

## COMMUNICATING IN THE CLASSROOM: WHAT MAKES A DISCUSSION HAPPEN?

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Within the past year, two reports on the status of American education — *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and Goodlad's (1983) *A Place Called School* — have recommended increasing the ratio of student talk to teacher talk at the secondary level. This call for action should ideally meet with little resistance. In a recent survey of methods texts and journals, Gallagher and LaZansky (1983) found that educators generally hold fast to the assumption that discussion plays an important role in helping students comprehend what they read. As a topic of empirical investigation, however, discussion has received little attention since Taba's (1967) seminal work in elementary social studies. In fact, Tierney and Cunningham's (1984) review of the research on teaching comprehension since 1970 listed only four studies directly related to classroom discussion.

Given the generally accepted notion that discussion is a worthwhile classroom activity, what accounts for the relatively few studies in this area? Several ideas exist, but perhaps the most likely one is that everyone takes discussion for granted, believing perhaps that class discussions "just happen" naturally, without much forethought or planning. For the past year and a half we have been investigating what teachers mean when they say they're holding a discussion over a previously assigned segment of the required text. While we have reported elsewhere (see Alvermann, O'Brien, Dillon, & Smith, 1984) how teachers operationalized the term "discussion," we have yet to describe how different social and communicative demands made on students within various classroom settings affect the tone of a discussion. Such is the purpose of this paper. Specifically, it chronicles how four teachers, who share the common goal of conducting a class discussion over text they have previously assigned, differentially affect their students' responses.

### METHOD

#### The Setting and the Participants

The information reported here is derived from a broader ethnographic study (Alvermann, O'Brien, Dillon, & Smith, 1984) that included a descriptive analysis of the socio-communicative patterns identified during videotaped discussions in 24 different teachers' classrooms. All but one participant in that study taught 7th- and 8th-grade students; the one exception taught a group of gifted 6th-graders. The

teachers and students represented a mix of socio-economic levels within rural, suburban, and urban areas of four county school districts in Georgia. Classes included a variety of subject areas (social studies, science, literature, spelling/grammar, health, human development, reading) and ability levels (gifted, average, remedial, and disabled.) Participants in the current study were members of four of those classes and represented the following content areas: social studies, human development, literature, and health.

#### Materials/Equipment

Required classroom texts and related study guides, worksheets, or other printed resources normally used by the teachers and students comprised the instructional materials in this study. Equipment consisted of a Panasonic VHS and a Sony reel-to-reel videorecorder. Several microphones connected to an audio mixer were positioned at various locations in a room to ensure adequate retrieval of all teacher-student and student-student interactions.

#### Data Collection

Securing volunteers for the study varied from site to site. Typically, the senior researcher and one research assistant visited with school district personnel to determine if sufficient interest existed among administrators, faculty, and students to warrant further investigation of the school as a research site. Once a preliminary commitment had been obtained, the researcher presented a formal plan of study to the entire faculty. At this time the researcher also explained that teachers would be required to do nothing special in preparation for the videotaped lesson, other than to ensure that they had assigned their students a portion of the text to read the evening prior to the taping. Sometimes as many as three follow-up visits were necessary to talk individually with teachers who had expressed an interest in participating in the study. Once initial approval was obtained, phone calls and letters were used to arrange mutually convenient visitation schedules.

One day prior to the actual videotaping, the researcher and one assistant visited a classroom to set up the video and audio recording equipment. This trial run provided an opportunity for participants to ask questions about the equipment, to become somewhat accustomed to strangers in the room, and for the researchers to become familiar with the general activity flow of a particular class.

On the day of the actual videotaping, the assistant operated the camera while the researcher kept a written record of classroom activities. This log was later used to supplement information from the transcribed videotapes. In addition, approximately one-third of the teachers participated in post study viewing sessions. During these viewing sessions, teachers were asked to 1) analyze their own tapes as they watched a playback of their class discussion, and 2) respond to the researcher's questions in an open ended interview (see Davies, 1978; Mehan, Hertweck, Combs, & Flynn, 1982). Information obtained from these sessions was used primarily to validate our interpretations of the observed teacher—student interactions.

#### Data Analysis

Data obtained from the transcriptions of the videotapes and from the accompanying field notes (log) were simultaneously

analyzed and reduced into categories and properties using the constant comparative methodology of Glaser and Strauss (1967). For a full description of the main study's analysis, as well as attention to validity and reliability issues, see Alvermann, O'Brien, Dillon, and Smith (1984). For purposes of the current paper, the transcripts of all 24 participating classes were searched for instances in which teachers differed widely in the communicative demands they made on their students. The four classrooms selected represent a range in student responses to those demands and in a sense portray what made a discussion happen or fail to happen in particular settings.

## RESULTS

### Classroom #1

In this 7th-grade social studies class the students had been discussing religious freedom and the right of individuals to display the nativity scene on public property. Somewhere in the course of the discussion their talk had strayed to devil worship. The segment of the transcript that follows reflects the teacher's high regard for her students' opinions. Note particularly how she encourages Scott to pursue the argument further by her last statement.

Teacher. What do you think about that? Are they free to practice that religion?

Several

Voices. Uh-uh; no; uh-uh.

Teacher. What about freedom of religion there?

Scott. They shouldn't even have that religion.

Teacher. What, Scott?

Scott. I said they shouldn't even have that religion—what with killin' people.

Teacher. But if they really believe that—and that's their religion—they should be free to practice it.

### Classroom #2

Unlike the teacher in the first classroom, the human development teacher made few attempts to enlist his students' participation in a discussion on male and female chromosomes. In fact, when Ellis in the following example raised his hand to *ask* a question rather than to *answer* the teacher's question, the communicative demand was clearly one of "let the authority figure speak first."

Ellis. Uh, uh, I was gonna ask you a question.

Teacher. Okay, hold on. First, let's answer this and then I'll get your question. What's gonna form? I want you to answer this question anyway. The male releases a Y sperm and it unites with the female's ovum. What type of baby will be born?

Ellis. A male?

Teacher. Okay, a male. All right, what's your question?

Ellis. (clearing throat) So it looks like, when the male—the male's sperm has a lot to do with the decision—cuz the X chromosome is the female and the Y chromosome is the male; so the male really controls the sex of the child . . .

### Classroom #3

In the following segment of a discussion on *Odysseus* an 8th-grade literature teacher continually interrupts Michael's attempts to summarize what he has read. That Michael interpreted these interruptions to be part of the teacher's playful style and not singularly critical of him is evident from his perseverance and his willingness to play the straight man. The communicative demands made by this teacher were twofold: on the surface she appeared to want only the right answer, and a very literal one at that; implicitly, however, her intonation and playful style indicated that she wanted to keep the students involved by catching them off guard.

Michael. Well, um, they was sailin' on a ship and they came, um, to this island, he had a cave, um . . .

Teacher. (interrupting) *Who* did?

Michael. O . . . Ossissius.

Teacher. *Odysseus* had a cave?

Michael. No, Cyclops.

Teacher. What was Cyclops' name; anybody know?

(No one answers—long pause)

Teacher. Boy, I'll tell you, I probably ask the Cyclops' name was Ulysses, or um Inhuman, or Noman, or . . .

Michael. Noman!

(Class and teacher break out laughing)

Teacher. No, uh uh . . . Um, Polyphemous, uh . . .

Jody. It was Polyphemous.

Teacher. You sure?

Jody. I think so. Somethin' like that. (Laughter) It was one of those funny soundin' names.

Teacher. Okay, one of those funny soundin' names, go on. Mr. Funny Soundin' name did what?

Michael. Well, uh, he . . . Ossissius came to . . .

### Classroom #4

The communicative demands made on 8th-grade students in the health teacher's class were the least ambiguous of all. As suggested in the following excerpt from a class discussion on first aid, the rhythmic pattern of questioning and answering made the discussion take on the tone of a litany. Whether this exchange of ideas really qualifies as a discussion is open to debate. However, in terms of the teacher's perceptions, it did.

Teacher. All right, the second one; Vanessa, would you try to identify the poison for *all* victims or only the ones that are conscious?)

Vanessa. *All* victims.

Teacher. All victims, good. Russell? Would you call the poison center for *all* victims or only the ones that are conscious?

Russell. All of them.

- Teacher. All of them, good. Lance? Would you treat for shock only those victims who are conscious or *all* victims?
- Lance. All victims?
- Teacher. All victims, good. Would you watch to be sure that the victim keeps breathing, James, on all victims or only the conscious ones?
- James. All.

### DISCUSSION

Until recently, most classroom reading activities, including reading one's textbook for class discussion, would have been viewed primarily as cognitive-linguistic activities (Bloome and Green, 1982). However, evidence is accumulating which suggests that the communicative demands made on students within various instructional settings (Au, 1980; Green, 1977) more realistically define reading as a cognitive-linguistic process *embedded within a social and communicative framework*. But with the exception of Bloome's (1981) ethnography of a single textbook-discussion-test event which involved a small number of junior high school students, the study of textbook reading as a social and communicative process has been limited largely to the primary grades (DeStefano, Pepinsky, and Sanders, 1982; Eder, 1982). The present study, therefore, with its focus on middle school teachers and students involved in post-reading discussions of regularly assigned subject matter texts, adds information to the socio-communicative literature beyond the primary grade level.

The context of the classroom as a speech community (Hymes, 1971) typically governed by the teacher, sets what behavior is permissible during a discussion. What Bloome and Green (1984, p. 400) refer to as communicative "rights, obligations and demands"—i.e., who gets to talk and under what circumstances—is an unstated "rulebook" which supersedes other rule systems. For example, the notion of linguistic competence and performance is interesting as a descriptive system to account for what possible behaviors are actually exhibited in discussions; however, the types of behaviors actually exhibited may be related to communicative demands that don't fully exploit the competencies participants possess.

Communicative contexts are bound by constraints which, according to the current investigation, are largely a function of an individual teacher's perceptions of how smoothly the classroom is operating overall. This implies, or course, that a teacher's definitions of what a discussion *should be* will influence what it *is*. Frequently, however, a teacher's definition of the "ideal" discussion fails to match the reality of the classroom discussion. For example, we rarely observed the "free and open interchange of ideas between students and teachers" that graduates and undergraduates enrolled in reading methods courses envisioned (see Alvermann, 1983). Perhaps this is due, in part, to the nature of the instructional materials education majors are exposed to. For instance, almost all teachers' manuals direct the teacher to discuss certain topics with the class; however, we have found that these same manuals rarely, if ever, explain *how* to conduct a discussion.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

What is lacking in the present study's findings is the students' perspective on what a discussion should encompass. Nor do we know whether they perceived the communicative demands of their teachers in the same way that we interpreted those demands. Future researchers should take this limitation into account by building into their designs a component for examining student perceptions of the discussion task.

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