Leading Productive Group Discussions

What is the pedagogical practice of leading productive group discussions?

The practice of leading productive group discussions consists of the educator's application of different strategies to engage children and youth in conversations aimed at developing thinking. The educator invites and helps students to share and clarify their own thoughts, to guide the reasoning of others, and to listen to each other.

Productive group discussions involve both the teacher and the students. Everyone's interventions help and encourage students to deepen their reasoning, to improve their communication skills, and to analyze and respect the ideas of others. All of the above allow students to organize their thoughts, deeply understand ideas and concepts, and share them with others, thus improving learning.

Productive group discussions can be conducted with a whole course group or with a subgroup. They can be brief (2 to 3 minutes) or extensive (15 or more minutes), depending on the topic and the age of the students.

Leading productive group discussions implies that the educator:

✓ Relates the content of the discussion to learning objectives or curriculum content.

✓ Engages the whole group in the discussion by establishing behavioral norms that promote active participation. For example: "when a partner speaks, we stop what we are doing, turn our body in his direction and listen by looking at him".

✓ Demonstrates active listening. For example: directing *his or her body towards the speaker, looking the speaker in the face, maintaining a welcoming body expression for all participants, showing attention and genuine interest in what the students are saying.*

✓ Helps students to be more and more precise, using the appropriate terms to refer to concepts and skills, also by exemplifying. For example, *"the process you are explaining is called... ", "who can give an example that allows us to distinguish the two processes?"*

✓ Uses evidence to back up what you are saying and help students to do so. For example: *"what is your basis for that idea?", "what evidence allows you to say that?".*

What is not leading productive group discussions?

- Generate social conversations among students in order to keep them entertained. For the discussion to be productive, it must contribute to academic content and generate thought.

- Ask students for their opinion regarding an image, text, video, etc. What generates discussion is to direct the questions to how we can understand the content of the analyzed material. For example: "*what does this image mean?", "how do we connect what the paragraph points out with what we have learned before?", "how do we connect what we have seen with our experience?*

- Ask a question and evaluate the answer. A common practice in the school system is for the teacher to ask a question, listen to a student's answer, and point out whether it is correct or not. A productive discussion begins with one or more open-ended questions and extends well beyond the correct answer.

- Ask a question and have students answer it one after the other. This can be a good start, but the practice will become a productive discussion only if the teacher stops and asks the students to argue and go deeper. For example: *"What do you think about this idea?", "Who can answer the question raised by the classmate?"*. The key is to make them think about what others think.

- To get one or two students to share or evidence their reasoning, in a monologue or dialogue. A productive discussion involves the teacher and all students.

- Make students fight. For some people the word "argument" has a negative connotation so they prefer to avoid it. In the academic context, the word "discussion" has a positive connotation as it implies exposing something that is known, questioning it, arguing for and against, using evidence, and constantly reasoning.

Teaching strategies for leading productive group discussions

- **Wait**: allow time for students to think. Examples: *"you have 1 minute to think about your answer", "take your time, we will wait for you".*

- **Anticipate**: allow the student time to organize his or her ideas before making them public. Example: *"When I ask for volunteers to participate, could you volunteer to share your analysis?*

- **Prepare**: allow students to speak in pairs or small groups. Example: *"now we are going to discuss it in pairs".* This provides a space to think, develop, test, synthesize before saying it in front of the whole group.

- **Paraphrasing**: reproducing or rephrasing a student's contribution in order to highlight or clarify what he or she said, so that other students can value it and make sense of it. Examples: *"I heard you say that...", "so your idea is..."*, *"you mean that...?"*

- **Repeat**: ask one or more students to repeat the reasoning of another classmate. Example: *"Can you repeat in your own words what ... just said?"* and then immediately return to the first student and ask *"Did ... say what you meant?".* Like the previous strategy, this helps to clarify the other's thinking.

- **Add**: ask for more ideas or further participation with respect to the intervention of one of the students. Examples: *"What could you contribute to what ...", "Does anyone want to add anything else?*

- **Use error**: identify errors and generate cognitive dissonance so that they feed the discussion and are corrected during the discussion.

- **Reasoning**: ask students to apply their own reasoning to that of another person. Examples: *"Do you agree or disagree with what he said...?", "Why?"*

- **Sustaining the thought**: ask the student to elaborate on the idea he/she is putting forward, saying something more about it, giving evidence or reasons. Examples: *"can you give an example of what you claim?", what could be an example of a disadvantage of that?", "what evidence do you have for what you point out?", "what if...".*

- **Reconstructing**: consists of extending a student's contribution by constructing an unprejudiced account focused on learning. It allows to deepen, to elucidate confusions and to incite dialogue. Example: *"what you point out ... is an example of what we have been learning". "Therefore, if we consider the example he gave ... we would have to rule out one of these two possibilities".*

References

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