

Foreword

How would we describe the normal course of events inside US classrooms?

- Classrooms are characterized by a lot of teacher talk and relatively little student talk.
- Classroom talk frequently focuses on information and rarely focuses on ideas.
- Students are expected to provide answers more often than they are allowed to formulate questions.
- Topics are typically selected based on the textbook or the content standards, and often remain irrelevant to students' lives and unconnected to their interests.
- When classroom discussions occur, students frequently offer opinions and rarely present well-developed arguments.

This volume, *The Most Reasonable Answer: Helping Students Build Better Arguments Together*, documents all these conditions, presents a cogent argument that they represent an impoverishment of educational opportunity, and, most importantly, presents a set of procedures and strategies that could help teachers move beyond their default practices to introduce high-quality, student-involved, goal-directed discussion into their classrooms.

The authors call the kind of discussion they are promoting *inquiry dialogue*. Inquiry dialogue is characterized as discussion in which “students search for the most reasonable answer to big, contestable questions and, if agreement is not possible, they work to clarify the basis and criteria for their disagreement.” It is, in other words, directed at finding, or at least approaching, truth. Inquiry dialogue is

a form of discussion focused on getting to a better understanding of an issue rather than to either agreement or victory.

Alina Reznitskaya and Ian A. G. Wilkinson, both acknowledged experts in the analysis and promotion of discussion-based teaching methods, display in this volume precisely the skills in critical thinking that they attribute to participation in inquiry dialogue. Developing what they call *argument literacy*—skill in producing and evaluating arguments—is the outcome they most value and the reason they want to see opportunities for inquiry dialogue in every classroom.

Argument literacy is not, I would contend, the only important outcome of good classroom discussion. Student levels of engagement are visibly enhanced during discussion, as are their opportunities to confront alternative perspectives on issues—alternative perspectives that are more potent precisely because they come from the students' classmates and friends.

My appreciation of this volume derives from my experience during the last several years promoting and analyzing classroom debates conducted as part of the Word Generation program (www.wordgen.serpmedia.org). Debate, a term often paired with discussion in treatments of classroom interaction, can (like Socratic discussions) take many forms, but it is distinct from inquiry dialogue in that the discussion topic is formulated as opposing positions, and in that the goal of the participants is to defend their chosen (or assigned) position as effectively as possible. One motivation for engaging in debate is to win. In other words, debate is inherently competitive, whereas inquiry dialogue is inherently collaborative.

The teachers in our projects who have implemented Word Generation, like those who have adopted inquiry dialogue, often find it an intimidating prospect at the beginning. They mistrust their skills as discussion launchers and leaders, and worry about introducing disorder, disruption, and interpersonal conflict into their classrooms. Discussion is not a practice that most of these teachers were exposed to in the classrooms where they were students, nor is it typically a practice emphasized in teacher education programs. The selection of topics and deployment of helpful talk moves that keep discussion going constitute huge challenges for many teachers. Thus, the careful descriptions of how to prepare for and support discussion that are provided in this volume, together with the concrete examples offered in the final chapters of texts and questions that can sustain discussion, constitute an invaluable resource.

Are there reasons to prefer inquiry dialogue to debate or other specific forms of classroom discussion? No one has carried out a rigorous comparison, but the available evidence suggests that any format that enables students to express their own views in carefully thought-through forms of language, with specific goals and the chance to think deeply about appealing topics, will improve student outcomes. Such opportunities are vanishingly rare in most classrooms, so adding even a brief session of inquiry dialogue or debate just a few times a week to any student's schedule would constitute a significant enhancement. Once opportunities for discussion of some sort are ubiquitous in US classrooms, it will be time to analyze in greater detail the value added of various specific formats, topics, question types, and supports.

The work described by Reznitskaya and Wilkinson is (as they note) closely allied with the Philosophy for Children Program, which provides models for effective discussion with children as young as preschoolers. A central question for research is the mechanism by which such discussions promote child skills. Is the inquiry component crucial? Or would other practices that give children more opportunity for linguistic autonomy and voicing their own thoughts work as well? It would be useful, for example, to compare the outcomes of Philosophy for Children sessions with outcomes from Story Telling/Story Acting, the narrative-authoring/theatre-directing technique initiated by Vivian Gussin Paley. Whereas Philosophy for Children is focused more directly on argument literacy, Story Telling/Story Acting gives children agency and a mechanism for exploring interpersonal conflicts. One might hypothesize that all that is really needed in classrooms is lots more opportunities for students to speak aloud about things they are interested in, an end that can be achieved with a variety of talk forms and practices. Or perhaps there are very specific affordances associated with the search for truth inherent in inquiry dialogue, with the efforts to triumph inherent in debate, and with the need to manage classmates' dramatizations characteristic of Story Telling/Story Acting. If so, then students should be given access to *all* these opportunities to promote their own and contribute to others' thinking.

A key characteristic of all the various forms of classroom talk that we see so little of and need so much more of is distributed cognition. Only if students can talk with one another can they learn from one another, can their own understandings of events and phenomena be enriched by access to others' understandings. Distributed

cognition is the essence of shared learning, of teamwork, of going beyond friendly cooperation to the cognitive wrestling associated with authentic collaboration. Collaboration is the essential twenty-first-century skill, in a society encountering problems that are too complicated to be solved by individuals. Collaborative efforts are made possible by the communication skills honed in classrooms where students discuss. We need to make such classrooms the default, and *The Most Reasonable Answer* will help greatly.

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