Discussion Strategies

Think-Pair-Share

Background

Think-Pair-Share (TPS) is a collaborative learning strategy in which students work together to solve a problem or answer a question about an assigned reading. This technique requires students to (1) think individually about a topic or answer to a question; and (2) share ideas with classmates. Discussing an answer with a partner serves to maximize participation, focus attention and engage students in comprehending the reading material.

Benefits

The Think-Pair-Share strategy is a versatile and simple technique for improving students' reading comprehension. It gives students time to think about an answer and activates prior knowledge. TPS enhances students' oral communication skills as they discuss their ideas with one another. This strategy helps students become active participants in learning and can include writing as a way of organizing thoughts generated from discussions.

Create and use the strategy

The teacher decides upon the text to be read and develops the set of questions or prompts that target key content concepts. The teacher then describes the purpose of the strategy and provides guidelines for discussions. As with all strategy instruction, teachers should model the procedure to ensure that students understand how to use the strategy. Teachers should monitor and support students as they work.

1. **T** : (Think) Teachers begin by asking a specific question about the text. Students "think" about what they know or have learned about the topic.
2. **P** : (Pair) Each student should be paired with another student or a small group.
3. **S** : (Share) Students share their thinking with their partner. Teachers expand the "share" into a whole-class discussion.

Variation:

Teachers can modify this strategy and include various writing components within the Think-Pair-Share strategy. This provides teachers with the opportunity to see whether there are problems in comprehension. Teachers can create a Read-Write-Pair-Share strategy in which students:

1. **R**: Read the assigned material;
2. **W**: Write down their thoughts about the topic prior to the discussions;
3. **P**: Pair up with a partner
4. **S**: Share their ideas with a partner and/or the whole class.

GALLERY WALK

Basic Structure: Stations or posters are set up around the classroom, on the walls or on tables. Small groups of students travel from station to station together, performing some kind of task or responding to a prompt, either of which will result in a conversation.

Variations: Some Gallery Walks stay true to the term gallery, where groups of students create informative posters, then act as tour guides or docents, giving other students a short presentation about their poster and conducting a Q&A about it. In Starr Sackstein's high school classroom, her stations consisted of video tutorials created by the students themselves. Before I knew the term Gallery Walk, I shared a strategy similar to it called Chat Stations, where the teacher prepares discussion prompts or content-related tasks and sets them up around the room for students to visit in small groups.

PHILOSOPHICAL CHAIRS
a.k.a. Values Continuum, Forced Debate, Physical Barometer, This or That

Basic Structure: A statement that has two possible responses—agree or disagree—is read out loud. Depending on whether they agree or disagree with this statement, students move to one side of the room or the other. From that spot, students take turns defending their positions.

Variations: Often a Philosophical Chairs debate will be based around a text or group of texts students have read ahead of time; students are required to cite textual evidence to support their claims and usually hold the texts in their hands during the discussion. Some teachers set up one hot seat to represent each side, and students must take turns in the seat. In less formal variations (which require less prep), a teacher may simply read provocative statements students are likely to disagree on, and a debate can occur spontaneously without a text to refer to (I call this variation This or That in my classroom icebreakers post). Teachers may also opt to offer a continuum of choices, ranging from "Strongly Agree" on one side of the room, all the way to "Strongly Disagree" on the other, and have students place themselves along that continuum based on the strength of their convictions.

SOCRATIC SEMINAR
a.k.a. Socratic Circles

Basic Structure: Students prepare by reading a text or group of texts and writing some higher-order discussion questions about the text. On seminar day, students sit in a circle and an introductory, open-ended question is posed by the teacher or student discussion leader. From there, students continue the conversation, prompting one another to support their claims with textual evidence. There is no particular order to how students speak, but they are encouraged to respectfully share the floor with others. Discussion is meant to happen naturally and students do not need to raise their hands to speak. This overview of Socratic Seminar from the website Facing History and Ourselves provides a list of appropriate questions, plus more information about how to prepare for a seminar.

Variations: If students are beginners, the teacher may write the discussion questions, or the question creation can be a joint effort. For larger classes, teachers may need to set up seminars in more of a fishbowl-like arrangement, dividing students into one inner circle that will participate in the discussion, and one outer circle that silently observes, takes

notes, and may eventually trade places with those in the inner circle, sometimes all at once, and sometimes by "tapping in" as the urge strikes them.

FISHBOWL
Basic Structure: Two students sit facing each other in the center of the room; the remaining students sit in a circle around them. The two central students have a conversation based on a pre-determined topic and often using specific skills the class is practicing (such as asking follow-up questions, paraphrasing, or elaborating on another person's point). Students on the outside observe, take notes, or perform some other discussion-related task assigned by the teacher.

Variations: One variation of this strategy allows students in the outer circle to trade places with those in the fishbowl, doing kind of a relay-style discussion, or they may periodically "coach" the fishbowl talkers from the sidelines. Teachers may also opt to have students in the outside circle grade the participants' conversation with a rubric, then give feedback on what they saw in a debriefing afterward, as mentioned in the featured video.

Snowball Throwing
The snowball throwing strategy can be used to help students predict, summarize, justify, and think critically. It is also especially helpful for getting conversation started on difficult and/or controversial topics. Teachers can adapt the strategy to their own purposes.

First, have students write the answer to a poignant content-related question on a piece of paper. Students then crumple their paper into a "snowball." Then, students throw their "snowballs" across the room and retrieve one that is not their own. Students then open the "snowball" and respond in some way to the content of the "snowball." Finally, you can ask the next question, and allow the students to write the next answer on the paper they have and repeat the process.

Modify the process to meet your classroom needs.

The Snowball Fight activity enforces writing, responding to text, critical thinking, justifying, and collaboration. The anonymity of the activity encourages students to respond even if they are unsure of the "right" answer.

I have used this technique a number of times to both initiate discussions, as well as to move forward when discussion has gotten stuck because students were afraid of being judged for their thoughts. For example, I was teaching a very diverse group of students when the topic of white privilege came up. One student said that white privilege didn't exist; another student claimed it did. At that, discussion ground to a halt, as students either did not want to offend each other or were afraid of being attacked for their ideas. I asked everyone to take out a sheet of paper and write for about 5 minutes about what they were feeling and/or thinking at that moment, and not to put their names on the paper. I had them crumple the sheets into balls and throw them at me in the center of the room. I

then proceeded to unwrap and read each one, after which we discussed the array of ideas and feelings, without anyone having to necessarily be accountable for the ideas in the room.

Speed Dating
Divide the class into pairs; if an uneven number, you take part as well. Arrange the classroom in a way amenable to two-person tables/conversations. Offer a prompt for conversation, e.g. explain the thesis of your paper. Assign one side of the room to begin the conversation and let them talk for an established amount of time (2-5 mins, typically). When the time is up, the other student gets to talk. After the time allotted for each pair is up, have one have of the students get up and rotate to the next chair/person, and the process begins again.

Note-taking Strategies

Concept Maps

Background

A concept map help students visualize various connections between words or phrases and a main idea. There are several types of concept maps; some are hierarchical, while others **connect information without categorizing ideas.**

Most are comprised of words or phrases surrounded by a circle or square that connect to one another and ultimately back to the main idea through graphic lines. These lines help students to "negotiate meaning" (Hyerle, 1996) as they read and make the meaning connections between the main idea and other information.

Benefits

Concept maps have been shown to support struggling readers (Lovitt & Horton, 1994) by building off of students' prior knowledge and asking them to reflect on their understanding while reading. They are easy to construct and can be used across all content areas.

Create and use the strategy

There are several ways to construct concept maps for middle and high school students. Most include the following steps:

1. Model for your students how you identify the major ideas presented in a reading as you read.
2. Organize your ideas into categories if applicable to the type of concept map you chose. Remind students that your organization may change as you continue to read and add more information.
3. Use lines or arrows to represent how ideas are connected to one another, a particular category, and/or the main concept.

You can use concept maps as a pre-reading strategy by inviting students to share what they already know about a particular concept. As students begin reading and adding to

the map, they are able to meld their prior knowledge with new information they have gathered from their reading.

After students have finished the guide, encourage them to share their concept maps with one another in pairs or small groups. This will allow students to share and reflect on how they each interpreted the connections between concepts and words.

Encourage students to use the concept map to summarize what they have read, organize their writing on the concept, or to create a study guide for their own studying.

Double-Entry Journals

Background

The Double-Entry Journal strategy enables students to record their responses to text as they read. Students write down phrases or sentences from their assigned reading and then write their own reaction to that passage. The purpose of this strategy is to give students the opportunity to express their thoughts and become actively involved with the material they read.

Benefits

Double-Entry Journaling improves students' comprehension, vocabulary, and content retention. This interactive strategy activates prior knowledge and present feelings, and promotes collaborative learning. It fosters the connection between reading and writing as students are able to "reply" to the author or speaker as they write their responses.

The technique offers flexibility in that teachers can use any form of written text, read alouds, or listenings that are assigned in class.

Create and use the strategy

Introduce a passage of text to the students. Discuss the Double-Entry Journal technique and model the procedure including specific guidelines for writing. Have students read the selected text making journal entries whenever a natural pause in the reading occurs, so that the flow is not interrupted constantly.

1. Students fold a piece of paper in half, lengthwise.
2. In the left hand column, the students write a phrase or sentence from the selection that was particularly meaningful to them, along with the page number.
3. In the right hand column, the students react to the passage by writing personal responses to the quotes on the left. The entry may include a comment, a question, a connection made, or an analysis.
4. Students can share their responses with the class or literature discussion group.

Analytical Strategies

The Method

When writing research-based essays, writers often begin by brainstorming ideas and seeking out texts that speak to the paper prompt. Working with individual texts can be a challenge, but placing those texts in conversation with others is even more complicated.

Fortunately, we can explore a step-by-step approach to identifying valuable aspects of the research we have compiled, without getting bogged down in the rest of the information that might seem unnecessary. We call this The Method.

The Method is not about arranging an argument and getting quickly to the bottom line; it's about really looking at things—reducing anxiety by getting rid of the bottom-line mentality and giving yourself something quasi mechanical to do that will let your mind play freely with the material. Listing is a great form of brainstorming; the method makes the listing activity more coherent and systematic. Here's how it works:

The Method: Making Observation Systematic and Habitual

Step 1.

Locate Exact Repetitions—identical or nearly identical words or details—and the number of times each repeats. For example, if the word "seems" repeats three times, write "seems x 3." Consider different forms of the same word—"seemed," "seem"—as exact repetitions. Similarly, if you are working with images rather than with words, the repeated appearance of high foreheads or of bare midriffs would constitute exact repetitions.

Step 2.

Locate strands—a grouping of same or similar kind of words or details. (For example, "polite, courteous, mannerly" or "accuse, defense, justice, witness," are strands.) Be able to explain the strand's connective logic, how the words are linked. Some people find it useful to think of strands as clusters or word-detail families that repeat throughout a verbal or visual subject.

Step 3.

Locate details or words that form or suggest binary oppositions. We call these binaries or organizing contrasts. Here are some examples: open/closed, naïve/self-conscious, gray/brown (note the opposition doesn't have to be as start as black/white or light/dark). Start with what's on the page. Gradually move to implied binaries but keep these close to the data. Images of rocks and water, for example, might suggest the implied binary permanent/impermanent or the binary unchanging/changing. Understand that binaries ask us to think in terms of either/or. Instead, ask the question, To what extent?

Step 4.

Choose what you take to be the key repetitions, strands, and binaries—which may involve renaming or labeling them—and rank them in some order of importance. Notice that choosing which binaries, strands, and repetitions are key is already in interpretive activity. At this point in the process (and not before) you can give yourself more space to start making the leap from data to claims (that is, from observations to conclusions). If, for example, you had been analyzing a picture, your leap might answer the question "What does this picture 'say'?" There will always be more than one plausible answer to this question. For now, you should concentrate on practicing the first four steps—the data gathering phase—and recognize that your choices of what goes with what, which is key, and so forth, already constitute moves toward interpretation.

Step 5.
Write up the three lists that you have been composing and then write one healthy paragraph in which you explain your choice of one repetition or one strand or one binary as especially significant.

10 on 1
Do more with less. It is better to make 10 observations or points about a single representative example than to make a basic, over-generalized point with 10 examples. 10-on-1 helps to narrow focus, draw out every meaning from good examples, and structure analytical papers.

Developing a thesis is more than simply repeating an idea.

- Overly general claim:
  - example 1
  - example 2
  - example 3
  - … example 10 = conclusion

This is mere demonstration. Here, the analysis of evidence is superficial and the presentation is redundant. Such is the problem of a five-paragraph essay.
The thesis tends to be a broad generalization, and the body paragraphs are arbitrarily divided, predictable points that simply plug evidence into categories without analyzing how that evidence is related.

10-on-1 is the opposite of demonstration: it examines a part of a whole in great detail, and then draws conclusions about that whole.

point 1 ←→
point 2 ←→ **Representative Example**
point 3 ←→
...point 10 ←→
conclusion used to explore other examples

This general technique can be used in a number of different ways. I used it once push discussion about *Othello* deeper. The students had all read the play, and we had discussed various aspects of it. I had the students consider the book cover of the Arden edition we were using, which is a minimalist, black and white photograph of a white handkerchief falling though indeterminate space against a grainy greyish background. I put students into groups and asked each group to come up with 10 ways in which the image was thematically related to the play. While there was some overlap between groups, the amount of original and compelling ideas was impressive, and went quite beyond the obvious black/white binary. Besides simply coming up with ways that the image related to the text, these ideas then became new avenues and lenses through which to further explore the text, thus generating new knowledge.

Various analytical purposes of 10-on-1:

- locates the range of possible meanings of data
- breaks from initial impressions and preemptive claims
- discovers the complexity of the subject
- slows down moves toward generalization and helps to narrow working theses

Helpful Resources

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*
A classic. So much good stuff in here.

Blau, Sheridan. *The Literature Workshop: Teaching Texts and Their Readers*
Although written particularly for teaching literature, the pedagogical insights here are broadly applicable, especially the fundamental shift from teaching what one knows, to developing students ways of knowing.

The internet. Yeah, kind of obvious perhaps, but there are so many good resources out there. Though many, if not most of them, are aimed at elementary and secondary teachers, their applicability to college teaching is readily apparent.