What Does Research Tell Us about Classroom Discussion?

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Why should sociologists be concerned with discussion in the college classroom? A major reason is that students' active participation in the classroom has been linked with learning (Astin 1985, Johnson and Johnson 1991, Kember and Gow 1994, McKeachie 1990), critical thinking (Garside 1996, Smith 1977, Weast 1996), and degree completion (Tinto 1975, Tinto 1997). In addition to facilitating these general education goals, Brookfield and Preskill (1999) argue that classroom discussion is a particularly useful tool for helping students develop a sociological imagination (p.8). They go on to suggest there are four key purposes of discussion:

(1) to help participants reach a more critically informed understanding about the topic or topics under consideration, (2) to enhance participants' self-awareness and their capacity for self-critique, (3) to foster an appreciation among participants for the diversity of opinion that invariably emerges when viewpoints are exchanged openly and honestly, and (4) to act as a catalyst to helping people take informed action in the world. (Brookfield and Preskill 1999, p.3)

Each of these four goals is consistent with the goals of an undergraduate education in sociology. However, despite these benefits, instructors are often hesitant to utilize discussion.

Reasons for this hesitation are many. Some suggest that discussion is too time consuming. It does allow for sufficient coverage of the range and volume of content desired. Others argue that while discussion might be appropriate in some courses (usually someone else's courses), it is inappropriate for my course. Of course, covering content is not particularly helpful if students fail to engage it in a meaningful way. Likewise, discussion can be adapted to any course if creatively applied. The challenge for instructors is to determine how best to engage students with the material in a way that will facilitate reflective thinking about it.

Karp and Yoels (1976) first identified a couple of college classroom norms that work against effective classroom discussion. The first they called civil attention. Because college professors will rarely call on students who don’t show some indication that they are willing to contribute, it is easy for students to merely created the appearance of paying attention in class (civil attention), rather than actually being engaged in classroom activities. Secondly, Karp and Yoels (1976) found that regardless of class size the vast majority of contributions to classroom discussion will come from a very small number of students. Students come to accept and even expect this consolidation of responsibility for classroom participation often directing their attention to those few “talkers” when an instructor asks for input from the class. Thus an instructor can leave a classroom thinking an effective discussion took place without recognizing that the discussion occurred primarily between the instructor and three to five students while the rest of the class primarily were onlookers. In order for effective discussion to occur instructors need to seek the active participation of a much higher percentage of students. In order to do this, it helps to be aware of the research on classroom discussion which tells us which students are most likely to accept the consolidation of responsibility for classroom discussion and which are likely to remain passive onlookers.
Variables that Influence Student Participation in Classroom Discussion

Studies of student participation in discussion in the college classroom have addressed a number of variables thought to have significant impact. The variable most often studied is student gender. This line of research springs from Hall and Sandler's (1982) "chilly climate" thesis which postulated that patterns of interaction and behavior in the college classroom create a climate that is less hospitable to female students than to male students. Tannen (1991), based both on her research on gender conversation rituals and on her experiences as an instructor, has suggested that male and female students see and respond to the classroom differently. She argued that there are three reasons why men speak more frequently in class than do women. First, men speak more in class because they find the "public" nature of the classroom more conducive to speaking while women are more comfortable speaking in private settings with a small group. Second, men are more comfortable with the debate-like form of discussion that may occur in the classroom. Finally, Tannen suggests that males more frequently take the attitude that it is their job to think of contributions and to try to get the floor in order to express them. Whereas female students monitor their participation and may avoid getting the floor in order to avoid dominating the discussion. Yet, Tannen (1991) cautions that no one's conversational style is absolute. Styles change in response to the context and to the styles of other participants in the conversation.

Despite the ongoing concern with student gender in classroom participation, the research support has been mixed at best. Some studies have found that males participate more frequently than females (Auster and MacRone 1994, Brooks 1982, Crawford and MacLeod 1990 [in their small college sample, but not in their university sample], Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones and Piccinin 2003, Fassinger 1995, Karp and Yoels 1976, O'Keefe and Faupel 1987, and Statham, Richardson and Cook 1991). Other studies have suggested that males participate more frequently in courses taught by male instructors (Pearson and West 1991, Sterniglantz and Lyberger-Ficek 1977) but not in courses taught by female instructors. Brooks (1982) concluded the opposite—that males participate more in female taught courses. Fassinger (1995) and Karp and Yoels (1976) found that females participate more in courses taught by female instructors than in courses taught by male instructors. A large number of other studies found no significant difference in participation based on student gender (Boersma 1981, Constantinople, Cornelius, and Gray 1988, Cornelius, Gray and Constantinople 1990, Crawford and MacLeod 1990 [in their university sample], Heller, Puff, and Mills 1985, Howard, James, and Taylor 2002, Jung, Moore and Parker 1999). One possible explanation for the lack of significance of student gender is the presence a significant percentage of females in the classroom. However, in their study which utilized a survey methodology, Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones, and Piccinin (2003) failed to find a significant relationship between percentage of female students in a class and students' participation.

Several studies have suggested that student age has a stronger impact than student gender on participation in classroom discussion. Nontraditional students (25 years of age or older) have been consistently shown to participate more frequently than traditional students (less than 25 years of age) (Fritschner 200, Howard, Short and Clark 1996, Howard and Henney 1998, Howard and Baird 2000, Howard, James and Taylor 2002, Jung, Moore and Parker 1999, Lynch
and Bishop-Clark 1993). However, Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones and Piccinin (2003) found no differences in participation by student age in a study that utilized self reports rather than observation. Faust and Courtenay (2002), who observed only a single class of 20 students, concluded that in that particular course traditional students contributed to class discussion more frequently than did nontraditional students.

Instructor gender is another variable that has been examined in relation to students’ participation in classroom discussion. The results have again been mixed. Some studies have found that there is more discussion in courses with female instructors (Canada and Pringle 1995, Constantinople, Cornelius, and Gray 1988, Crawford and MacLeod 1990, Fassinger 1995, Howard and Baird 2000, Howard, James and Taylor 2002, Karp and Yoels 1976, Pearson and West 1991, and Statham, Richardson and Cook 1991). While no study has suggested that students participate more frequently in courses with male instructors, numerous studies have failed to find a difference based on instructor gender (Auster and MacRone 1994, Cornelius, Gray, and Constantinople 1990, Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones, and Piccinin 2003, Heller, Puff, and Mills 1985). Of these studies that failed to find an effect of instructor gender all but one (Cornelius, Gray and Constantinople 1990) relied on student self reports via survey rather than observation. This may account for the lack of significant findings. Karp and Yoels (1976) reported that while students reported no effect of instructor gender in their survey responses, based on observations of actual classroom behaviors female students participated significantly more in female taught courses than in male taught courses. Howard and Baird (2000) had the same result with survey responses failing to find a relationship between instructor gender and participation, but observations of classroom behavior revealing that students participate more frequently in courses with female instructors. Based on observations of student behaviors, Howard and Henney (1998) found that a higher percentage of students present participated in discussion in female taught courses. Also using observation, Howard, Taylor, and James (2002) found that students were significantly more likely to participate in female taught courses than in male taught courses.

Class size is another variable frequently found to have a significant impact on student participation in discussion. Most studies have found that more interaction occurs in smaller classes (Auster and MacRone 1994, Constantinople, Cornelius and Gray 1988, Cornelius, Gray and Constantinople 1990, Crawford and MacLeod 1990, Fassinger 1995, Howard, Short and Clark 1996, Howard and Henney 1998, Neer and Kircher 1989). However, Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones and Piccinin (2003) and Karp and Yoels (1976) failed to find a significant impact of class size.

Fassinger (1995) argued that instructor traits (e.g., gender) have little impact on student participation. Instead, student traits (confidence, comprehension, interest, preparation) and class traits (size, emotional climate, interaction norms, frequent large group discussions) were more important influences on participation. Likewise, Aitken and Neer (1992) concluded that it is a student trait (motivation or the lack thereof) that best explains students’ lack of participation. However, it is clear that instructor behaviors can influence student traits like comprehension and interest and can influence class traits such as emotional climate and interaction norms. Nunn (1996) argued that it is instructor teaching techniques (such as praise, posing questions, asking
for elaboration, and using students' names) that significantly improve levels of discussion. Thus Nunn concludes that instructors do play an important role in student participation.

To Grade or Not to Grade

As we seek to stimulate student participation in discussion in the college classroom, it is only logical that sociology instructors pay attention to the structural conditions that can either encourage or inhibit students' participation. We also need to reflect upon how we can overcome any structural barriers to discuss (e.g., class size). Perhaps this will require breaking the class into smaller groups to allow for wider participation. It may mean using two minute papers which allow those students who are normally reluctant to participate (e.g., traditional students) an opportunity to think and reflect before being required to speak. It may mean grading students' participation in discussion in order to convey the importance of discussion as a learning tool. This last suggestion may be met with resistance from students who sometimes view discussion as an "optional" component of the course (see, for example, Howard and Baird 200). Instructors may need to "sell" the learning benefits that come from discussion in order to convince students that it is a reasonable expectation.

This raises the dilemma of how to grade participation in discussion. I have always found it difficult to keep track of who is speaking how often along with the quality of their contribution to discussion. One strategy is for instructors to give students an occasional discussion grade based on the instructors' impressions. This approach can lead to student objections over the assessment if the instructor is not somehow keeping systematic track of student participation. My solution to this dilemma has been to have students grade themselves at the end of each class period. I use the following grading scale when the discussion format includes the entire class as a single group.

0 Absent
1 Present, but did not verbally participate
2 Verbally participated one time
3 Verbally participated more than once
4 Made an equitable contribution to discussion in terms of both quality and quantity.

By requiring students to grade themselves using this grading scale, students are forced to reflect upon the quantity and quality of their participation at the end of every class period. This frequent reflection makes students more aware of their contributions to the discussions. I find that most students give themselves a grade of four, but also that most students will earn that grade. Knowing that they will be asked to assess their own participation at the end of the class period, encourages them to contribute. For courses where the discussion is based on small group participation, I have students use the following grading scale.

1 Present, but did not contribute to the discussion.
2 Made at least one contribution, but had not read the assigned material prior to class.
3 Made one contribution to group discussion and had read the material prior to class.
4 Made more than one contribution to the group discussion and had read the material prior to class.
5 Made more than two contributions to the group discussion, had read the material prior to class and made an effort to secure the participation of all group members

This scale has the additional benefit of slowing down the dominant contributors by requiring them to make overt attempts to encourage the quieter students to join in the dialogue. One cannot maximize their discussion grade unless every member of the group has participated in the discussion. Again, students almost always give themselves fours and fives, but based on my observations of their groups in the vast majority of cases those grades are well deserved. This approach also is flexible enough that a very shy student who speaks up only twice can reward him or herself with full credit while talkative students often feel they must contribute more than twice to be deserving of full credit.

In order to convey the importance of discussion participation in student learning, I make the discussion grades which students assign to themselves count for ten percent of the final course grade. For me this approach reinforces to students, that they have something to contribute to their own and their classmates learning.

In sum, research suggests that the benefits of discussion (increased learning, critical thinking, development of a sociological imagination) make it a pedagogical strategy well worth utilizing. In sociology courses in particular, where our students have 18 or more years of life experience in society, students have much to contribute to the learning of their classmates. It is a good investment of instructors time and energy to determine how best to integrate classroom discussion into their courses.

References


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