is hard, it's a little too "old school", and it's not exciting. But it is the method that experienced instructors rely upon and it's the best method to teach a variety of subject material. Compared to other instruction methods, it most resembles the natural way we communicate. It makes instruction personal, removing barriers between teacher and student, and it's been used since the beginning of Western Civilization. The method of instruction is proven. So, what literature should be looked at in reference to discussion-based teaching? Specifically, what literature can assist an instructor of English Literature who aspires to teach like a proven veteran and not like an inexperienced instructor afraid of losing control of his class?

A good place to start is with Rick VanDeWeghe's article titled "What Kinds of Classroom Discussion Promote Reading Comprehension?" (2007). VanDeWeghe, who teaches English Literature at the University of Colorado at Denver, states that English teachers value classroom discussion because it "help[s] students make sense of literary texts," invites a deeper understanding of literature, and improves reading comprehension by challenging interpretations (p. 96). The article explains nine separate methods by which a teacher can induce meaningful discussions using a variety of techniques that appear valid. These methods are easy to understand, seemingly easy to incorporate into a literature classroom allowing an instructor to try any individual method, and each method is written in a manner that encourages a teacher to try to find a method that is suitable for him or her. The paper is very supportive. VanDeWeghe also asks the question, "[H]ow do we know what, if any, kinds of classroom discussion promote achievement?" His answer to that question is not based on discussion-based research; instead the article uses the findings in a Martin Nystrand article that is a review of the history and research of composition.

Nystrand's article "The Social and Historical Context for Writing Research" (2006) provides the most comprehensive review of academic research on the subject of teaching composition at the university level that can be found. The fact that the article is used to ground a paper on discussion-based instructional techniques for English Literature should be no surprise. English departments at institutions of higher learning have the responsibility of teaching both composition as well as literature; somehow, the two subjects go hand in hand, regardless of the fact that the "comp" and "lit" sections of an English department are often at odds (Beech and Lindquist, 2004). The fact is that the development of research on discussion-based instruction for English courses has proven more difficult than the research on composition (Smith and Connolly, 2005). Since English teachers are accustomed to teaching both composition and literature, the borrowing of research on composition to aide in the development of better literature comprehension through in-class discussions makes sense.

A valuable article that does base its evidence on discussion-based instructional research is William W. Wilen's "Refuting Misconceptions about Classroom Discussion" (2004). Wilen is a social scientist who has published articles on discussion-based instruction for nearly twenty years and is another source from which concepts for discussion-based teaching in English Literature can be borrowed from. Wilen's article lays out five misconceptions about classroom discussions and then refutes each with solid academic research that generally comes from the nineties. Possibly the most controversial reason for not using discussions and a primary reason why inexperienced instructors would elect to not use them is the fear that, "Teachers cannot

objectively evaluate students' contributions during classroom discussions" (p. 37). Wilen gives some methods by which teachers can evaluate discussions, but ends up agreeing that effective evaluation is a difficult dilemma for instructors to overcome. In the end, Wilen is a clear supporter of discussions in the classroom setting, going so far as to claim that this method of instruction can teach students "problem solving necessary for the common good" (p. 33). An idea that, I think, most experienced instructors would be inclined to agree with.

#### **Annotated Bibliography:**

Beech, J. and Lindquist, J. (2004). The Work Before Us: Attending to English Departments Poor Relations. *Pedagogy*. 4(2). 171-189.

This article, written by two English professors, provided the idea that while composition and literature both reside within an English department, the two sub-departments don't necessarily get along. Also, the article confirms that English teachers at the university setting do indeed teach both comp and lit and are therefore, sensitive to the needs of both. The article is humorous as well as insightful.

Christensen, R. C., Garvin, D. A., and Sweet, A. (Eds.). (1992) *Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

This source, although somewhat dated, was useful to describe discussion-based teaching at the height of its era of research. The text offers a variety of essays from select scholars who each present different settings in which discussion within the classroom is used. All of the articles also attest to the worth of discussion within the classroom.

Hoetker, J., Ahlbrand, W. P. (1969). The Persistence of the Recitation. *American Education Research Journal*. 6, 145-67.

I was unable to find this source, which is a shame because Wilen (2004) lists it as one of the first academic articles that began to differentiate discussions from recitations and other forms of oral feedback in the classroom. I had hoped to see the earliest possible definition of discussion-based teaching from this century.

Lei, S. (2007). Teaching Practices of Instructors in Two Community Colleges in a Western State. *Education*. 128(1), 148-160.

Lei's article does a good job in showing the different techniques used by the most effective instructors in a community college setting. Lei summarizes his lengthy study by stating that the best instructors, typically the most experienced instructors, use classroom discussion to maximize student understanding.

Mehan, H. (1984). Language and Schooling. *Sociology of Education*. 57(3), 174-183.

This article ended up being the earliest article that I could find to use the term "discussion" in the classroom in a manner that was needed to date the research conducted of the discussion-based

teaching topic. Beyond that marking of a research date, the essay offered very little to me as its main focus was using language that students could easily understand in the classroom.

Nystrand, M. (2006). The Social and Historical Context for Writing Research. In C. A. MacArthur, S. Graham, and J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Handbook of Writing Research*, (pp. 11-27). New York: The Guilford Press.

This article, next to Wilen's, is the prize among the annotations of this literature review. Nystrand is clearly an expert on the historical significance of composition studies in the United States. His article, chapter 1 of the book in which it's contained, fully immerses the reader into where compositional studies began, how the government became involved, the primary leaders of compositional studies, and how to effectively teach composition in today's classroom environment. When coupled with VanDeWeghe's article, I was able to appreciate the incredible amount of thinking and resources that went into how to teach basic reading and writing to this country's citizens.

Omatseye, B. O. J. (2007). The Discussion Teaching Method: An Interactive Strategy in Tertiary Learning. *Education*, 128(1), 87-94

This article is written by a young professor who is trying to discover the best way for her to teach the subject material she is responsible for. What is interesting is that the article is kind of a personal journal. The author discusses how she was taught (by lectures), how her students were unresponsive to her own lectures, and how she decided to begin adopting a discussion-based classroom. She writes about her early struggles and how she overcame those struggles to now have a more enriched classroom.

Smith, M. W. and Connolly, W. (2005). The Effects of Interpretive Authority on Classroom Discussions of Poetry: Lessons from One Teacher. *Communication Education*. 54(4). 271-288.

This article relates a study conducted in a ninth grade classroom concerning students' discussion of poetry. The relevant information that I pulled for this literature review is that research on discussion is hard to isolate in a laboratory-type setting. The amount of information available and the amount of data that can be recorded can be overwhelming. Thus, the authors of this article continuously stated that their research cannot be conclusive. The synopsis of their article is interesting: they believe that increased discussion is related to decreasing the teacher's authority over the text.

Tribus, B. (2007). Bottom Line—Eighteen Cadets. *About Campus*, 11(6), 25-27.

This short article was written by a former USMA, BS&L instructor, Major Brian Tribus. It mainly discussed how he laments the fact that he was unable to personally know each cadet that he taught here at West Point. I used his reference to the Thayer Method in my short essay. The fact that the article focuses on interacting with West Point cadets in the classroom is appealing for this review as well.

VanDeWeghe, R. (2007). What Kinds of Classroom Discussion Promote Reading Comprehension? *English Journal*. 96(3), 86-91.

This article was extremely helpful to me as it laid out nine separate methods that can be used for classroom discussion in an English Literature course. Prior to this article, I had begun to doubt that English Literature would be represented among academic essays that looked at discussion-based teaching. I know that discussion is the primary method by which teaching occurs in literature classes and this article validated that opinion for me. The article also led me to Nystrand's article (2006), which showed me the amount of research conducted in the area of composition.

Wilen, W. W. (2004). Refuting Misconceptions about Classroom Discussion. *The Social Studies*, 95(1), 33-39.

Wilen, like Nystrand, gives a powerful message to this literature review. He is clearly knowledgeable in the field of discussion-based teaching and full of insightful, clear rhetoric that enables a young instructor, such as myself, to believe wholeheartedly in discussion-based teaching. The article was used as a wrap up of my literature review and was also one of the primary starting points for the numerous articles that is referred to within the review.

#### **Additional Resources:**

Cazden, C. (2001). *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Knowledge*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinmann.

Chinn, C. A., Anderson, R. C., and Waggoner, M. A. (2001). Patterns of Discourse in Two Kinds of Literature Discussion. *Reading Research Quarterly*. 36(4). 378-411.

Gamoran, A. and Nystrand, M. (1992). Taking Students Seriously. In F. Newman (Ed.) *Student Engagement and Achievement in American Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Larson, B. (1997). Social Studies Teachers' Conceptions of Discussion: A Grounded Theory Study. *Theory and Research in Social Education*. 25(2). 113-136.

Newmann, F. (1991). Promoting Higher Order Thinking in the Teaching of Social Studies: Overview of a Study of 16 High School Departments. *Theory and Research in Social Education*. 19(4). 22-27.

Nivens, D. (2008). The Hidden Music of Writing. *Writing*. 30(5). 16-19.

Rex, L. A. and McEachen, D. (1999). If anything is Odd, Inappropriate, Confusing, or Boring, It's Probably Important: The Emergence of Inclusive Academic Literacy through English Classroom Discussion Practices. *Research in the Teaching of English*. 34. 65-131.

