The Pedagogy of Digital Discussion

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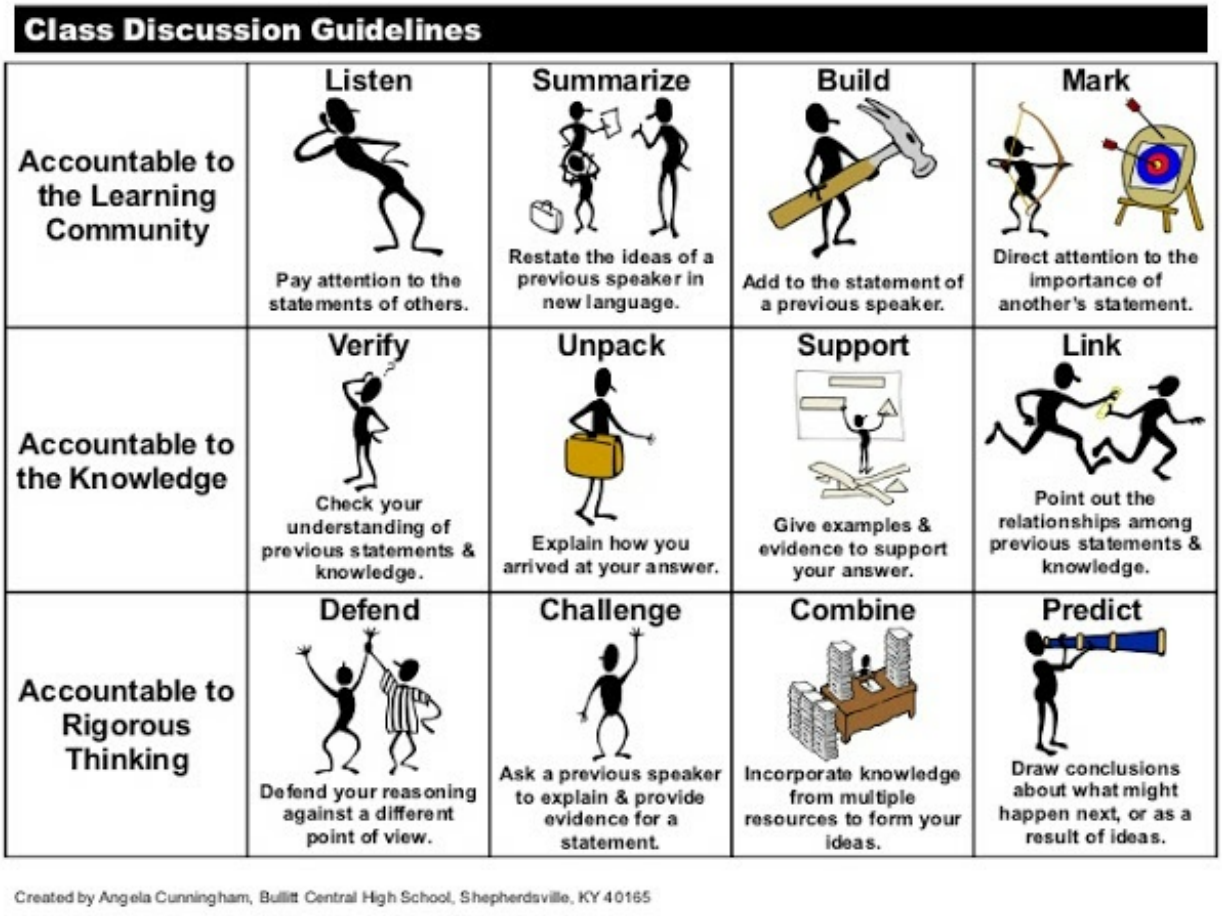

I wasn't an overly confident student when it came to engaging in open conversations during class. If one of my teachers posed a question, I only raised my hand if I was 99.9% sure that I knew the correct answer. I guess you can chalk this up to the fact that I lacked a certain degree of confidence in my knowledge acquisition or the fact that I was a relatively shy student when it came to class participation. Perhaps it was a combination of both. There were other issues at play that impacted my level of engagement. Not only was I averse to answering questions, but I also rarely directed any to my teachers outside of a one on one conversation. Discussions with my peers were limited to the rare occasion when a cooperative learning activity was planned. Such was life in a classroom back in the day.

I often reflect on what my learning experience might have been like had my teachers had access to and used the many interactive tools that are available today to enhance classroom discussion. During every single workshop I facilitate, I have participants in both peer and randomly selected groups engage in face-to-face conversations on numerous question prompts. It is during this time that they get to share their ideas on the topic, discuss implementation strategies, reflect on what others have said, or provide positive reinforcement. I am always inspired when I eavesdrop on these conversations. There is no substitute for real human interaction as this is the ultimate relationship builder. After a set amount of time, they are then all asked to share their responses using one of many different digital tools.

Let me take a step back now and share some insights on why classroom discussion is so meaningful. As I was researching for some solid pedagogical links, I came across this wonderful article that Todd Finley wrote for Edutopia titled Rethinking Whole Class Discussion. It is not only a great read but also what he cites aligns with the strategies that I described previously in this post. Here is one piece that he shared:

> *Quality discussion, according to the University of Washington's Center for Instructional Development and Research, involves purposeful questions prepared in advance, assessment, and starting points for further conversations. Teachers are also advised to:*
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> - *Distribute opportunities to talk*
> - *Allow discussants to see each other physically*
> - *Ask questions that "may or may not have a known or even a single correct answer."*
> - *Foster learners talking to peers*
> - *Encourage students to justify their responses*
> - *Vary the types of questions*

Below are some strategies to enhance classroom discussion. For even more research-based ideas click HERE.

Research supports the importance of discussion when backed by the purposeful use of technology. Smith et al. (2009) found the following:

> When students answer an in-class conceptual question individually using clickers, discuss it with their neighbors, and then revote on the same question, the percentage of correct answers typically increases. Our results indicate that peer discussion enhances understanding, even when none of the students in a discussion group originally knows the right answer.

As a supplement to traditional discussion strategies technology can serve as a catalyst to increase engagement by getting more learners actively involved during lessons. It can also take conversations to new levels of interactivity and expression. There are so many great tools to choose from, but we have to be focused first on the improved outcomes that can result from purposeful use. Digital discussion:

- Allows creativity in responses (video, images, online research citations)
- Provides an avenue for open reflection
- Affords more learners an opportunity to answer and ask questions
- Better meets the needs of shy and introverted students
- Can extend conversations and learning beyond the traditional school day
- Welcomes participation from others beyond the brick and mortar classroom
- Can be used to show parents and stakeholders the learning that is taking place
- Works to create a culture grounded in trust and responsibility

Now that I have covered the many ways digital discussion serves as a sound pedagogical strategy, the next step is to begin implementing various tools into daily lessons and learning activities. Some of my favorites include Mentimeter, Gsuite, GoSoapBox, Yo Teach!, and Padlet (check out the backchannel option). Many learning management systems (Google Classroom, Schoology, Microsoft Teams) have opportunities to facilitate digital discussion as well. Harness the power of digital to take conversations to the next level while empowering both students and adult learners in the process.

Smith, M. K., Wood, W. B., Adams, W. K., Wieman, C., Knight, J. K., Guild, N. & Su, T. T. (2009) Why peer discussion
improves student performance on in-class concept questions. Science 323 (5910):122–24.