

# **Teaching Through Dialogue: Using Discussion and Debate to Foster Deep Thinking, Passion, and Creativity in Boys**

## **Table of Contents**

|   |    |
|---|----|
| A Brief Survey of the Research                | 2  |
| Some Dialogue and Discussion Models           | 3  |
| Student Reflections                           | 4  |
| Teacher Feedback from Our Working Group       | 6  |
| Sample Lesson Plans                           | 8  |
| Sample Assignment Sheets and Assessment Tools | 11 |
| Bibliography and Further Reading              | 15 |

**Stefanie Turner** (sturner@rsgc.on.ca) and  
**John Lambersky** (jlambersky@rsgc.on.ca)  
Royal St. George's College, Toronto, Canada

## **A Brief Survey of the Research: What's Been Said About Dialogue?**

"When students fail to learn, they do not need 'more'; rather, they need 'different.'" (John Hattie, *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing impact on learning*, New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 83)

### **Research**

Pedagogical research has always been hotly contested. For every finding, there appears to be a contradictory study. But in the past decades, educational research has improved in its rigor and comprehensiveness. John Hattie's meta-analysis, though controversial in some corners, is able to shed light on what works very well and what doesn't. By evaluating thousands of studies involving millions of students, the most effective teaching approaches can be isolated.

Classroom discussion is ranked seventh – out of 150 – in effect size on student achievement. (Hattie, 2012)

### **Dialogue and Creativity**

"The mind's power of invention enables us to create new ideas about the world. Thinking becomes creative through the use of imagination. Imagination may be thought of as the mind's plastic material, enabling us to conceive of things that are beyond the senses. Like clay it allows us to mould thoughts and ideas into new forms. But imagination can lie dormant unless engaged, expressed and practised through creative thought, talk and activity." (Robert Fisher, *Creative Dialogue; Talk for thinking in the classroom*, New York; Routledge, 2009, p. 5)

### **How to Do It?**

There is an emerging body of research indicating what specifically works when teaching and learning through dialogue and discussion. In the past few years, a thorough meta-analysis was performed, revealing insights:

"The data indicate that the most productive discussions (whether peer or teacher-led) are structured, focused, occur when students hold the floor for extended periods of time, when students are prompted to discuss texts through open-ended or authentic questions, and when discussion incorporates a high degree of uptake. Results also indicate that authentic questions give rise to longer incidences of student talk, which in most cases result in opportunities for greater elaboration of utterances by students, and which in turn, generate reasoning and high-level thinking." (A.O. Soter, et al, "What the discourse tells us: Talk and indicators of high-level comprehension," *International Journal of Educational Research* 47, 2008, p. 373)

## Some Dialogue and Discussion Models:

### *The Directed Discussion Method:*

The defining characteristic of this method is the assumption that the teacher has a specific student-aim that should be reached by the end of the discussion. The goals are similar to those of a lecture; however, rather than students being told the content of concept, they arrive at this understanding through questioning that is conducted by the teacher.

### *The Exploratory Discussion Method:*

This discussion method has the potential to empower students. The teacher takes on the facilitator role, ensuring that the main question is explored in depth and as many students as possible have been engaged. There is no “end goal” in an exploratory discussion, and the focus should be on the questioning process. Students are at the centre of these discussions and determine the flow and focus.

### *Fish Bowl:*

This can be used with either discussion model, but works well for larger classes. After splitting the class in half, one portion discusses, while the “outer” group observes and takes notes. Halfway through the class, a switch takes place, either with the same topic or a new one.

### *Four Square Debate:*

This method encourages students to question their opinions, physically. Each corner of the room is labeled (**Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree**). The teacher, or other students can pose questions to the group, and they move to their position. Students are encouraged to move if they change their view, or if they are questioning a new perspective.

### *Small Group Discussions/Literature Circles:*

Literature circle are small discussion communities that students engage in after they have learned and practiced dialogue and discussion in the class.

Adapted using from I. C Gabler and M. Schroeder, *Constructivist Methods For The Secondary Classroom; Engaged Minds*, Boston; Allyn and Bacon, 2003.

# **Student Reflections on Dialogue**

## **June 2012**

### **Grade 8 English and Social Studies**

#### **Student #1**

*1. How have discussion-based classes and activities (literature circles and full class circle discussions) helped you grow as a learner?*

These discussions have helped strengthen my opinion and become more open minded about other peoples ideas. The main upside to how we sit in a circle and talk about a topic is that we can make the conversation more personalized because you can make eye contact with everyone in the circle. Since this circle becomes more of a conversation people openly share their ideas and just from listening to someone else you could get a whole different perspective on the same topic. In this type of a discussion you are learning constantly because there is always someone stating their opinion on the subject and you can build on what they say until you have a great conversation going on with the class.

*2. What discussion skills do you still need to work on?*

The skill that in these circle discussions I most need to work on would be instead of just making my own point I should build on other people's ideas. The reason why this is a skill I should improve is because that is how as a class we can come to a conclusion on a topic and not just skip over it because someone has changed the topic.

#### **Student #2**

*1. How have discussion-based classes and activities (literature circles and full class circle discussions) helped you grow as a learner?*

The Harkness method has helped me grow as a learner and has helped me to become an open-minded person. When reading books like Macbeth or Oliver Twist I found a lot of "big ideas" and "deeper meanings". For example in Macbeth blood is a symbol of guilt. By myself I found reasons why it was a symbol of guilt but I only felt like my reasons where correct. If I found a symbol but I couldn't find a reason for it being a symbol I wouldn't try to listen to someone else's idea. Being in the circle made me realize that I could take ideas from different people and understand symbols that I didn't understand. They circle made it easier to understand things like symbols because together the circle felt like a free place to express different ideas. Being in a safe and accepting

environment made it easier to listen to people's ideas and since I could listen to many ideas I became more accepting of new ideas. The Harkness circle helped me learn that if I don't have an answer I can always listen to my peer's ideas.

*2. What discussion skills do you still need to work on?*

The discussion skill I need to work on is etiquette. I am polite when letting people speak their ideas when I want to speak which is a lot but when I let a person speak before me it discourages me. This discourages me to try to speak at all during the whole Harkness circle discussion. This makes people think that I don't have ideas; the only thing is I feel like my ideas are not important enough for me to talk. I would like to stop being so polite and sometimes take charge and put my ideas out to my peers.

### **Student #3**

*1. How have discussion-based classes and activities (literature circles and full class circle discussions) helped you grow as a learner?*

Discussion-based classes and activities have helped me grow as a learner because it lets the entire class share their opinions. Firstly, when we do literature circles for our books, we all share our opinions and questions for things that we noticed in the section. Not everyone focuses on the same things, so everyone learns new things about the section and we learn good ideas. Doing this gives us new ways to analyze the book and we can think about different opinions to something. Second, when we do full class circle discussions I learn to put myself in others' shoes. When we were doing a circle discussion on the Germans' reaction to the Treaty of Versailles, we had to think about how the Germans would react. I had to think about how different Germans would think of the treaty and how they would feel. In conclusion, discussion-based classes and activities have helped me grow as a learner because we can share all of our opinions and questions and we learn to put ourselves in others' shoes.

*2. What discussion skills do you still need to work on?*

Some discussion skills that I still need to work on are getting my ideas out in full class discussions and having my ideas fully formed in my head before I say them. Firstly, a skill that I need to work on is getting my ideas out in full class discussions. Sometimes I can't get my ideas out and I can't break through the conversation to show my opinions. Next year, I have to work on saying my ideas and making sure I am heard. Second, a skill that I need to work on is having my ideas fully formed in my head before I say them. In some discussions I will have an idea and I will try to say it, but I won't have it formed in my head, so when I say it it's not exactly what I want to say. Next year, I need to wait to

Speak so I will know what I am going to say and not speak when my idea is partially formed.

## **Teacher Feedback from Our Working Group**

### **Paul, English Teacher, Senior School**

The addition of dialogue-based activities to my senior, all-boys English classes have had a transformative effect on the classroom dynamic. Before I first tried a Harkness-style class I hesitated for over a year, worrying about how it would be assessed, rubrics, the size of my class, how to time conversation, etc. I eventually put it on the student calendar, forcing me to follow through with it and take the plunge.

For homework, I had my students read and annotate a story in The Things They Carried. The next day, all those that had read it formed a circle with their desks. Those who had not completed the assigned reading were left on the sidelines to observe. Roles were assigned, a timekeeper was chosen and, before long, a fascinating and structured discussion of the novel was taking place. I piped up a few times, but tried my best to suppress my desire to direct the conversation. Before long, a structured, informed and thoughtful conversation was taking place. The class passed quickly and my students seemed much more animated than usual. There were a few lulls but, at its best it was so engaging that a number of students on the outside of the circle pleaded to be allowed to join the discussion.

Many of the benefits quickly became obvious. Students who rarely volunteered information in a regular, teacher-led class discussion became talkative, making insightful and meaningful contributions. Overall, facial expressions and body language were significantly different from my regular classes. Students seemed more alert, more attentive and would often build on their classmates' statements, indicating that they are listening, synthesizing and advancing an idea or concept. I felt like I was meeting some of these students, intellectually, for the first time. The session also produced class notes, which were distributed to all the students.

I have only been experimenting with this method for a few months, but I feel it has been a valuable change to my practice.

### **Nadya, Teacher, Junior School**

I first heard about the Harkness method through my colleagues at RSGC. The method sounded fascinating, and so when they proposed an idea of a focus group to talk and learn more about it, I was intrigued. The articles we read before our first meeting were very interesting, and the focus group discussion was enlightening as well. However, I teach grade four, and I felt that this method was more suitable for older students. Considering that I have a bright class this

year, I thought that I could still try and use the method, but looking back, I realize that I was discouraged from even attempting to use it. I also tried to make plans to observe my colleague in grade 8 using Harkness, as I thought that might give me a better sense of how I could apply it to my own classroom, but of course we could never find a mutually convenient time for it! I think that perhaps if I do some more research into the method over the summer, and come across some videos that demonstrate how Harkness could be used in a primary classroom, I might be inspired to give it another try.



## Sample Lesson Plans

### Civics

Below is an example of using both formal informal debate techniques in a class – specifically, a course on Canadian government. In this case, the hope is that students will dramatize the legislative process reflecting their own interests. The debate can serve as both instruction and assessment – a moderated debate allows the instructor to gain insight into the pupils’ understandings and misconceptions.

**Unit:** Civics Basics

**Lesson Topic:** Laws and Life

**Overall Curriculum Expectations:**

-explain the legal rights and responsibilities associated with Canadian citizenship;  
-describe the main structures and functions of municipal, provincial, and federal governments in Canada.

**Instructional Strategies:**

1. Students brainstorm a list of issues they want to address – issues in our society where we might want to see change. These issues become the ‘order paper’ of our class’s legislature.
2. The class holds an election for PM: we first select candidates, then speeches, then we vote: the PM forms a government of 4 (or 5) people. The two runners up each choose 3 (or 4) people to form the opposition in this minority government. Teacher is the governor-general.
3. The PM and his government are given time to develop an idea for a bill. They then introduce their bill, and both sides have a chance to debate.
4. At the end of the debate, they will vote on the measure. Then, we explain where the bill goes, and how it becomes law.
5. Students are then given time to prepare for two debates. Resolutions are: abolish the senate, and abolish the monarchy.
6. Class then holds four-corner debate on each resolution.

Agenda:

Passing a Law

Debates – First Research, then Square Off!

**Resources:**

- Textbook, *Canadian Civics*

**Assessment:**

For learning: Prior knowledge discussion

As learning: Verbal feedback during discussion

Of learning: None

**Homework:**

- Read pages 42-48 in *Canadian Civics*

**Notes for Revision:**

## **Sample Lesson Plans**

### **Grade 8 English**

Dialogue is the basis for any deeper understanding of the text in this lesson. The expectation is that because students only have to focus on several pages of the play, they are more inclined to complete a close reading of the text. Once the students are in the dialogue setting, they can start seeing links and connections between their scene and the others from Act IV. Preparation is key for this discussion, as students will have thought deeply about their section, and they will have information and knowledge to contribute and connect to the other parts of the scene.

**Unit:** Macbeth

**Lesson Topic:** Exploration of Act IV

#### **Overall Curriculum Expectations:**

To read and understand Act IV of Macbeth using dialogue as the basis for discovery and exploration. For students to achieve a collective understanding of the symbolic role of the Act, and to connect it to the play as a whole.

#### **Instructional Strategies:**

1. Students watch video of Act IV (scene i, ii, iii)
2. Students break up into expert groups comprised of no more than four students. Each member of the group is given a print out version of one scene from Act IV.
3. Students are given the rest of the period to
  - a) read the scene with their group
  - b) annotate with group members using guide posted on projector:
    1. Plot
    2. Characters
    3. Symbols and Language-
    4. Connection to Themes
    5. Select the THREE most important quotations from the scene
    6. Develop THREE discussion questions (should spark opinion and debate)
4. The following class, students will run a full period dialogue in a circle with all members of the class. Students who read certain scenes will act like experts, proposing topics; however, all members are invited to discuss the scenes and make connections to their own.

5. Homework for the evening following the discussion will be to write a passage analysis of the most important quotation from Act IV.

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Resources:</b><br>-film clip of Macbeth (BBC version)<br>-photocopies of each scene from Act IV. | <b>Assessment:</b><br>Formative - feedback will be given to each group as they are working, and during the class discussion<br><br>Students' passage analysis will also be assessed. | <b>Homework:</b><br>Night 1 - read and annotate scene<br><br>Night 2 - passage analysis |
|---|--|---|

## Sample Assignment Sheets and Assessment Tools

This is an example of an activity that can be used as assessment for learning, or as assessment of learning at the end of a unit or module (speaking times can be varied to suit the purpose). The topics selected here can reflect the 'big ideas' of a course, and can be modified to fit student interest – even developed by the students themselves. The result is not unlike a great essay – though with deeper analysis due to the role of rebuttal and refutation.

---

### CIVICS DEBATES!

**The Idea:** Politics and government involves lots of debating. Our legal system is adversarial, as are our legislatures, as we have learned, which means we arrive at a conclusion by squaring off against one another. Through debate, we will use the principles of our political traditions to arrive at a clearer understanding of the issues of our course.

#### Your Task:

- Perform in a debate on a topics related to the study of Canadian Civics
- You will debate with a partner against another pair
- The debate will follow the format below:

#### *Timing:*

1<sup>st</sup> Government: 3 minutes      1<sup>st</sup> Opposition: 3 minutes  
2<sup>nd</sup> Government: 3 minutes      2<sup>nd</sup> Opposition: 4 minutes  
1<sup>st</sup> Government: 1 minute

#### Reminders:

- Debates are not unlike essays: strive for clarity and cohesiveness above all.
- Use rich supporting points where you can – your textbook is a great place to start, though you are encouraged to go beyond it.
- While there are no “citations,” do not use others’ words as your own.
- In order to avoid contradicting or merely repeating your partner’s points, establish a shared case before working on your individual parts.
- Please see the attached rubric for evaluation guidance.

#### List of Topics:

- Democracy is not suited to solve the problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- We should adopt proportional representation
- The rich should pay the same percentage of income tax as the poor
- The accommodation of minorities has not gone far enough
- Public funding for Catholic schools should be abandoned
- Multiculturalism has been a success
- The government should put the economy before the environment

*The debate will be performed on \_\_\_\_\_.*

EVALUATION FOR DEBATE ASSIGNMENT --

|                                    | LEVEL 4   | LEVEL 3  | LEVEL 2  | LEVEL 1  |
|------------------------------------|---|--|--|--|
| <b>Knowledge and Understanding</b> | <p>A very detailed and precise understanding of the issue is demonstrated.</p> <p>No significant details are omitted.</p>   | <p>A somewhat detailed and precise understanding of the issue is demonstrated.</p> <p>A few significant details are omitted.</p>   | <p>Understanding of the issue is only barely demonstrated.</p> <p>Many significant details are omitted.</p>  | <p>No real understanding of the issue is demonstrated.</p> <p>Most significant details are omitted or confused.</p>  |
| <b>Thinking</b>                    | <p>Effective research demonstrated with the inclusion of relevant facts.</p> <p>Research shows evidence of student asking many relevant questions</p>                                       | <p>Some research demonstrated with the inclusion of relevant facts.</p> <p>Research shows evidence of student asking some relevant questions</p>   | <p>Very little research demonstrated with the inclusion of relevant facts.</p> <p>Research shows little evidence of student asking relevant questions</p>  | <p>No effective research demonstrated with the inclusion of relevant facts.</p> <p>Research shows no evidence of student asking relevant questions</p>                         |
| <b>Communication</b>               | <p>The debater argues passionately and effectively.</p> <p>The debater uses ingenuity and wit to plead the case</p> <p>Student argues passionately for his position, listens carefully,</p> | <p>The debater argues effectively in favour of the chosen issue, but could be stronger.</p> <p>The debater speaks clearly but lacks passion</p> <p>Student argues for his position and listens well to the other</p> | <p>The debater's arguments are unclear and unfocused. The audience is unconvinced.</p> <p>The debater gets the point across - but just barely</p> <p>Student fails to clearly argue for his position. He or she does not adequately respond to the</p> | <p>No real arguments are presented.</p> <p>The debater seems bored and disinterested</p> <p>Student fails to put forth much of an argument whatsoever. He seems disengaged</p> |

|  |                 |       |             |                  |
|--|-----------------|-------|-------------|------------------|
|  | and improvises. | side. | other side. | from the debate. |
|--|-----------------|-------|-------------|------------------|

Final Mark:

## Dialogue Rubric

|                      | Level 4  | Level 3  | Level 2  | Level 1  |
|----------------------|--|--|--|--|
| <i>Knowledge</i>     | Student's comments consistently reveal a strong understanding of content and concepts from class.  | Student's comments frequently reveal a good understanding of the content and concepts from class.  | Student's comments draw on information from class, but are often based mostly on opinion.  | Student does not draw on information from class to support points, and shows a lack of understanding.  |
| <i>Thinking</i>      | <p>Student's comments consistently show insight, critical thinking and depth</p> <p>Student frequently makes relevant textual references that support an interpretation and deepen the dialogue.</p>   | <p>Student's comments often show insight.</p> <p>Student often makes textual references.</p>   | <p>Student attempts to make insightful comments; however, often resorts to surface level references.</p> <p>Student attempts to make textual references; however, they do not further the dialogue.</p>  | <p>Student makes comments that are only factual or surface level.</p> <p>Student does not make textual references.</p>   |
| <i>Communication</i> | <p>Student consistently speaks with clarity and eloquence.</p> <p>Student consistently demonstrates active listening skills by adding to the conversation, rather than interrupting it.</p> <p>Student always models proper table etiquette and encourages other students.</p> | <p>Student consistently speaks with clarity.</p> <p>Student often builds on classmates' views in order to create flow in the conversation.</p> <p>Student models proper table etiquette.</p> | <p>Student's remarks sometimes need clarification.</p> <p>Student sometimes attempts to build on others' views; however, often repeats ideas or starts a new point before others have been developed.</p> <p>Student usually models proper table etiquette, but needs reminders.</p> | <p>Student's comments are usually difficult to understand.</p> <p>Student usually states his own points, and interrupts the flow of the conversation.</p> <p>Student does not follow proper table etiquette.</p> |
| <i>Application</i>   | Student very frequently draws  | Student's comments   | Student attempts to make some  | Student sticks to comments that  |



|  |   |   |   |  |
|--|---|---|---|--|
|  | connections to relevant texts and events in order to deepen the dialogue. | sometimes connect to other texts or events. | textual and real-world connections; however, they are not usually relevant. | are directly related to the text/source used as the starting point for discussion. |
|--|---|---|---|--|

### Discussion Assessment Sheet

| Name | Asks a question | Makes a new point | Deepens a point | Disputes a point | Textual Reference | Application comment | Interrupts flow of conversation | Repeats a comments already made | Surface Level comment | Uses peer's name | Addresses teacher |
|------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-------------------|
|------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-------------------|

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

## **Bibliography and Further Reading**

Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching (2nd ed.)*, San Francisco; Jossey-Bass, 2005.

Nicholas C. Burbules, *Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and Practice*, New York; Teachers College Press, 1993.

Robert Fisher, *Creative Dialogue; Talk for thinking in the classroom*, New York; Routledge, 2009.

I. C. Gabler and M. Schroeder, *Constructivist Methods For The Secondary Classroom; Engaged Minds*, Boston; Allyn and Bacon, 2003.

John Hattie, *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing impact on learning*, New York; Routledge, 2012.

Diana Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom; The democratic power of discussion*, New York; Routledge, 2009.

P. Karen Murphy, et. al, "Examining the Effects of Classroom Discussion on Students' Comprehension of Text: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 2009, Vol. 101, No. 3, 740-764.

A.O. Soter, et al, "What the discourse tells us: Talk and indicators of high-level comprehension," *International Journal of Educational Research*, 47 (2008) 372-391.

Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults*, San Francisco; Jossey-Bass, 2002.