Class Discussion Skills 101

Your school district probably does not have a formal, written-down plan to train children to be students. Consequently, many youth lack even the basic skills to succeed in class. Both younger and older youth may seem grossly unprepared to properly participate in class discussions, making teaching very difficult, perhaps impossible.

Here are the skills that students need to succeed in classroom discussions. Although ideally, these skills would be taught in the earliest grades, these strategies are designed to be used with both older and younger students. If by fifth grade, a student hasn't mastered these skills, the chance that he or she will do so without explicit instruction is probably fairly slim. Since some youth will never acquire discussion skills on their own, even if you are not provided a formal plan or mandate by your district to provide this training, you may want to ensure that you still teach these important skills.

Discussion Skills or Disruption Ills

Eyes on Teacher
Don't assume students have been taught this basic, essential skill. Strategies: Use a magnet and metal to teach that students' eyes must be "stuck" on the teacher. Relate to jobs: what would happen if a surgeon's or crane operator's eyes wandered.

Ears on Teacher
Not listening equals not learning! Strategies: To teach listening skills, hide treats or prizes then verbally instruct the students to locate the hidden items. Discuss how listening was essential, then relate to school. Discuss the consequences of not listening in jobs, parenting, driving, etc.

Follow the Discussion
Keeping up with the conversation is essential for discussions. Strategies: To teach following the flow of discussion, play "Telephone." That's the game where one person whispers a sentence to the next person, then that person tells the next person, etc., until the sentence has been whispered to everyone. The last person says what they heard, which will now be very different from the original. Discuss: missing all or part of a discussion results in receiving as poor, inaccurate and missing information as playing "Telephone."

Keep On Following
Staying tuned in is critical. Strategies: To further teach on-going concentration skills, begin a story. After several sentences, "toss" the story to one of the students, then use a timer or bell to signal that the story is being tossed to yet another student. Once everyone has contributed to the story, ask the students to discuss the twists and turns of discussions, and how much you miss when you don't consistently focus
Mouth Control

Most schools lack a formal plan to teach “mouth control”—the most important discussion skill. Teach it anyway; you’ll get great results.

**Frequency** In our workshop, one of the most common requests we get is for ways to manage too talkative students. Our first question: Have your students identified a recommended number of times to talk per class? If not, that’s part of the problem. Until given a quantifiable standard, some youth won’t discern it.

**Duration** Some students speak forever while others talk but a second or two. If you don’t teach students to compare their contributions to a standard, many will never discern that standard on their own. Without this intervention, studies show that quieter students talk ever less and long-winded students talk ever more.

**What to Say, Not Say** Don’t assume that students understand what are appropriate content and words for the classroom. Have students determine “word to use,” and “words to never use” (such as swear words.) Assist students to have a phrase to use when they don’t know what to say, such as “I don’t know how to answer.” You may be surprised how many behavior problems can be avoided via this pro-active help.

**When to Talk, When Not** Have the class develop specific (not general) ground rules on interruptions, side talk, joking. Don’t assume students have the judgement, willingness, motivation to comply. You have to teach that, consequences and restating expectations will not compensate for absent motivation and missing specifics.

Stop the Disruptions During Classroom Discussions

**On the Job:** To motivate students to consider that class discussion Skills will become essential on-the-job discussion skills, assist the class to determine the results of disruptions during discussions at the jobs or businesses they may want to do in the future.

**Make a Checklist:** Have students develop a Discussion Checklist of behaviors they should do in discussions, then review each behavior. Set a timer during a discussion; when it rings, have students determine which behaviors they were doing.

**Hand-Raise:** Teach hand-raising prior to expecting it, or require students to be holding a “talk ball” or “talk pen” prior to speaking. This structure can really help compensate for students’ lack of internal control.

**Disrupt Whenever You Want:** Ask the students to name all the jobs and businesses that allow you to disrupt whenever you want; there are none; even pro-wrestlers must follow the plan or be fired.

**In Charge:** Have a student take the role of teacher and run a discussion while others engage in usual misconduct, then ask that role-play teacher to rate the experience. This can build empathy in some of those who normally disrupt, withdraw, arrive late, or dominate.

**Clown Time:** Reward good participation with "Clown Time:" appropriate play at the end of a successful class discussion.

**When You’re an Adult:** Build motivation for acquiring discussion skills by asking students to name adult activities you can’t do if you lack these skills. Elicit answers such as go to court, negotiate a loan, interact with police, purchase a car, solve a problem with your spouse, play team sports, and talk to the doctor.

Rate Your Site: Do You Have a Plan to Teach All These Discussion Skills?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Comments</th>
<th>When to Talk, Not Talk</th>
<th>Following Directions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Duration of Comments</td>
<td>Managing Distractions</td>
<td>Eyes, Ears, Brain in Focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What to Say</td>
<td>Hand-Raising</td>
<td>Approc. Behavior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you thoroughly teach class discussion skills, you may find the discussions distressing.