

# Assessing Historical Discussion

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## **Abstract**

*Discussion can be a valuable element of history classrooms, and assessing participation can provide an important means of improving students' engagement in this valuable form of communication. Doing so requires that teachers identify the specific skills of historical discussion that they want students to master; teach those skills systematically; and develop practical procedures for collecting information on students' participation. This article suggests guidelines for teachers to consider in preparing for each of these tasks.*

For most history teachers (and others in the humanities), classroom discussion is an inherently appealing practice. After all, professional historians discuss their work with each other—and with the public—all the time, so introducing students to this part of the discipline seems an authentic way to move beyond the traditional tests and essays found in most history classrooms. In addition, it seems self-evident that discussion can increase students' engagement, sharpen their intellects, develop their verbal skills, and model how to take part in civil discourse with those whose ideas differ from their own. Notably, an important predictor of students' commitment to democratic values is the extent to which they have experienced an “open” classroom climate in school (reviewed in Knowles & McCafferty-Wright, 2015), and one of the characteristics of such classrooms is that they encourage students to engage in a relatively free exchange of ideas through discussion of social and political issues

(which often overlap with history). With all these reasons in its favor, most history teachers these days look for opportunities to regularly engage students in classroom discussion.

Assessing those discussions, however, is another matter. Many teachers hesitate to formally evaluate students' participation in discussion, for a number of related reasons (Hess, 2002). First, some teachers feel—not without reason—that holding students accountable for the quality of their discussion may inhibit participation. Students may be so afraid of making a mistake, that is, and so they minimize their engagement for fear of losing credit. Conversely, teachers may worry that students will be so focused on getting a good grade that it will render discussion inauthentic: Students may simply follow scoring guidelines without regard to their true thoughts on the topic, or without concern for the inherent benefits of sustained intellectual discourse. And finally, teachers may despair at the possibility of creating an assessment measure that adequately captures the nature of historical discussion. They may feel less qualified to evaluate a discussion than the more familiar format of an essay, for example, or they may feel that forms of discussion are so diverse—even idiosyncratic—that there is no way to create a common rubric that would apply to each discussion and each student.

These are valid concerns, and teachers must grapple with them. Nonetheless, there are good arguments that the value of assessing classroom discussion outweighs

such challenges. Perhaps the most important is that we should assess students on those things we consider important. With presentations and written work, we do not assess students on their memory of historical trivia, but on their ability to construct a well-reasoned argument and communicate it clearly; we therefore send a clear signal that reasoning and communication is more important than remembering trivia. If we truly believe that historical discussion is important, then we should signal that through our assessment practices (Hess, 2002). Otherwise, students may come to regard discussion as a distraction from the “true” historical work of writing—a perspective that is already reinforced by the essay-focused nature of external examinations.

A related reason for assessing discussion is that students need feedback in order to improve (Hess, 2002). That is, we do not want students simply to “participate” in a discussion; we want them to increase their skills so that they become increasingly adept at this form of historical communication, just as we want them to master skills of writing and presentation. Without assessment, there can be no improvement: Simply repeating an activity over and over does not lead to increased expertise. Students need to know what the standards are, how well they have achieved them, and what they need to do in order to do better. If we truly value discussion, then, we owe it to students to let them know—in very specific terms—how to improve. This means clearly identifying the skills students need to master, and then teaching them to students, so that our assessment of their discussion is helpful and transparent (Parker & Hess, 2001).

### **Skills of Discussion**

Like any important academic or social activity, “discussion” is made up of many

component skills. We would never tell students they should simply “do research,” “write well,” or “show respect,” and leave it at that. Instead, we would help them understand the specific elements of those activities and what they look like in practice. So too with discussion: As teachers, we have to decide what we’re looking for—what makes for good discussion participation—and then teach those specific skills to students, so that we can provide them feedback on how well they’re doing.

There is no master list of such skills. This is due in part to the fact that history educators—whether scholars or practitioners—have not devoted enough sustained attention to the topic to develop a consensus over what makes for a good discussion. It is also due to the fact that context does matter: The skills students need to learn may vary by school or cultural context, and those needed for one type of discussion may differ from those needed for others. Although some sources do set out lists of discussion skills, these may be too simplistic or generic (e.g., “take turns,” “differ with dignity”) to be of much use in assessing specifically historical discussion. (Such skills may, however, be important for managing effective discussions in particular circumstances.) Ultimately, teachers will need to identify a limited number of skills that they consider historically important and that match their classroom context. The list below, adapted from Harris (1996) and Larson and Kiefer (2013), provide an initial list of possibilities that teachers might draw from.

**Substantive skills:** These skills focus on how students use logic and the content of history to make an argument. They do not differ substantially from what might be expected in an essay or presentation, but students’ achievement in settings in which they can prepare and revise their work does not always

transfer easily to the more spontaneous and interactive sphere of discussions. In addition, the phrasing of content is often different in a discussion than in a paper. For example, claims typically have to be stated in less qualified terms, statements need to be more concise, and the connection between claims and evidence may need to be more direct. Among the most important substantive skills are:

- *Making a claim:* Making one's position clear, concise, and comprehensible
- *Elaborating on claims:* Providing details, examples, or other statements and explanations that clarify the meaning and implications of one's claim
- *Using historical evidence:* Citing the historical patterns, original sources, bodies of evidence, or arguments of historians that support one's central thesis or supporting statements

Procedural skills: Whereas substantive skills focus on students' ability to present claims and evidence in a discussion format, procedural skills focus on their ability to use those skills in a conversational format—the give-and-take of a discussion. These skills focus to large degree on how to acknowledge and respond to the comments of others, so that the conversation becomes a productive engagement rather than a series of disconnected statements. These skills include:

- *Acknowledging the positions of others:* Orally recognizing what others have said and noting how one's own contribution relates to it is one of the most fundamental discussion skills. In a good

discussion, students frequently make specific reference to what others have said, and some teachers even require that students restate the contribution of the previous speaker before commenting on their own.

- *Responding to the statements of others:* Beyond simply acknowledging others' positions, a discussion requires that students *respond* to those statements, usually by providing reasons for agreeing or disagreeing. This might include pointing to gaps in logic, to additional supporting evidence or to weaknesses in the evidence provided, or to further connections or implications.
- *Defending one's own position:* This is one of the most difficult skills for students. Once their claims have been countered, they often are at a loss: They do not know what to do other than move on to a new point. Students must learn how to strengthen their claims, or how to argue against the counter-claims of others. (Think of a courtroom with examination of a witness, cross-examination, and then re-examination and even re-cross examination. Lawyers do not simply give up once their claims have been countered!) Often, counter-claims may be incorporated into one's own position, in order to reach a more comprehensive synthesis.
- *Asking questions of others:* One of the ultimate forms of discussion involves meaningful, thoughtful questions for other participants. In a debate-focused discussion, these might be critical questions designed to uncover flaws in their arguments; in more collaborative, consensus-seeking, or exploratory discussions, questions can be a way of jointly

clarifying claims, seeking evidence, or considering implications.

### Teaching Discussion Skills

Most teachers would recognize the skills above as characteristics of students' contributions to good discussions, but it is tempting to simply hope that students already possess these skills—a wish that usually disappoints us. Once we have identified elements of discussion we hope to see from our students, we have to teach these to them—not just *tell* students what we are looking for, but actually teach them. In the field of cooperative learning, there is a fairly well-developed method for teaching social skills (D. Johnson, R. Johnson, & Holubec, 1994), and this method applies equally well to discussion. In teaching each skill, teachers should

1. *Establish a need for the skill.* Explain to students what the skill is and why it is needed. Students need to understand what each skill means and why it is an important part of a historical discussion. What does it mean to acknowledge others' positions, for example, and why is this important? This is the most traditional, "teacher-directed" part of this process, but it can be further supported with posters, wall charts, and other materials.
2. *Ensure that students understand the skill.* Just because the teacher has explained something does not mean that students understand it or can apply it in concrete situations. For this step, teachers have to break the skill down by providing examples (and asking students for examples) of exactly what it would sound like in practice—the specific words or phrases involved in "responding to the statements of others," for example, such as, "I disagree because this is only based on one source..." or "I agree because of another example that shows the same thing..." Having students model the skill in front of their peers (and model what it does *not* sound like) is an important—and interactive—way of driving this point home.
3. *Provide time to practice.* This is the heart of the method: giving students time to try out the skill in practice, as they're engaged in a historical discussion (whether in a small group or as a whole class). It is important, however, that skills not be forgotten or subsumed once taught, and so for a given discussion, students must have a chance to practice *one specific skill* (even though they'll be using many others at the same time). This means that teachers will need to monitor students' use of that skill, for example by keeping track of instances when students are "defining one's own position" to see how well they are applying the skill.
4. *Create opportunities for reflection.* It is not enough that students practice a skill; they need to think about how well they are doing and receive feedback on their performance. After observing students' use of a skill such as asking questions of others, for example, teachers should comment on how these instances have (or have not) contributed to the conversation, as well as have the class consider how such questions could be improved. Ultimately, students should be able to engage in self-reflection, with limited teacher input; they should have internalized the skills well enough that they can identify what they have done well and how they can improve. Importantly, this means that

teachers must set aside time for reflection at the end of each discussion (at least 5-10 minutes, and sometimes longer); otherwise students will not fully master or retain the skills.

Three important cautions are in order for those who teach discussion skills. First, each of these skills will seem artificial at first, as students strain to make sure they are remembering to “ask questions,” “defend claims,” and so on—and that’s perfectly all right. No one masters a skill perfectly and naturally from the very beginning, and what seems stilted in the beginning will eventually become (with practice and reflection) a normal part of students’ repertoire. Second, it is critical to teach one skill at a time. Trying to teach all these skills in a single lesson, or even a few lessons, is guaranteed to be a disaster. No one would try to teach all essay writing skills at once—these take development over many lessons and even many years. With discussion, it is important to go slowly, to teach each skill individually, and to focus on it consistently over the course of multiple discussions, before moving on to the next skill. This brings us to the third caution: It will take time. Simply explaining and clarifying a skill (the first two steps) will take up a significant portion of a lesson, and reflection requires additional time. But teaching anything important takes time, and if we consider discussion an important component of the history classroom, we will devote the time needed to help students learn how to do it. Ignoring the teaching of these skills, or trying to do so in a rush, means that we shortchange students in an important aspect of their education.

### **Pragmatic Assessment Procedures**

As part of the teaching of discussion skills, it is crucial to give students feedback on what they are doing well and how they

can improve—this is what assessment is about, after all. This can be done at both the group level—as part of practice and reflection—and in the assessment of individual students. This means that teachers must collect information on how well students are achieving each of the skills they have been taught, and this has to happen during the discussion itself. Teachers will need to take specific notes, with examples, on how students are contributing to the discussion, while at the same time facilitating or at least monitoring that discussion—a difficult task. To make this easier, teachers should focus on one skill at a time, as explained in the preceding section; trying to take notes on all discussion skills at the same time, or even a sub-set of them, is simply impossible. (However, teachers will inevitably notice outstanding examples, good or bad, of skills other than the ones they are focusing on at the moment.) Just as importantly, teachers will probably need to focus on only a few students at a time. Although all students should be practicing the skill that has been taught, it would be very difficult to try to take notes on 35 or 40 students during a single lesson; it is much more manageable to focus on a subset of students during one discussion, another subset during another lesson, and so on. (And again, teachers will inevitably take note of some other students who have demonstrated the skill, even if they are not their principal focus that day.)

Notes on students’ mastery of discussion skills should then be used to give very specific feedback. General feedback, such as “good job” or “need to improve,” do not provide students with the direction they need to learn. Instead, they need to know exactly what they have done well or in what way they can improve, through comments such as “You responded well by explaining how your evidence was stronger than it seemed,” or “You asked a question, but it would have been better if it had been

speculative and more closely tied to the points other students had been making.” Of course, the range of student contributions—and the resulting feedback—is so wide that it is difficult to prepare for this kind of feedback beforehand. Teachers must know the types of contributions they are looking for, but the specifics will always be somewhat unpredictable, even more so in a discussion than in an essay.

Teachers may also want to consider creating formal rubrics or scoring guidelines, just as they use for essays and presentations. These are important not only to remind students of what is being assessed, but of what beginning, proficient, and advanced performances would look like. This kind of transparency helps to further legitimate the assessment in students’ eyes, as well as communicating its importance. Involving students in the creation of guidelines and rubrics can also help them internalize expectations as well as take responsibility for setting their own goals and reflecting on them. Reaching this level of specificity will certainly be highly classroom-specific and will depend on teachers’ (and students’) insights into the needs and capabilities found within particular contexts.

### Conclusions

Assessing historical discussions is not for everyone. Some teachers may consider assessment a barrier, rather than an aid, to improving discussion, while others may be unwilling or unable to devote the time needed to do it well. For those teachers who see value in such assessment, however, and who are willing to give it systematic attention, the guidelines in this article should prove helpful. These guidelines are not meant as strict formulas to be followed to the letter, but as ideas to draw from. Teachers will need to consider their own educational goals as well as the specific

circumstances of their students and classrooms before deciding how to assess historical discussions. Yet any teacher who wants to engage in this process will need to carefully consider the three main tasks described here: identifying which skills to assess, how to teach them, and how to manage the task of providing feedback. Doing so can provide a valuable addition to students’ engagement in the full range of communication found in the field.

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