BOOK REVIEW

Discussing Discussions
A review of "Using Discussion in Classrooms"

Using Discussion in Classrooms
James T. Dillon
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reviewed by Tim Sprod

Discussion is widely recommended as a classroom activity, being mentioned in virtually any curriculum document you might pick up, but research has found that what passes for discussion in many classrooms is little more than teacher dominated recitation - virtually chanting of the catechism. To run worthwhile discussion demands that teachers relinquish some of their control in the classroom, and teachers find this hard to do, fearing a lapse into meandering anecdotal chat. Those of us involved in Philosophy for Children feel that we have a model for discussion that gets the balance right, enabling children to explore the ideas that interest them whilst simultaneously keeping the conversation rigorous.

There have been many accounts of the use of discussion from within the P4C camp, such as Lipman (1991), Splitter & Sharp (1995), Cam (1995) and Wilks (1995), so it is useful to see what an 'outsider' to P4C has to say about it. And Dillon is an outsider: his bibliography surprisingly makes no mention of the work on discussion, theoretical and practical, done by Matthew Lipman and his associates.

So, by how much does this book, by an acknowledged expert in the areas of questioning and discussion, differ in its approach to discussion in the classroom from that with which we are familiar? The answer is, reassuringly little. Dillon addresses discussion through six questions, and the answers he gives generally sit quite comfortably with the P4C understanding. A welcome feature of the book is that theoretical analyses of discussions are backed up by detailed references to fourteen pages of actual discussion transcripts.

His questions are:
What is discussion?
What things are discussed?
Who engages in discussion?
How to conduct a discussion?
How to talk in discussion?
Why use discussion?

The first chapter gives an excellent characterisation of discussion, which Dillon defines as "a particular form of group interaction where members join together in addressing a question of common concern, exchanging and examining different views to form their answer, enhancing their knowledge or understanding, their appreciation or judgement, their decision, resolution or action over the matter at issue (p 8)". He then carefully distinguishes it from other forms of "back-and-forth talk". His particular target is recitation: that form of classroom interaction which is commonly called discussion by teachers, but consists of cycles of closed, shallow teacher question, brief student response and teacher evaluation. Dillon draws heavily on the work of British educational philosopher David Bridges in this section and provides an excellent checklist of the characteristics of discussion that teachers could use in evaluation of the face-to-face talk in their own classrooms.

In the second chapter, Dillon claims that any question from any subject area can be discussed, provided it meets two criteria: it expresses group predicament about how to think or act, and it invites joint inquiry. He disagrees with the commonly expressed view that exempts the `hard' subjects from discussion, or facts in any subject. For example, in respect of facts, he says that we can discuss whether or wherein it is a fact, how it came to be accepted as a fact, or the meaning, significance or worth of the fact.

Characteristics needed by all participants in a discussion form the meat of chapter three. Dillon makes the point that, while a range of skills are required for excellent discussion, all children and teachers are able to enter into discussion with only the skills acquired in everyday living.

All that is needed to get started is a question and the basic willingness to talk things over with other people. Nevertheless, he analyses the desirable characteristics of participants, leaders and groups in discussion, offering useful and practical advice on how they can be attained. It is interesting to note that he uses the term `community of inquiry' to summarise the desirable group end point.

It is in his fourth chapter on how to conduct a discussion that readers with a P4C background will come across the first different feature in Dillon's treatment. There are, he says, five phases to the discussion: preparation for the discussion, presentation of the discussion question, the initial address of the question, the discussion and the conclusion of the discussion period. Although the last three cover ground familiar to us, albeit with some excellent advice and detail, the source and presentation of the question will sound less so.

Dillon asserts that the identification and wording of the question to be discussed is essentially the teacher's task. Thus, the question needs to be presented to the class and carefully explained. I can't help thinking that here, Dillon could learn a lot from the P4C tradition of allowing the children to ask their own questions from some type of trigger material, though it must be acknowledged that he later mentions such a possibility in passing. His advice, however, on how to map out the possible subsidiary questions (in our terms, write a Manual entry) is first rate.

On the other hand, I feel that we can learn from Dillon on the matter of the first addressing of the question. He warns against the tendency for the first speaker to try to solve the problem and of the next to either support or oppose her. The danger is that the discussion then slips into adversarial debate; other interesting points of view find it hard to get a look in. People take sides and attack and defend, instead of exploring possibilities. He advocates that participants are first encouraged to "give testimony to the problem": state what they know about the question and what the question means to them. Then a richer discussion will follow. I found his identification of two "test points" in this crucial early stage of a discussion most thought provoking. The points are: after the initial posing of the question and after the first response to it. Teachers pass the tests if they do not respond, avoiding particularly the question "What does anyone else think?" Thus the question is left open, and the first responses are not ossified, but remain subject to revision.

The characterisation of the discussion phase itself is thorough and contains little to surprise us, though there is much of great utility. Like Lipman, he is strong on the responsibility of the leader to "discipline teacher behaviour in favour of educational purpose", so that (in principle) students over time come to perform most of the teacher's behaviours.

In answer to the question of how participants are to talk in discussions, Dillon identifies five contributions: questions from the teacher or from a student, statements, signals and silence. It is no accident that he distinguishes student from teacher questions: his attitudes to the two types are diametrically opposed. He states it quite baldly: "Do not put questions to students during a discussion. [They] do not stimulate student thinking [nor] encourage participation. They depress student thought and talk" (p 78; italics in the original).

I can remember much being said about the use of teacher questions in discussion in P4C training workshops I have attended. Indeed, one of the most influential was entitled *The Art of Questioning,* run by Laurance Splitter at the 1991 Australian P4C Conference. I drew upon that experience in my book *Books into Ideas,* where I wrote "the questions the teacher asks are the key to the community. I feel that the teacher's input should be almost entirely in the form of questions". In my own workshops, I have been known to say that the core of running a community of inquiry is deciding "the right question to ask of the right child or children at the right time". So, here lies a second major difference from the P4C approach; one which challenges a lot of my beliefs and has caused me to rethink my practice in the classroom.

Why does Dillon set his face so firmly against teacher questions? It must be said that the statement quoted above is qualified to some extent afterwards. Obviously, asking the main discussion question is acceptable, as is asking "one, perhaps two" self-perplexing questions - that is, ones which genuinely perplex the teacher. Indeed, earlier in the section on Leadership Functions (p 72), the examples of exercising each of the five functions identified come in the form of teacher questions. Nevertheless, Dillon has his reasons. He argues persuasively, backed by research done by himself and others, that the discussion remains much more open if teachers phrase their input in non-question forms. Non-question alternatives result in student responses which are longer, show more initiative, are more likely to involve and refer to other students, are exploratory or speculative, involve personal revelation or interpretation of experience, show more interconnectedness and lead to more student questions and unsolicited material.

What are these non-question alternatives? Dillon has already identified them: statements, signals and silences. In a very interesting discussion of statements, he identifies six types. Perhaps the most interesting is what he calls the declarative statement. He advises stating the "pre-question thought" that occurred to you as a result of what the student said, instead of the question that subsequently springs to mind - or, in a characteristically practical piece of advice to those of us who cannot stop the question forming in our mind, "keep the question quiet but *answer it aloud" (p. 81*; italics in the original). The other five are more familiar: repeating or summarising; stating the truth of your state of mind in relation to statement - e.g. I'm confused, I (dis)agree; saying what particularly interests you in relation to statement; connecting the idea to previous speakers or statements; and reporting on your knowledge, experience or feeling in response to statement. Signals (brief phrases expressing feeling, fillers and gestures) and deliberate silences, based on the extraordinary work by Mary Budd Rowe on wait-times, should already be familiar to P4C practitioners. If they are not (and even if they are), Dillon has much of value to say about them.

What are we to conclude from Dillon's argument? I must admit to still being puzzled. Close attention to the transcripts in the appendix bears out his claims: he documents the effects of certain teacher questions in those discussions convincingly. Yet, not all the teacher utterances that have the form of questions seem to be treated as "teacher questions"; some are classified as signals or seem to be accepted as crypto-statements. The transcripts show that teacher questions are common in discussions, and I feel that to eliminate questions entirely from the teacher's repertoire would be extraordinarily difficult. My reaction is that there is perhaps a need for further study of the type of questions teachers use, some (leading questions? questions addressed to individuals?) being less helpful than others (open questions? questions cuing certain cognitive moves?). Nevertheless, I do think it valuable to consider whether non-question alternatives could be used more widely. It is the subsequent move that students make that is important, rather than the trigger that causes the move, so if non-question alternatives still have these effects while avoiding certain disadvantages, then they are obviously worth using. However, one puzzle that still remains for me is this: if the teacher is modelling behaviour for students to internalise, then from where are students to get their model for asking good questions, both of others and of themselves? This seems especially important, given the positive benefits Dillon ascribes to student questions.

I am led to muse on the different emphases that different people bring to their study of discussion. Dillon mentions approvingly the calling upon of the next speaker by the teacher as one of his signals, and the transcripts show it to be near universal. In my work with teachers, and in my own classes, I have always striven to work towards the situation where the teacher retires as much as possible from the allocation of turns, preferring a natural transition. To me, the teacher's control of speaker status is a danger to true discussion. It is not easy for the teacher to relinquish this control, nor for the class to take on the responsibility, but it has always seemed to me to be an important issue. Yet Dillon does not consider it at all.

In his final chapter, Dillon considers the question of why we should use discussion at all. Again, most of the arguments will be familiar to P4C supporters. He deals with the counter-arguments, being particularly frank about the difficulties in running excellent discussions, but mounts spirited and powerful arguments for its use. I was particularly struck by his assertion that the most potent rationale lies in the nature of discussion itself:

"We discuss for the experience of community and inquiry in the lived moment, for participation with our fellows in communal reflection, discovery and deliberation. Discussion is a good way for us to be together. We use it to face our common perplexities about what to think and how to act. And we use it to form our young, inducing them into these very goods. So discussion is a way for adults and children to be together in a

fundamental human relation and essential educative activity. That is the good of discussion, its raison d'etre." (p 112)

I highly recommend this book. It provided an excellent, concise account of the use of discussion in classrooms. The P4C workshop leader will be led to think deeply about their understanding of the nature of discussion and will find abundant material to use in the design of workshops. Teachers who are working hard to improve their use of discussion will find a wealth of useful practical advice. The inclusion of transcripts enhances the link of theory to practice immeasurably. If it can assist in restoring discussion to pride of place in the educational array of techniques - an aim close to our own hearts - then it will do children a great service.

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