HOLDING CLASS DISCUSSIONS TO BE FOLLOWED BY WRITING

Class discussions can be held for several reasons: you may be trying to introduce a concept, or analyzing an issue. You may be analyzing a reading text using critical reading techniques, or you may be critiquing a sample essay. Most teachers feel that when students participate and continue a heated discussion for a prolonged period of time, student motivation is high and this benefits the teaching of our subject. However, apart from giving students opportunity to practice their skills of conversation, these discussions should lead to writing activity in a writing class. In this case, planning the discussion, focusing on the topic of discussion and determining the role of the teacher in the discussion become important.

1. **Planning ahead**: The teacher must decide what her goals are in holding the discussion. In other words, is the goal
   - To introduce a concept
   - To analyze an issue
   - To prepare students for writing?

2. **Planning the environment of the discussion**: The teacher, then, must decide in which conditions she is going to hold the discussion. That is, is she going to hold a whole class discussion or is she going to divide the class into groups or pairs?

   The format may be:
   - **Whole class discussion** where all the members of the class are invited to participate
   - **Debate** where the class is divided into groups with opposing views, and asked to voice their opinions
   - **Group discussion** where the students are divided into several groups, and hold the discussion within their own group
   - **Pair work** where student pairs exchange ideas and opinions
   - **Role play** where students are assigned or select roles themselves, and voice opinions according to their adopted roles

3. **Focusing**: Students can easily stray away during a discussion. Then, the teacher must ask herself the questions:
   - How much of that will I permit?
   - How do I bring them back?
   - Will I warn those who diverge?
   - Shall I apply tighter control?

4. **Organizing**: While the discussion continues, the teacher should help students organize their ideas by keeping track of issues discussed,
and points raised. One way to do that is writing them down on the board.

5. **Summarizing**: After the discussion is over, the teacher should summarize and clarify issues, going over the notes with the students.

6. **Giving clear instructions as to what the writing assignment is**: The students should be clear about what the writing task is, and how they are going to accomplish it.

**Holding the discussion**

There are certain guide points about holding a successful class discussion.

1. **Be prepared**: Know the issue or the topic at hand. If necessary, read about it before class.
2. **Be patient**: The importance of silence on part of the teacher.
   - Don’t be afraid of silence
   - Give students time to gather and formulate their thoughts

Don’t forget that they are ESL learners and need time to put their ideas into words. They are not as quick as we teachers are; they need time. You will be amazed how many responses emerge when you just wait after you ask a question.

3. **Don’t ask yes/no questions**: Yes/no questions only produce yes/no answers and do not invoke discussion.
4. **Rephrase students’ answers**: This helps them to clarify their ideas and also helps other students to understand what their friends are saying.
5. **Ask them to paraphrase their answers**: This again ensures that remarks are correctly understood and meanings are clarified.
6. **At regular intervals, summarize the views expressed and the issues raised by the students**: Lead the learners into further discussion using your summary and clarification as another starting point.
7. **Do not dominate the discussion, but act rather as a facilitator**: Play the devil’s advocate if students are not expressing ideas. However, if you share too many ideas, the students may think that you are dominating the discussion and that you only want to hear opinions similar to your own, which may be a reason for them to keep quiet. The same attitude reflects onto their writing. They try to write what they think you want to hear.
8. **Decide what you are going to do if you have a quiet, non-participating class:**
What are you going to do about the quiet students? Are you going to call on them for their opinions? What are you going to do about the talkative ones? Are you going to let them dominate the discussion? Quiet and non-participating students may be so because they are too shy to share their ideas, because they are too unsure of their English speaking skills or simply because they have no opinion ready to share. There are some methods to overcome these problems:

- Preliminary small group/pair discussion to be followed by whole class discussion:
  Ask the students to discuss the issue at hand among themselves in small groups or pairs. This helps generate ideas and students have time to respond with their own reflections on the issue. They also learn from each other.
- Class debates: Students choose sides or are assigned to a side. Next, they prepare their arguments and refutations for possible counter arguments. Then, they hold the debate.
- Class debates and discussions can be held with preparation beforehand:
  o Assign a topic/issue to be investigated, e.g. a current issue
  o Students come to class having thought and read about it
  o Assign them to sides/or they choose the side they want to be on
  o Hold the debate
  o Summarize
  o Write up
- Role-play: Assign a role to each student. After the assignment of roles, students go and read about the opinions that can be held by the roles they have adopted. They come to class having formed their opinions, and then the discussion is held. One example may be approaches to paid education: students, parents, faculty members, university administrations, government officials, ministry of education and ministry of finance, civil rights groups are some of the interest groups in the controversy. Students voice the opinions of the group whose identity they have adopted. Sometimes role-play works better because some students who are too shy to voice their own opinions are more willing to do so when they are expressing the opinions of their adopted interest group/personality/persona.

Following class discussions in the hyperspace
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A heated discussion, not reaching a conclusion in class because of time limitations, can be moved to the group site. Students write up their opinions continuing the discussion in the hyperspace. This offers further opportunity for writing practice. Since students will be doing so on their own accord it will be more like real life and will raise motivation too.

For this purpose as well as for communication among the class members and the teacher herself, a news group such as a yahoo group may be formed. A website too may be constructed for the communication among class members.

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