

## Discussion

In order to demonstrate the use of case study, this section on using discussion starts with a case study of a sociology teacher attempting to use discussion in his class.

You should use this scenario to analyse and evaluate the teacher's use of discussion and to recommend guidelines for him to improve his technique. You will also find it useful to apply your guidelines to your own teaching practice.

### Activity

#### *An introductory case study*

Ron is a very keen 28 year old teacher recently appointed as a part-time sociology lecturer in a further education college in an inner city. The college has a wide ethnic and cultural mix. He has been asked to deliver a sociology input on a BTEC Health and Social Care course. The subject he is dealing with is the family. He has provided some inputs on types of family and the functions of the family. Ron has been told that discussion is a valuable teaching method and is keen to have a go.

There are eleven people in the class. Their motivations vary from very keen to a couple who are on the course because they couldn't really think of anything else to do. There are three mature students (30+) and one male student. It is September and only their third week in college.

The class runs from 11.00 – 12.30 on a Friday morning. At 12.10 the eager Ron says, "Right. Let's have a discussion. What do you think about the family?" No response. Several students look at their notes or gaze out of the window. Some look at Ron as if wanting to help him out. Ron aims a question at an individual, "Chantelle, what are

your views on the family?" Chantelle blushes and mumbles, "Well... it's OK for some people." An enigmatic response.

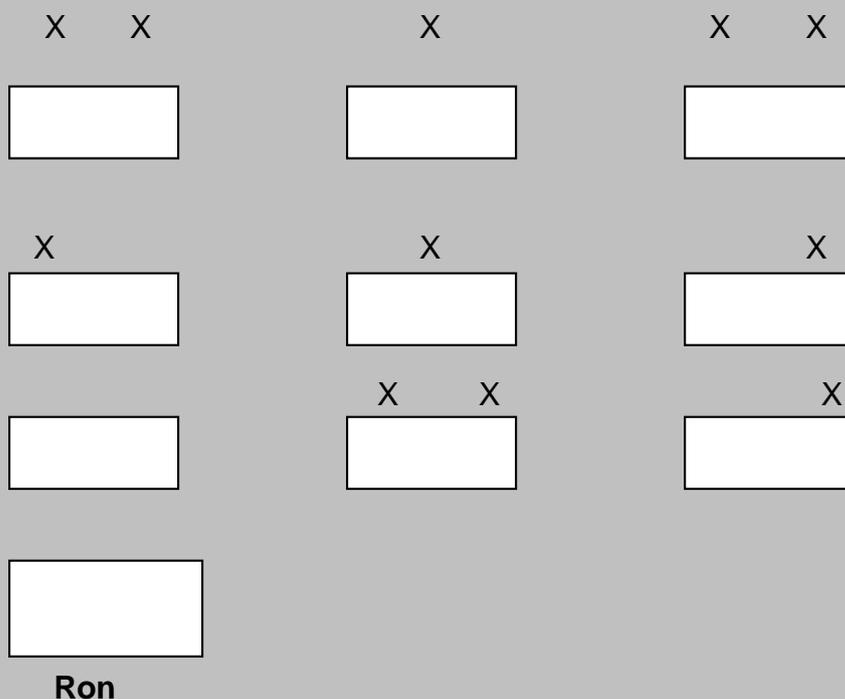
Dawn, a mature student previously a shop steward in a garment factory, says, "The nuclear family is another example of Western cultural imperialism, isn't it?" Ron looks pleased. This is exactly his opinion. "Any responses to Dawn's point?" There are none.

Darren says, "It's like on EastEnders, isn't it?" "Eh?" replies the temporarily baffled Ron. "What do you mean?" His tone is not hostile but Darren declines further comment. "Don't matter," he mutters.

In a last act of desperation, Ron aims a question at Zeinab, who is normally keen to speak. "What do you think, Zeinab? Do you agree with the functionalist view?" "No," says Zeinab.

After a period of silence Ron says, "Well, you don't seem to have any opinions, do you?"

The class is set out like this:



1. Analyse Ron's use of discussion and his use of questions
2. What should he do to have a better chance of success with discussion as a learning and teaching technique?
3. Produce a set of guidelines for effective use of discussion.

Discussion is something we take for granted, often regarding it as just 'having a chat' with learners or, worse still, it is derided as not 'proper teaching'. Discussion deserves serious consideration as a learning and teaching method, particularly in the development of active, constructivist learning and thinking skills.

The essence of discussion is dialogue and the exchange and expression of ideas, opinions and knowledge. Discussions might range from a structured and planned learning experience to the unplanned but welcome opportunity to air some ideas. Inspectors are keen to see that sessions are not so rigidly planned that opportunities for discussion are missed. Discussion is an excellent method for developing thinking skills and higher-order learning. Discussions are important when exploring opinions, beliefs and attitudes and encouraging learners to appreciate other points of view, but be careful because people can have strong views and may find it difficult to be objective (this includes teachers!).

Discussion is often considered to be a method more suited to the arts, humanities and social sciences which, it is mistakenly assumed have more 'issues' to discuss, rather than science or mathematics which might be considered more in the realm of

facts. Science is based on theories and debates, many of them controversial, and they need to be discussed. One of my trainee teachers described a session in which she introduced students to genetics through a discussion of ethical issues based around transgenic animals. This seems to me to be an excellent way to introduce a topic by making it relevant to real life and reminding learners that science is not neutral but has social, moral, religious and ethical implications.

Mathematics might seem to many teachers and learners not the place for discussion – what is there to discuss, they might ask? Research by Malcolm Swan, based on GCSE Maths retake students in FE colleges, suggests there is considerable benefit to be gained from using discussion in maths sessions. Students retaking maths tend to improve by one grade on average, if at all, and much of the teaching is teacher-centred and ‘transmission-based’. These methods have already failed the learners and merely repeating them does little to boost their confidence and motivation. But, as Swan says of the discussion-based resources which were developed:

“... there is evidence here to suggest that learning is enhanced, particularly when they are used in student-centred ways. In particular, this means students’ existing knowledge and misunderstandings are brought to the surface and discussed in the lessons. The greatest gains (approximately one standard deviation) were made in the group that used many lessons in student-centred ways. The more student-centred approaches seem to have prevented a general decline in confidence and motivation that may occur when traditional didactic approaches are used in FE classrooms.” (Swan 2006: 240)

## **Guidelines for using discussion**

In the case study above, Ron did very little to plan for the use of discussion as part of learning about the family. If you are going to plan discussion into a session, here are few things to consider:

- Do you need some stimulus material or something to start the discussion?  
Ron could have provided an article about families, perhaps something which related family to adolescent behaviour. He could have used some statistics about the family or even an extract from a soap opera.
- Encourage learners and give them opportunities to explore ideas. Darren, in the case study, with support from Ron might have developed his thoughts about EastEnders into a useful vehicle for exploring issues about the family.
- Teachers shouldn't dominate discussion or force their ideas and opinions on the group; like good chat-show hosts their role is to encourage and facilitate inputs from others.
- As a teacher you will sometimes need to take the role of chair and to keep things under control and to keep the discussion focused on the main point. Occasionally, you will need to thank contributors for their inputs but ask them to hold back a bit so that others can join in.
- It's a good idea to establish some rules – only one person can speak at a time; no interrupting; no offensive or inappropriate statements or actions; listening to each other.
- The important thing is to make sure that everyone is involved, and willing to be involved, in the conversation. I've observed a number of sessions in which teachers are really enjoying an in-depth discussion with a few like-minded

learners about an item of mutual interest whilst the majority of the group are showing clear signs of boredom.

- Don't let a discussion ramble on. When it's reached the end of its useful life, bring it to an end but don't forget to summarise the key points and relate them to the learning topic – better, still, get the learners to summarise.
- Consider the room layout. Everyone needs to be able to see each other, so old school-style rows with people looking at the backs of heads is not appropriate.

**Extract from Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector by Peter Scales (2008)**

**Open University Press**

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