

Student-Centred Discussion

Purpose

The purpose of a Student-Centred Discussion is for students to develop a deeper understanding of a text through a two-phase group discussion. Students assume most of the responsibility for the discussion, and work collaboratively to develop understandings in a way that serves all members of the group. A Student-Centred Discussion is not about debate, but is about dialogue; it is not about proving each other wrong, but is about working together in service of developing understanding.

Procedure

1. Select an appropriate text.

The text selected for a Student-Centred Discussion should be relevant to what is being learned and meaningful to students' own lives. Texts will be complex, rich and generative, and will be open to thoughtful conversation, multiple perspectives, and questions for which there may be no prescribed right or wrong answers. Material may be taken from literature, history, science, maths, philosophy, current affairs, art, music, etc.

2. Reading the text.

Depending on length and text type, the text is read aloud twice, by two different volunteer readers.

3. Pre-discussion process.

Individually and silently, each member of the group annotates the text before discussion begins. Students are encouraged to interact with the text by marking questions and reactions in the margin, circling and looking up words if necessary, underlining key phrases, analysing key components, etc.

4. Creating circles.

Students are divided randomly into two concentric circles: an inner circle and an outer circle.

5. Discussion Phase 1.

Prior to discussion, teachers remind students of the Discussion Norms, and may leave these displayed on the screen during discussion (see Discussion Norms at the end of this document).

Students in the inner circle discuss the text for approximately ten minutes, while students in the outer circle listen silently and make notes.

The teacher usually remains outside the circles, and remains largely silent throughout the discussion, often documenting the discussion on butcher's paper as it develops. Documentation captures key ideas discussed, questions raised, and some of the specific comments that are made.

Inner Circle

In the inner circle, the students take charge of the discussion, talking with each other and not with the teacher. The teacher might ask a question to initiate the conversation, but the goal is to let students take it from there. If there are periods of silence during discussion, teachers should resist the urge to jump in and fill the empty space - periods of silence are often opportunities to gather our thoughts, reflect and process. If necessary, teachers might offer probing questions if the conversation truly needs jump-starting!

To get students started, the teacher might pose an opening question such as:

- What's the first thing you notice when you look at this text?
- What are you finding challenging in this text?
- What questions is this text raising for you?

Outer Circle

In the outer circle, students listen silently and make notes in response to this question:

- What do you hear that surprises/interests you?

6. Switch, and Discussion Phase 2.

The inner and outer circles changes places.

Students in the inner circle discuss the text for approximately ten minutes, while students in the outer circle silently observe the discussion and make notes.

As before, the teacher usually remains outside the circles, and may continue to document the discussion.

Inner Circle

Once again, students take charge of the majority of the discussion, talking with each other and not with the teacher.

To get students started, the teacher poses the following question, though students will eventually build on these reflections with their own thinking:

- What did you hear that surprised/interested you?

Outer Circle

In the outer circle, students listen silently and make notes on what they hear in response to these questions:

- What do you hear that surprises/interests you?

7. Reflect

Individually and silently, students are asked to reflect in writing on what they have learned, using the following prompt:

- What are 3 big ideas emerging from this discussion which seem important to you? Explain each idea with evidence from the text, aiming to preserve complexity, not diminish it.

8. Debrief

“What felt powerful about the Student-Centred Discussion today?” “What felt inhibiting?”

“What improvements are we noticing since our last Student-Centred Discussion?”

“Looking at our norms, what worked well today, and what do we need to work on next time?”
(Teacher may display norms again here.)

Discussion Norms

During effective discussions, we:

- Talk to each other, not just the teacher
- Support our ideas with evidence (from the text)
- Hear each other out, and avoid interrupting
- Monitor personal airtime
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood
 - “I think you’re saying that... Have I heard you right?”
- Use conditional rather than absolute language
 - “One possible interpretation is....” “Maybe another way of looking at this could be...”
 - “Perhaps...”
- Appreciate each other’s thinking
 - “That extends my thinking because...” “That’s interesting because...”
- Build on each other’s thinking
 - “Building on that...” “This gets me thinking about the idea that...”
- Probe each other’s thinking
 - “What makes you say that?” “Please can you tell me more about...”
 - “How does... connect with...?”