Top 5 tips

Reaching all students by purposefully planning rich discussions and strengthening questioning skills

Tip 1: Create a plan to guide discussions.
It is essential for teachers at all grade levels to plan the general framework of instructional discussions in the classroom to keep the learning focused. When creating a plan for class discussions, include the objectives of the discussion and strategies to achieve the objectives. The plan should also incorporate necessary academic language for students to develop their vocabulary.

Use the discussion plan to ensure that all students engage in higher-level thinking and that every student’s voice is part of the discussion. Embedding a variety of higher-order questions into specific parts of the discussion plan can help to ensure that all students have the chance to participate at a level that supports and extends their thinking. During the discussion, look for opportunities to highlight different perspectives and ideas. Model how to listen to and respect the unique viewpoints of each member of the classroom community.

Your discussion plan should include a focus on student-provided evidence and reasoning. Students should gain fundamental experience justifying their responses, generating predictions and considering additional ideas. As questioning, explaining, analyzing, evaluating and reflecting become routine parts of discussion experiences, students begin to differentiate what it means to understand, believe, question or support the position of peers.

With practice, students will become skilled at participating in thoughtful dialogue with others and comfortable pondering complex issues and ideas.

Tip 2: Provide feedback using anecdotal notes and checklists.
Anecdotal notes and checklists are useful tools for formatively assessing students’ engagement in discussion and their application of higher-order thinking skills. The data from anecdotal notes and checklists will help you to provide students with feedback to develop their thinking and questioning skills. You can also use the data to continue planning and honing effective classroom discussions. In anecdotal notes, describe how each student considers and responds to new and different ideas. Note whether or not the student is able to contribute alternative solutions. Use your notes to provide students with feedback. Specific feedback helps students become more aware of their thinking skills and what they need to do to develop them.
Checklists should include higher-order thinking skills, such as the students’ ability to respond to open-ended questions, to explain and analyze their thinking across a variety of instructional approaches and to demonstrate problem-solving skills. Other items to include on the checklist for evaluation are student participation in groups/partners and the quality of discussion/questioning in flexible groupings.

**Tip 3: Guide students to generate questions, not simply provide answers.**
It is critical that students in today’s classrooms become questioners (and not just question answerers). As questioners, students gain experience considering what they know, how they know it, why they need to know it and how it connects to prior and future understanding.

To help students become questioners, develop an open-ended thinking/questioning culture in the classroom. Avoid questions that students can answer in just one or two words. Avoid questions that can be answered by just a single student. Incorporate questioning activities that bring many student voices to the conversation, such as, “If ________ is the answer, what is the question?” (Provide an answer and ask students to develop the questions for that answer. This enables many students to participate on many different ability levels.) Purposefully and deliberately cultivate student-questioning abilities.

When asking students to develop their own set of questions and consider why their questions are strong, incorporate enough wait time (think time) so students have time to use their metacognition and sift through many ideas. Providing time for all students at all levels to contemplate helps them strengthen their thinking skills and become more confident and capable questioners.

**Tip 4: Change activities you are already doing to cultivate questions.**
Switch things up! Are you using a Quick Write as a Reader Response, or a Quick Question as a Turn-and-Talk activity? Instead of having students introduce themselves, have classmates develop questions to ask one another and report on the findings. Switch up your use of exit slips to include student-created exit questions so that students have a chance to consult thinking charts and posters in the room to consider any higher-order questions they could pose. After students generate their own questions, review questions as a class and discuss ways to improve them. Finally, assist students in evaluating their questions.
**Tip 5: Reflect on questioning.**

All teachers must routinely reflect on their classroom questioning. Ask yourself these questions:

- Are students encouraged to be questioners?
- Is there time to provide feedback on questions?
- What makes a strong question?
- How can questions be improved?
- Do teacher questions require students to go deeper into their thinking?
- Are higher-order questions planned and embedded so that deep, student-driven discussions develop?
- Are enough meaningful questions and ideas presented to ensure equitable student participation?

Self-reflection on questioning provides meaningful feedback that can guide you in planning richer, more effective classroom discussions.