

Using Powerful Questions in Classroom Discussion

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a) Look for new ideas.

It's nice to be the expert on a particular text or topic, but it can be liberating to relinquish that role. I have texts I've taught for many years and students are still showing me new connections and new ways of seeing them. The highest compliment I pay in my classroom is, "I've never seen it that way before."

b) Let students have time to think.

Let a good question hang in the air a moment. Revisit questions that need more exploration.

c) Let students speak for themselves.

If you repeat what students say, you're teaching them not to listen to each other, and not to speak to each other. Instead of repeating, ask students to speak up, or ask another student to rephrase what a classmate has said.

f) Let students answer each other's questions.

Don't be too quick to offer an answer. Throw the question back out to the rest of the class. Student-generated questions can be the most powerful of all.

d) Require students to justify their responses.

This encourages students to think more carefully and makes them communicate more effectively. This is the same thing we're looking for in their writing.

e) Let students evaluate each other's responses.

We all want to encourage students, but when you affirm one answer you may be discouraging another. Instead of saying, "Exactly," or "Very good," try asking another student what he or she thinks. This takes some getting used to, but ultimately it empowers students and leads to richer discussion.

f) Be direct when you wish to share an insight of your own.

Sharing your own interpretation can be excellent modeling. Just be up front about it; don't pretend to ask open-ended questions when you are really trying to lead them to your conclusions.

Steven C. Reinhart, a middle school math teacher from Chippewa Falls, Minnesota, has written a terrific piece on questioning titled, "Never Say Anything a Kid Can Say." It was published in the April, 2000 issue of Mathematics Teaching in the Middle School. He can be reached at stevejeinharl@wetrn.pbs.org