Rich Classroom Discussion: One Way to Get Rich Learning

by Ronald Gallimore, James Hiebert & Bradley Ermeling — October 09, 2014

"Rich classroom discourse" has long been valorized by education reformers who object to teacher domination of classroom discussions. Is it greater use of RCD key to intellectually inspiring and challenging classrooms? Perhaps instead of focusing on increased use it's time to ask what specific role for RCD might be realistic and yield learning outcomes educators value? The best chance for progress is to link this question to another one: how to create rich learning opportunities for achieving more advanced competencies. Strategic deployment of RCD for well-defined instructional purposes seems a more realistic vision than advocating greater use without respect for why, when, and for whom. Finding RCD' proper role requires at least three conditions. Sustained collaboration between teachers and researchers. An ongoing study of curriculum and practice to identify pivotal RLOs in each unit or project and which might benefit from RCD. Supporting teacher development of the professional judgment to skillfully manage complex decisions with each population and generation of students they teach, so they deploy the best instructional choices.

"Rich classroom discussion" is an important characteristic of 21st century classrooms long envisioned by education reformers and, most recently, by proponents of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). There are sound reasons for this. In addition to learning the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, this new century's classrooms require development of advanced student competencies. To nurture them, educators, subject matter specialists, policy-makers, and researchers mostly agree on a crucial role for rich classroom discussions.

Rich discussion or discourse usually means students talking in class about their ideas, asking questions of peers, engaging in debates with peers, explaining their reasoning, and sharing some roles traditionally assumed only by teachers. Some teacher evaluation frameworks already assign the highest merit to classrooms in which there is more open discourse devoted to active student exchange of ideas and evidence. That rich classroom discourse (RCD) begets richer student thought and expression is a cardinal assumption.

So far, so good. It's never been difficult to sell the idea that classroom discourse ought to be intellectually challenging and engaging. Starting in the late 19th and early 20th century, teaching critics and researchers repeatedly observed, and objected to, teacher domination of classroom discussions. In 1912, Romiett Stevens published the first systematic study of U.S. classrooms. Using stenographic records, she determined teachers talked an average of 64 percent of the time regardless of subject or grade level. Nearly 80 percent of the classroom talk was devoted to asking, answering, or reacting to questions that called for rote memory or superficial comprehension. Throughout the 20th century many leading reformers called for improving and enriching classroom discourse. It remains a clarion call in this new century

Have circumstances changed since 1912? Perhaps not. There is little evidence that student "talking" opportunities have changed much since the 19th century. The conclusion of an often cited 1969 review (Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969) likely still stands in 2014: " [there is] a remarkable stability of classroom verbal behavior patterns over the last half century. . ." As recently as 1997, Nystrand and his associates' (1997) large study of 8th- and 9th-grade English language arts classes revealed that 85% of observed instruction was some combination of lecture, recitation, and seatwork.

If anything, criticism of classroom discourse practices increased as teaching research expanded, matured, and broadened. Small-scale observational, experimental, and intervention studies confirmed that student thought and expression are expanded temporarily by more RCD opportunities (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003).

Researching RCD at scale runs into two problems: first, if the critics are right and RCD occurs infrequently, and the evidence suggests they are, it is difficult to study its effects in randomly selected classrooms. Second, conducting a fair test of an infrequent classroom event means recruiting enough teachers willing to learn how to enact rich discussions for an extended period. The cost and logistics of extended professional development have severely limited RCD research and attempts at large-scale reform of teaching practices. As a result of these dilemmas, large sample research linking RCD to richer student learning remains limited at best, and often contested. This does not mean abandoning the pursuit of more RCD, but after a century of trying perhaps it's time for a new perspective.

Is it a greater use of RCD that is key to intellectually inspiring and challenging classrooms envisioned in this new century? Perhaps instead of focusing on increased use, it's time to ask what specific role for RCD might be *realistic* and yield the *learning outcomes* that educators value?

Stepping outside of one's own culture can sometimes prompt re-examination of something as complex as classroom teaching. New perspectives on U.S. instruction were an explicit goal of the 1999 TIMSS Video Study of Mathematics (Hiebert, et al., 2005). This study compared the U.S. with six higher achieving countries in 8th-grade teaching practices. Assessment of the countries' relative mathematics achievement included some of the more advanced competencies toward which reformers are working and the CCSS aspires to improve.

So, what role did RCD play in the higher achieving countries? Not much. Although every country uses a distinct cultural pattern of teaching, in none of them was RCD a frequent practice (Hiebert, et al., 2003). Not only were RCD practices not characteristic of high achieving countries, surprisingly, the U.S. lessons had the most student talk opportunities.

What distinguished higher achieving countries from the U.S was the nature of learning opportunities provided to students. With varying degrees of frequency, all higher achieving countries slowed down instruction at some point in some lessons to ensure that students had *richopportunities to learn*—time to grapple with the key mathematics ideas and connect them. During those instances, there were sometimes short episodes of RCD, but its infrequency was more striking than the occurrences. Rich learning opportunities (RLOs) seemed to be the critical and significant distinction between the U.S. and higher achieving countries—not frequency of RCD.

But the story doesn't end there. Along with varying teacher-centered instructional approaches, RCD *was used* sometimes as a vehicle to create and sustain RLOs, by some teachers, in some higher achieving countries. This puts RCD, as well as the aspirations of past and present U.S. reforms, in a new perspective. Perhaps RCD is not *the* critical indicator that good instruction is occurring. Rather, it is one of many means to an essential end—creating and sustaining RLOs that nurture the advanced competencies and more ambitious achievements U.S. reformers seek.

John Dewey, the leading icon of progressive American education, never featured RCD in his pedagogical theories. To the contrary, he argued teachers need not avoid "telling" students information. He only warned, and this is a significant "only," that students are unlikely to hear things they are unprepared to hear (Dewey, 1929). How do teachers prepare students to hear? That's a fruitful question for new thinking and research about the role of RCD in effective instruction. The best chance for progress is to link this question to another one: how to create rich learning opportunities for achieving more advanced competencies. Strategic deployment of RCD for well-defined instructional purposes seems a more realistic vision than advocating for its greater use without respect for why, when, and for whom. A different vision is the easy part. The hard part is building a knowledge base that identifies effective ways to convert the vision into effective teaching practices.

RCD will almost certainly play a role in this new knowledge base, but it is likely not the only practice that creates learning opportunities and prepares students to hear. Finding its proper role requires at least three conditions: (a) a sustained collaboration between teachers and researchers, (b) an ongoing study of curriculum and practice to identify pivotal RLOs in each unit or project that might benefit

from RCD, and (c) supporting teachers' abilities to skillfully manage complex decisions so that they deploy the best instructional choices.

The pathway to improvement lies not in the increased use of a single compelling instructional method, but in building of a full repertoire of effective methods, and a nuanced understanding of how and when each will propel a teacher's students toward ambitious learning goals.

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