


Chapter 37

Cooperative Discussions for Critical Thinking: Protocols for the Pre–Service Classroom


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ABSTRACT

Cooperative discussions are useful for several reasons, including engaging students in course content, building their communication and social skills, and adding variety to instruction. However, cooperative discussions are also an important means of developing students' critical thinking abilities because students must consider multiple perspectives, justify their points using evidence, and evaluate their own and their peers' thinking. This chapter offers a theoretical rationale for using cooperative discussion protocols in the pre-service university classroom, as well as tips for planning and assessing discussions. Additionally, multiple discussion protocols, including protocols for activating prior knowledge, text-based discussions, and deeper learning, are described using actual examples from the authors' experience as teacher educators.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a sunny Friday afternoon in the child development class. After a busy week of interning at elementary schools and taking classes, one might expect the pre-service teachers in this class to be staring longingly out the window or keeping a vigilant watch on the clock, ready for the weekend to begin. But a peek inside the classroom reveals a class engaged in a vigorous debate over which theorist has had a greater influence on our understanding of childhood learning and development: Jean Piaget or Lev Vygotsky. As the students on Team Piaget passionately explain the significant contributions of their theorist, the students on Team Vygotsky listen intently and glance at their notes, ready to refute Team Piaget's arguments. The students are engrossed in what is happening in their classroom, eager to see their team win the debate. Weekend plans seem to be far from their minds.

This chapter explains how cooperative discussions in the classroom can support pre-service teachers as they develop their ability to think critically. The opening vignette, based on an actual lesson from one of our classrooms, illustrates the power of cooperative discussions toward achieving this end. Using Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson et al., 2001) as a framework, it is clear the pre-service teachers in this class demonstrated multiple levels of higher order thinking as they participated in the debate:

- They *analyzed* different sources of information about Piaget and Vygotsky, examining the relevance of this information in relation to the debate's purpose and the arguments they planned to build.
- They *evaluated* the strength of the arguments they constructed together, considering ways the other team might undermine or refute their points.
- They *created* arguments in support of Piaget or Vygotsky, synthesizing multiple sources to persuade their classmates to agree with their perspective.

Opportunities to engage pre-service teachers in critical thinking are not limited to classroom debates. As we will illustrate throughout this chapter, there are many possibilities for promoting critical thinking through discussion.

Drawing from our experience as instructors in a program for dual elementary and special education majors at a public university, we provide a rationale for utilizing cooperative discussions in university classrooms. Following this are protocols and methods that can be implemented to facilitate students' critical thinking and engagement. While these methods are described in a university context, many of them are suitable for K-12 learners and can be adapted to different settings.

BACKGROUND: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The work of many theorists and researchers supports the use of cooperative discussions as a pathway for learning in the classroom. Here, we discuss the theoretical views informing our understanding of the value of cooperative discussions, and we summarize the research backing the use of discussions, particularly when discussions are centered on a text. Additionally, we explain why protocols, or structured procedures for participating in a discussion, are useful for developing students' critical thinking

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