



Questioning

FOR Classroom Discussion

Purposeful Speaking, Engaged Listening, Deep Thinking

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Acknowledgments	iv
Introduction: Making the Case for Questioning for Discussion	1
1. Quality Questioning: The Heart of Thoughtful Discussion	13
2. The DNA of Productive Discussion: Social, Cognitive, and Use-of-Knowledge Skills and Companion Dispositions	32
3. Teacher-Guided Discussion: Teachers as Coaches During Five Stages of Discussion	57
4. Structured Small-Group Discussion: Using Protocols to Scaffold Skills for Discussion	102
5. Student-Driven Discussion: Putting Students in the Driver's Seat	151
6. Questioning for Discussion: Creating Your Own Designs	192
Appendix A: Skills Associated with Disciplined Discussion	201
Appendix B: Template for Planning a Productive Discussion	205
References	211
Index	216
About the Authors	227

INTRODUCTION

Making the Case for Questioning for Discussion

Why should we place greater emphasis on questioning for discussion in our classrooms?

Questioning and discussion are important means—and ends—of student learning. Research connects student engagement through questioning and discussion to improved learning outcomes, including higher levels of thinking and increases in student achievement (Applebee et al., 2003; Murphy et al., 2009). Furthermore, the skills of questioning and discussion are valuable in and of themselves. Employers report that they are important to career success (Wagner, 2008), college professors tout their value in the academic environment (Conley, 2008; Graff, 2003), and which of us would not agree that discussion and critical thinking skills are keys to active citizenship in our democratic society?

Questioning and discussion work in tandem to move students from passive participants to active meaning makers. Acknowledgment of the interdependent nature of these two skills can be found in the new state standards and in teacher evaluation rubrics. Advocates for an increased focus on questioning and discussion argue that these skills support critical thinking and collaborative problem solving (Schmoker, 2006; Wagner, 2010).

Given the compelling case for the value of questioning for discussion, one might assume that these instructional strategies are used effectively and

regularly in K–12 classrooms throughout the United States. However, there is substantial research to the contrary: classroom discussion is a rare event in our schools. Perhaps this is one reason for the current emphasis on questioning and discussion in curriculum standards and teacher evaluation systems. Skillful use of questioning for discussion is clearly a classroom practice that is worthy of pursuit.

Questioning and Discussion: Prominent in Learning and Teaching Standards

A signal feature of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is the inclusion of *speaking and listening* alongside *reading* and *writing* in the triumvirate of English language arts (ELA)/literacy standards. The underlying logic is that these three skill sets are interdependent and reinforce one another in deepening students' understanding of content. This logic is evident in the first CCSS anchor standard for speaking and listening, which states that students should be able to do the following:

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. (ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1)

The conjunction of discussion and questioning appears in the grade-level Common Core standards associated with this anchor, beginning with kindergarten. By the time students are in Grades 11–12, they are expected to do the following:

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives. (ELA-Literacy.SL11-12.1C)

Similar language appears in the speaking and listening standards of all non-CCSS states. For example, here's one of Virginia's English Standards of Learning (SOL) for Grades 9–10: "Move conversations ahead by posing and responding to questions, actively involve others in the discussion, and challenge ideas" (10.1 CF). Likewise, the state standards for Texas—the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)—contain a strong speaking and listening strand that involves student questioning and collaborative conversations.

Thanks to the Common Core Standards for Mathematical Practice (<http://www.corestandards.org/Math/Practice>), many mathematics classrooms today are alive with student discussion. Even though questioning and thinking support all eight of these standards, it is Mathematical Practice Standard 3 that requires particular teacher and student skills in questioning for discussion: "Construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others" (CCSS.Math.Practice.MP3). More specifically, this standard requires that students "justify their conclusions, communicate them to others, and respond to the arguments of others" and that "students at all grades listen or read the arguments of others, decide whether they make sense, and ask useful questions to clarify or improve the arguments."

A look at the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) reveals that four of the eight NGSS science practices directly relate to questioning or discussion: asking questions; constructing explanations; engaging in argument from evidence; and obtaining, evaluating, and communicating information. Moreover, the inquiry-based nature of science lends itself to student dialogue as learners hypothesize and speculate, test and evaluate results, and work collaboratively to make sense of their experiments.

The College, Career, and Civic Life Framework (the "C3"), released in 2013 by the National Council for the Social Studies, features an "inquiry arc" with four dimensions that span the social science disciplines: developing questions and planning inquiries; applying disciplinary concepts and tools; evaluating sources and using evidence; and communicating conclusions and taking informed action. The emphasis on questioning and discussion is apparent.

Not surprisingly, speaking and listening, within the context of academic conversations or discussions, are central to the English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards developed by the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). All five ELP standards focus on communication, and Standard 1 is “English language learners communicate for social, intercultural, and instructional purposes within the school setting” (TESOL, 2006, p. 28). Fisher and Frey (2008) emphasize oral language as the bridge between reading and writing: “Oral language tasks do not end with the conversation but serve to scaffold learning, allowing students to activate their thinking before they read or to clarify their understanding and their use of language in preparation to write” (p. 41).

Even as discussion is a focus for learning standards, so is it also an important component of research-based rubrics underpinning current teacher evaluation frameworks. For example, Charlotte Danielson’s Framework for Teaching, one of the two most widely used evaluation systems in the United States (Popham, 2013, p. 61), spotlights questioning and discussion. Questioning and Discussion (3b) are the “only instructional strategies specifically referred to in the Framework for Teaching, a decision that reflects their central “importance to teachers’ practice.” Danielson views discussion and questioning as strategies for deepening understanding (personal communication, December 10, 2014).

Three elements associated with questioning and discussion form the related component in Danielson’s framework. These elements are (1) quality of questions/prompts, (2) discussion techniques, and (3) student participation. Danielson’s rubric includes four levels for rating teacher quality: Distinguished, Proficient, Basic, and Unsatisfactory. The Distinguished level for the questioning and discussion component requires proactivity on the part of students in asking questions, challenging one another’s thinking, and making comments. Inherent in this expectation is the assumption that teachers are developing student skills in these areas and creating a classroom culture where students are comfortable exercising these responsibilities. This sophisticated view of teacher responsibility is one that we propose in this book.

Danielson Framework for Teaching

Component 3b: Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques Distinguished (Level 4)

The teacher uses a variety or series of questions or prompts to challenge students cognitively, advance high-level thinking and discourse, and promote metacognition. Students formulate many questions, initiate topics, challenge one another's thinking, and make unsolicited contributions. Students themselves ensure that all voices are heard in the discussion. (Danielson, 2013, p. 67)

The current emphasis on questioning and discussion raises this question: What is the state of the art and practice of classroom questioning, particularly as it supports student discussion? If you assume that this emphasis is born of a perceived need or an identified gap between best practice and actual documented practice, then the following will affirm your thinking.

Discussion: A Rare Occurrence in K-12 Classrooms

Educational thought leaders have long lamented the limited opportunity for student interaction in K–12 classrooms. More than 30 years ago, Ernest Boyer, reporting on secondary education in the United States, wrote the following:

Most discussion in classrooms, when it occurs, calls for simple recall (*What were the provisions of the Treaty of 1763?*) or the application of an idea (*Use the periodic table to find an atomic number*). Occasionally students are asked to develop explanations (*If we were to release ammonia in one corner of the room, why is it possible to smell it in the opposite corner?*). But serious intellectual discussion is rare. (Boyer, 1983, p. 146)