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Instructional Discussion: The Most Important Area of Training for New Basic Course Instructors

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In order to determine the most important concept to teach new basic course instructors, it is important to know what we want students to be able to do as a result of the basic course and what teaching method will best reach that outcome. One main goal of the basic course is to teach students to communicate orally and give them practice doing so. This can be accomplished through what Muller (2014) defines as instructional discussion, or “an instructional interaction where teachers and students engage together in an exploration of problems, ideas, and questions in ways that incorporate the knowledge of all participants to generate a collective wisdom or understanding that would not have emerged without the interaction” (p. 326). This definition illustrates the importance of engagement and interaction, both important goals within the basic communication course. Additionally, instructional discussion highlights the central role of communication in the teaching and learning process. Thus, it is imperative that training programs for basic course instructors address how to plan, facilitate, and assess an instructional discussion as well as teach students how to engage in the process.

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL RATIONALE

Instructional discussion involves students and teachers engaging in in-depth conversations of course material, while providing opportunities to practice communication skills and enhance communication knowledge. There are several theoretical and empirical benefits to participating in instructional discussions. Because instructional discussions are characterized by experiential learning, where students are active agents in the learning process, this strategy encourages student engagement and involvement (Simonds & Cooper, 2011). According to Astin's Involvement Theory (1984), students learn best when they are actively involved in the learning process. As students spend time outside of class reading and thinking about course content, they can internalize material by reflecting on how the concepts relate to their own personal experiences (Girgin & Stevens, 2005; Luse, 2002; Nixon-Ponder, 1995). The discussion method then affords them opportunities in class to use concrete, personal experiences followed by a reflection and analysis of those experiences. Cegala (1981) further suggests that involvement is a way to measure communication competence where students articulate and defend their ideas as well as respond to the ideas of others'. Researchers have found that instructional discussions improve students' course preparation, increase participation, enhance student learning (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2008), promote student understanding of material, and promote critical thinking skills such as self-assessment, which will serve them well once they have to employ the same skills in other classes and in their careers (Dancer & Kamvou-

nias, 2005; Gee, 1998, 2000; Girgin & Stevens, 2005; Hamann, Pollock, & Wilson, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Impressively, Dallimore et al. (2008) found that students who prepared for and participated in a discussion report improvement in their oral and written communication skills, which makes this instructional method of utmost importance to the basic course.

In addition to the theoretical and empirical benefits of the instructional discussion method, there are also pedagogical implications. By virtue of using this method, instructors can reinforce reading expectations, create a student-centered classroom, promote higher order thinking, and maximize class time (Simonds & Cooper, 2011).

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Instructional discussions change how students spend time out of class, which has implications for how instructors and students spend time in class. The core of instructional discussion, as it should be used in the basic course, involves students thoroughly reading and understanding course material prior to class and reflecting on ways they can make contributions in class. When they get to class, they are afforded opportunities to engage in a higher order discussion by applying their own interests and experiences to course concepts. To facilitate this process, instructors can develop reading response questions that allow students opportunities to master the content and plan a contribution for class discussion. This method reinforces the expectation that students should read before coming to class, thus preparing students for success in college as they will be

better able to actively read and engage with course material in other classes.

Instructional discussion allows students and teachers to create a collective knowledge that would not have otherwise emerged without the discussion. Through instructional discussion, classrooms become student-centered. Students come to class prepared to discuss course material through the use of reading questions. Then, once in class, students can contribute to the learning of self and others. Through a collaborative discussion, students bring their own knowledge and experiences to class, which allows them to better understand the material as well as contribute to the learning of others. Creating student-centered classrooms has additional benefits to the basic course. In a comparison between teacher-centered (lecture-based) and learner-centered (interaction-based) public speaking courses, Kahl and Venette (2010) found a significant difference in speech outline grades with learner-centered courses having the average student score much higher than the average student in teacher-centered courses. Not only will instructional discussion enhance student participation and learning, it will also yield better results on course assignments.

Additionally, as students participate in these conversations, they are also honing their listening skills. Instructional discussion is consistent with the speaking and listening standards of the Common Core. As the standards continue to be emphasized, more students will be coming to universities with the ability to engage in instructional discussions. These standards require students to initiate and participate in collaborative discussions so they can express themselves clearly and

persuasively while building on the contributions of others (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014). Essentially, these standards provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their speaking and listening abilities by taking part in rich, structured conversations. When students come to the college level communication course, they will be able to contribute appropriately to these conversations, draw comparisons, analyze and synthesize multiple perspectives, listen attentively, build on contributions, and express themselves clearly. Thus, students enrolled in the basic course will already have the speaking and listening skills to engage in a sophisticated discussion. By teaching basic course instructors to facilitate an instructional discussion, we will capitalize on what incoming students expect, which will allow for greater understanding of course material. Further, the basic course will continue to nurture the speaking and listening skills students are taught in K-12 schools, thus enhancing the consistency of the discipline among grade levels.

One of the most important functions of instructional discussion is that, once the reading expectation has been established, valuable class time can be used for deeper probing of the materials. Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of cognitive learning identified seven levels: knowledge, comprehension, interpretation, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. When creating a discussion-based classroom environment, students can enter class with the knowledge step accomplished through readings, the comprehension step through answering basic questions about the concepts described in the readings, and interpretation by answering higher-order questions prior to class that demonstrate how cer-

tain communication concepts relate to other concepts or assignments in the course. It is possible to go as far as the application level by asking students to complete questions about the readings as the concepts have applied to a situation in their own life.

Therefore, when the students come prepared to discuss, the instructor can start with application level questions and let the students' prepared contributions allow for peer learning. The instructor can then move to asking probing questions designed to get the students to participate in active learning (Hertenstein, 1991; Simonds & Cooper, 2011), critical thinking (Delaney, 1991; Robinson & Schaible, 1993) and problem-solving (Davis, 1993; Gilmore & Schall, 1996) by synthesizing information and then assessing whether the synthesis is valid. As basic course instructors struggle to cover course content while allowing for in class presentations, the instructional discussion method maximizes classroom instructional time by holding students responsible for class content outside of class. Instructors no longer need to spend class time lecturing over material students *should* have read, rather, they can spend time in class engaging them in higher levels of learning.

THE TRAINING IMPERATIVE

The importance of training teachers on how to properly conduct classroom discussion cannot be overstated, as a number of problems can arise when proper techniques are not used. Jones (2008) points out that the type of questions asked during discussion matter because if students are asked lower-order recall questions rather than higher-order questions that promote

involvement and reasoning, students will be less inclined to deeply think about what they are reading. White (2011) raises the issue that instructors must be aware of cultural differences within their students and realize that students who are from different cultures may look at the discursive style being used and find it unfamiliar and challenging to adopt. This can lead to feelings of alienation on the part of these students and instructors must be cognizant and sympathetic to the students' needs.

Moreover, instructors need to be taught how to plan a productive discussion by providing students with reading response questions and preparing high order discussion questions. Instructors need to know how to facilitate the discussion to encourage future participation and validate and build on student contributions. They need to know how to encourage student participation in class as well as strategies for assessing student preparation *for* and participation *in* class discussions (Simonds & Cooper, 2011). This strategy requires certain skills and instructional finesse to ensure student success and build classroom confidence.

CONCLUSION

As we have elucidated in this essay, there are many reasons why basic course instructor training programs should address instructional discussions. First and foremost, instructional discussion is a communication-centered strategy that encourages student involvement and engagement. The instructional method has the potential to improve student communication competence by providing them with opportunities to articulate and

defend their ideas. Aside from the theoretical and empirical benefits outlined here, there are also pedagogical implications that enhance the learning experience for both the instructor and the students. Students can be taught to read and reflect on course content while planning, in advance, contributions for class discussion. Once there, they have opportunities to share their experience and take ownership of the learning process. What better place than a communication classroom for students to get these experiences? Instructional discussion is a communication-centered strategy that builds classroom confidence where students can competently communicate their ideas. Basic course instructors can model effective communication by engaging in this instructional strategy. Thus, basic course instructor training programs need to address this theoretically and pedagogically sound strategy.

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