# Discussion-Based Learning in High School English

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# Abstract

# For too long, the pedagogy of most teachers has been lecture-based learning. Strictly lecture-based instructor can be detrimental to both the student’s future education and real world skills. This is especially true of English classes. In English classes which use discussion-based learning, students gain and practice skills that will be required in their further education and in the real word, such as their jobs. This paper discusses and argues for the use of discussion-based learning as the signature pedagogy of high school English teachers.Discussion-Based Learning in High School English

In September, educational institutions all over the country open their doors to students for a new year of learning. While the millions of students in all of these schools take many different classes that spread across all the content areas, there is one thing on the syllabus that all these classes have in common. Somewhere on the syllabus, the teacher will stress the importance of class participation. In high school and college classes, the percentage of the final grade that class participation will count for is even given. For many of these classes however, the instructor’s pedagogy or teaching style is not geared towards class participation and discussion. Instead, many instructors decide to go with a “lecture-based” teaching style in which the teacher talks and the students listen. In this type of environment, there is no back and forth (discussion) between the teacher and students about the material. Therefore, this type of teaching style provides no opportunity for high levels of class participation that is still deemed important on the syllabus.

Lecture-based rather than discussion based learning is especially detrimental to students in English classes. Literature, in all of its forms, is meant to be read and discussed. The richest parts of English classes are when students are able to share their varying interpretations and analyses with the teacher and each other. This combines two major tenants or learning goals of English education, which is being able to analyze and interpret the text and then effectively share those ideas orally. Discussion-based learning is not just a means for getting a good participation grade and being able to orally expression your ideas about a text. Significantly, these skills are crucial because they translate to the real world. In her article “Oral Emphasis in the English Class,” Margaret Painter describes how “the functions of the English instructor are to train the whole individual, to prepare him to live with himself and others, to enable him to meet life-situations, and to make him a contributor to society” (Painter 1947). What Painter is basically describing here is the real life applications of discussion-based learning skills in English. For example, “to prepare to live with himself and others” (Painter 1947) can refer to being able to effectively talk to other people in either a social setting or workplace setting. This also ties in to the “life-situations” (Painter 1947) that she refers to. When discussing something with a family member, friend, co-worker, or boss, an individual must be able to effectively express their thoughts and ideas. If these skills are not practiced in beginning in secondary school English classes, students are being set up for failure not just in their future education but also in life. Despite writing this article in 1947, it appears that Painter’s call for discussion-based English classes have been mostly (but not completely) ignored since many teachers still use the old fashioned pedagogy of strictly lecturing.

In her article, Painter also discusses some of the more specific key skills that are enhanced in discussion-based learning. One of these skills is audibility. Painter remarks how often a teacher uses the phrase “Speak so that all can hear you” when a student is answering a question. If a student is not audible and never practices those skills in high school English through discussions, it is impossible for them to be audible when in the real world. Another skill is articulation, which is being able to speak clearly. These two skills are closely connected, since poor audibility is worsened by poor articulation. Even if you are audible, it will not matter if people cannot understand you. Another important skill Painter brings up is being able to “stand up in front of the group and talk to them, not the floor or the window” (Painter 1947). Whether in a formal class presentation or regular class discussion, the student must be able to have eye contact for a more meaningful discussion. The best real world example for the application of all these skills is a job interview. How can a student do these things in a job interview if they never did it in high school? Here, we truly see how discussion-based learning is more beneficial to both the students’ education and real life skills. Through discussion-based learning, all of these skills should be “the minimal essentials for ninth year students” according to Painter.

So far, the significance of real world skills gained from discussion-based learning in high school English has been the focus. While the future and real world aspects are important, it is also important to go back and discuss educational value of discussion based learning. In his article “Group Discussion in the English Class,” Robert Oliver outlines the educational value and goals of discussion-based English classes while also tying in real life goals. The first goal is that discussion “helps educate the students so that they may express what they know, believe, and feel with effectiveness” (Oliver 1958). As previously mentioned, the effective expression of ideas is one of the major goals of our current high school English standards. Discussion is where ideas begin to flow about written assignments, based off either the ideas of the teacher, classmates, or the student themselves. Without discussion, a student will never get to share their interpretation of the text or hear the interpretations of others. This relates directly to the next goal, which is that discussion “helps to awaken the interest of those who are slow learners and to provide additional stimulation for the quick witted” (Oliver 1958). What this is saying is that English class discussions not only engage all types of learners, it also helps all these different kinds of students learn from each other. The third goal describes how discussion “provides a constant check on the work being done by the students and on the depth and clarity of their understandings” (Oliver 1958). This is goal is especially important for teachers to remember. A discussion helps the teacher gauge where the students are at in terms of understanding notes given or the text itself. In an only lecture-based style class, students who are lost or want to share thoughts are left behind. The fourth and final goal describes how discussion “encourages toleration for the views of others” (Oliver 1958). This goal is crucial in terms of promoting proper classroom manners and letting everyone be respectfully heard. Along with students treating each other right and respecting each other’s views, this goal clearly also has real world implications.

To really see the contrast between discussion-based learning and lecture-based learning, Lee Shulman presents an example in his article “Signature Pedagogies in the Professions.” On the one hand, we have a college law class. This law class is “dominated by the case dialogue method of teaching” (Schulman 2005). In other words, the professor relies heavily on discussion-based learning rather than lecturing the whole time. The class room is set up so that the seats (more than one hundred) are arranged in a semi-circle and the professor is clearly visible as he faces his students from behind the lectern. Rather than lecturing, he asks questions and follow-up questions to as many students as possible. The professor faces the students for almost the entire time, only turning to write a few important notes and phrases on the board. There is a constant dialogue between the professor and the students, with the students responding to both the professor and each other. On the other hand, we have a college engineering class. In this class, all the seats are arranged in rows which face the front of the class. The professor has his back to the students and writes a lot on the blackboard. The only “exchange” between the professor and the students is when the professor asks “Are you with me?” (Shulman 2005) and a few students reply by grunting. The only other sound is the sound of both the professor and students furiously writing down the notes.

From the two classroom settings described above, it is clear which instructor uses discussion-based learning and which instructor uses lecture. While not an English class, there are many aspects of a law class which can make it a good replacement for an English class in this example (a lot of reading of texts, analysis, discussion, etc.). Obviously, the students in the law class will be much more practiced in the skills previously explained which come from discussion-based learning. Along with being a much more enjoyable learning environment, the students in the law class are more likely to remember and understand the material they are discussing. This is in contrast to the engineering students who will most likely spend hours and hours looking at the notes as they try to memorize and understand them.

A counterclaim against this pedagogy of discussion-based learning would be that too much discussion could actually harm the students’ learning. If the class is entirely discussion, the teacher hardly has to do anything. Also, all of the important material may not get covered if the class is entirely class discussion. A lot of discussion may also cause distractions and off topic digressions. To respond to this, the type of discussion-based learning being proposed here is not saying that the whole class should be a student-run conversation. In order to get a meaningful discussion going about the text, the teacher must first provide notes, information, and explanations about the material in order to get ideas flowing in the students’ minds. If not, the students would not know what they were talking about and no one would get anything out of the discussion. Even in this “lecture’ portion of the instruction, student response could still be incorporated.

References

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