

Teaching through small group discussion: formality, rules and authority

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This paper is not a survey of research. It is intended to be speculative and thus somewhat personal. Since a great deal of work remains to be done to establish even the full range of variables in small group discussion, it is of course incomplete. Indeed, it addresses itself only to one complex of problems, though a most important one: that which relates problems of authority to responsible participation by students in small groups.

It is concerned with participatory small group teaching, in situations where the tutor talks, let us say, less than 25 per cent of the time, where he is concerned to throw a great deal of responsibility on to the students and to develop their autonomy and where he accepts that the work of the group should take account of the needs of all its members. There is no suggestion that all small group work should be of this sort, merely that this is one useful kind of work.

I have drawn on published work, on unpublished papers, on discussions with colleagues and on experience gathered in directing a research and development project concerned with small group discussion in schools. A brief list of general references is given at the end of the paper.

Small group discussion, with its related activities including role play, simulations and educational games and problems, is essentially co-operative and essentially participatory. The basic principle is to place all the resources available within the group at the disposal of all the individuals within it. The group must feel that everyone's needs count.

This is not easy to achieve within the competitive assumptions of our educational system. Nor is co-operative working typical of most

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spontaneous groups, at least in our society. Accordingly, tutors generally have to teach students to work in groups, to value different styles and types of participation and to resist the temptation to commandeer the group to serve one's own needs. The problem of developing satisfactory small group work depends as much on student training as on teacher training.

I wish to argue here that successful participant small groups in education are likely to be formal rather than informal. They call for rules and conventions. Many seminars fail because tutors see them as informal occasions.

A spontaneous example of the development of conventions is reported by Bjerstadt. It was demonstrated by Beck that groups solving problems often showed initial phases where dominant individuals played an important role followed by phases where this dominance was replaced by some kind of regulated "division of labour": each individual was expected to try in turn (*Reihum-Phänomen*). As ability to do the task in question developed, the dominance rank order (in certain respects comparable to the pecking order of hens) was thus replaced by rules of procedure; to express it more picturesquely, but also more loosely: "right of strength" was followed by "right of law".

Small groups develop as part of their sub-cultures principles of procedure which have the status of conventions or rules. Successful teaching in participatory small groups depends on the establishment of procedures appropriate to educational aims, and this can best be done if conventions and rules are made explicit by the tutor. Usually he will be able to propose a number of rules and conventions at the outset, but others will have to be evolved in the group. In the latter case they should still be made explicit and clearly related to the group's task.

The intrusion of the tutor into the small group now needs to be considered. When he enters the group, he is immediately located in a position of authority and leadership, and he carries two types of authority. R. S. Peters has distinguished these as being 'in authority' and being 'an authority'. The teacher is 'in authority' in so far as he is the representative of 'an impersonal normative order or value system which regulates behaviour basically because of acceptance of it on the part of those who comply'. He is 'an authority' by virtue of 'his special competence, training or insight'.

The teacher in higher education is in authority as a representative

of his institution, and in this respect his authority is heavily reinforced by his position as internal examiner. This authority is consciously present to his students: he is seen as defining the task and the situation in which it will be tackled.

The teacher is *an* authority by virtue of his knowledge of the subject. Most students regard most teachers as experts, and the teacher is seen as a man of knowledge. There is also a sense in which the teacher is in authority within his role as an authority. He can be seen as adding to his own knowledge of the subject a grasp of 'the impersonal normative order or value system' which represents the subject as a discipline. He is familiar and at home with both academic institutions—conferences, journals, personnel—and the criteria and norms accepted in his academic field.

The consequence of this authority position of the teacher is that students brought up in our system expect him to play the role of instructor in the sense that they expect him to take responsibility for their learning. They assume an attitude of dependence. Now there are occasions—even in small groups—when instruction is appropriate. But there are also many occasions when students have to accept responsibility for their own learning, to develop autonomy as scholars, and hence to learn to use the tutor as a consultant and guide rather than as an instructor. It is in this context that participatory small groups are appropriate.

Yet the tutor cannot simply and easily renounce the authority which leads students to believe that the initiative and effort should come primarily from him. He enters the small group trailing with him the authority of his own knowledge of the university or college of which he is a delegate and of the academic field of which he is a representative. This authority may be reinforced by personal charisma and by the authority of age. All in all the teacher cannot escape the responsibilities of a leadership position and the problems in the area of authority-dependency which this sets up.

If a teacher handles his authority unselfconsciously as a matter of personal habit, he usually induces a relatively passive dependency relationship.

Students are reluctant to participate and anxious to interpret the rules of the situation. If he does not make the conventions explicit, his students can interpret them only by observing the tutor. Their task is to study his behaviour in order to understand the situation in which they are placed. He is for them an experimental subject. Un-

less they can develop from observation consistent theories about what he is up to, his authority will appear arbitrary. The need of the students to develop such theories will reinforce the teacher's position as centre of interest in the group. The students will be teacher-oriented rather than task-oriented.

Sometimes when a teacher is attempting to convey to the group procedures of thinking, he can find no way of defining them except through his authority. Such is the method of Socrates in the Platonic dialogues; and it accounts for their one-sidedness. I would argue that in small group situations he should avoid this if he can; and this suggests that he should explicitly confine his authority in the group by rules and conventions.

I have argued that participatory small group situations, which are often seen by tutors as spontaneous and informal, are likely to be most effective as educational enterprises when they are relatively structured and formal. The group needs to adopt explicitly rules and conventions governing procedures and the role of the tutor in the group also requires some formal definition accessible to the students. If I am right, this is an encouraging position for teachers since it suggests that competence in small group teaching is to a large extent capable of being learnt. It is not some personal or intuitive possession in the absence of which the teacher cannot be effective.

The next step is to examine what rules, conventions and roles are 'appropriate'.

Here there are two areas of consideration; the logic of the task and the psychology of groups. Crudely, we might regard the first as the message and the second as the medium; and we should immediately blur the distinction and say that medium and message are inextricably entangled. For example, a group dependent on the authority of persons is not likely to learn effectively the authority of research procedures.

Educational tasks are concerned with the promotion of learning. The task is often defined in terms of an aim; and aims are often analysed as cognitive, affective or psycho-motor. This seems to me a laboratory distinction rather than a teaching distinction, and I prefer to distinguish knowledge, application, understanding, and skills.

By knowledge I mean sheer information. The distinction cannot be rigidly maintained, but most teachers will be able to give the concept meaning in their subjects. In teaching the need for knowledge ex-

presses itself as concern for 'coverage'. Every teacher is familiar with a feeling of concern about covering the ground, and students feel this too. I do not believe that participatory small group teaching is an effective way of providing coverage. What is required is individual study, individualised learning programmes and/or lectures. (These do also have other functions). Nothing is more destructive of participatory small group teaching than concern for coverage in this sense; and any such teaching must take place in a context of coverage supplied by other experiences.

By application, I mean the application of principles to particular cases. The principles may have been learnt as knowledge or may be taught through application. They are at a higher level of generalisation than cases, but gather their strength from their effectiveness in application to cases. The task of application is a suitable one for small group teaching.

Understanding is essentially relational. It consists in establishing significant relationships of knowledge or of knowledge and skills. Application is one such relationship. The essential point about understanding is that it is both personal and public. An understanding implies a grasp of a relationship on the part of an individual. It is an experience leading the individual to claim 'I understand'. Understanding in this sense is opposed to not understanding. But it is characteristic of education that it is concerned with public criteria by which understanding can be assessed. A personal understanding must be tried out against such criteria. In this sense, understanding is opposed to misunderstanding. The promotion of understanding is a suitable task for small group teaching.

Skills are performances which are generalisable to some degree. That is to say they can be practised. One problem in this is that they may be practised as exercises in situations which are relatively meaningless. The application of skills, like the application of principles, is a suitable task for small group teaching.

Participatory small group teaching is thus effective as a critical exchange in which significant relationships are suggested and explored in order to promote an understanding of the structure and logic of knowledge or a grasp of the problems of applying knowledge or skills in various situations.

Tasks which would be suitable for small groups might be, for example, applying engineering principles to the design of a particular bridge, promoting an understanding of the wave/particle duality of

electrons or of *Hamlet*, or applying skills in the design of electronic apparatus to an experimental problem in psychology.

Now, given any such educational tasks as these, it is possible, though challenging, to work out the logic of the task in terms of rules for the group and roles for the teacher. But it is also possible so to push the logic that we fail to take account of the psychology of the group. This is an important failing in an educational setting since the group is there to learn, that is, the task is there for the sake of the group, not the group for the sake of the task. In a real-life situation, the test is whether the bridge stays up. In an educational situation the test is whether *all* members of the group learned in designing it. Moreover, lack of attention to the psychology of the group can lead to crises and even problems of control.

Now, of course, sensitivity to groups is important, even vital. But it is also helpful to recognise that there are certain patterns of small group work which have stood the test of experience and obviously help us in finding a ground-base of rules and roles which harmonise the logic of the task and the psychology of groups. Many such patterns have been reported in the literature, for example, by Abercrombie, Collier, Nisbet and Richardson in this country. My concern here is to argue that a pattern appropriate to the logic of the task needs to be adopted, rules and roles need to be defined as explicitly as possible within that pattern and the proceedings need to be handled with faithful adherence to those rules and with sensitivity.

In summary, the position I am advancing is as follows:

- 1 Effective group work depends upon the establishment of rules and conventions—it is formal.
- 2 The teacher will be most effective if he defines his role and thereby makes his use of authority also rule-governed, and his areas of initiative clear. Small group work is not forwarded by the renunciation of authority, but by its definition. Effective leadership is relatively formal.
- 3 Both group rules and teaching roles need to be logically consonant with the demands of an explicit task.
- 4 Group rules and teaching roles need to take account of the psychology of groups.
- 5 A variety of reports of patterns of small group teaching exist and provide a range of choices which have some claim to meet the demands of 3 and 4 above.

- 6 Given that effective small group teaching is relatively formal and that reported patterns offer precedents, it is possible to increase one's effectiveness in working with groups by learning, i.e., effectiveness is not merely a function of personality supported by mystique.

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