



Effective Upper School Teaching & Leadership with Dr. Christopher Schlect

Lesson 5: Leading Effective Discussions

Outline:

The Role that Discussion Plays in Upper School Teaching

What is discussion?

- Discussion is basically intellectual conversation. It is part of human behavior so it should be natural to the classroom environment.

“Discussion is less about the lesson, and more about the rich environment in which a great lesson can take off.” - Schlect

Function of discussion:

- To give student the chance to think through information.
- To let students try to explain their interpretation or response to information.
- To create opportunity for teachers and other students to react to their output - **sympathy and fellowship principle being activated.**
- To involve the whole class. (Analogy of coach trying to motivate and galvanize the whole team in a practice drill, rather than a singular player)
- Some people call discussion the Socratic method. As historian, Schlect rejects it, because he is unsure about whether Socrates is a good teacher model.

Socratic discussion format:

- Socrates gives speech on an intelligent point. Conversant then says “That is without question.” Cycle repeats.
- **Not example for good** classroom discussion. Interlocutors are only vehicles or stage props for Socrates to express himself.

Signs of bad discussion practices (from Schlect’s observations)

- Teacher’s doing all the talking
- Teacher gives students surface level, stimulus questions (that’s more a review than a discussion)
- Teacher always answers his/her own questions
- Teacher singles out certain students to answer every time, others become spectators ***refer to above ‘Function of discussion’ #4***
- Teacher repeats students’ answers more loudly and precisely
- Teacher asks a different question each time student answers
- No student-student interaction



- Student speaks loud enough only for teacher to hear instead of the whole class, because he/she has been trained to think that other students' responses don't matter to the lesson

Eventually, students will:

- Realize that teacher only has the agenda of completing the lesson on schedule instead of caring about their input
- Feel patronized, think they are only stage prompts for teachers to emphasize certain key points
- Tune out the teacher

How to rectify poor discussion practices

- Schlect advises **against** giving participation points for discussion - compares this tactic to seals trained to perform for fish, again will reinforce feelings of being patronized
- **“The kind of effort that comes from the incentive of fear is quite unlikely to develop permanent and abiding interest that you want” - Schlect**
- Teachers must aim to instill **Secondary Passive Attention**.
 - **Secondary Passive Attention:** (John M. Gregory's term) Student who is paying attention without realizing it, he is just invested in the activity.
- **Key question: Are we bringing up the attitude of intellectuals, wanting to learn, portraying human traits?**
- When students are allowed to express themselves in class, they might make mistakes, give the wrong answer, not be on the same accuracy page as the teacher. **However, let them say it anyway**, so they can be challenged.
- For example, **“Where is that in the text?”** or more tactfully, get another student to respond to the first comment.
- **Why?**
 - Students need to notice inconsistencies or mistakes, they won't if a teacher just proceeds with objective of clearing the syllabus.
 - Students need to ruminate on and voice their thought process, to fully understand in the long run

Suggested activity:

- Inner and outer circle discussions: Divide class into two groups; one observes the other conducting discussion
 - **Tip:** If you give students guides on what to look for, they start questioning their own discussion method.
 - It's the same concept as peer review, because students are more attuned to mistakes in each other's work and reasoning. **It's less about the feedback than the position the peer review is put in, because**



they start becoming more sensitive to mistakes in general, their peers' and their own.

- Divide class into small group, hand out the same source material to each one, **but** request each group to observe something different.
 - **Tip:** By reducing the number of discussants, it negates the chances of individual students laying low in the crowd and avoiding the limelight.
- Structure a last 5 min writing prompt on something drawn from the discussion.
 - **Tip:** It forces students to individually regroup thoughts, and take responsibility for what they have heard. Implement this **immediately after discussion/before end of class**, not a day later, so students will be able to reflect before their memory can fail them.
- **Bonus tactic:** A teacher can pull from the prompts for the following class to briefly review the last discussion and jog everyone's memory