

Classroom Teacher's Idea Notebook

Middle and High School

Scored Discussions

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In classrooms, students interact with the teacher, with one another, and with content. These interactions characteristically involve listening, speaking, and information-gathering skills. A primary objective in social studies classrooms is to help students learn how to analyze and discuss significant issues from history and from current policy debates. A classroom strategy called *scored discussions* helps students acquire and practice these skills.¹ In scored discussions, small groups of students receive points for their participation in a discussion. The teacher scores the discussion as it progresses and shares the results at its conclusion. In this article I provide a brief overview of the scored discussion process and explain specific ways of using this strategy in the classroom.

Unlike an oral report, in which a student presents to the class all that he or she knows about a given topic, a scored discussion is more like a mosaic. Each tile in a mosaic is integral to the overall image. Because each contribution in a scored discussion lasts no more than five to fifteen seconds, no single student dominates the discussion. Together, the many contributions of individual group members over the duration of the discussion create a clear picture of the topic discussed.

Another analogy that helps to illustrate how scored discussions operate is that of a social gathering. Small group discussions at parties are most rewarding and pleasant when no one individual takes control and spends several minutes (or more) pontificating on the subject at hand. Similarly, participants in small group discussions at social gatherings seek to encourage quiet members to contribute opinions. Information and insights are often shared in rapid-fire sequence. The outcome, when successful, is a discussion that has been egalitarian in structure and satisfying as a learning experience.

Effective scored discussions have the same qualities and can address a wide range of topics. The author has held scored discussions on many topics including the Strategic Defense Initiative, oral histories of the Depression, U.S. policy in Central America, abortion rights, current events, and the ratification of the U.S. Constitution.

Scored discussions use a fishbowl-type format with one group of participants in the middle of the classroom and the remaining students and teacher watching from a large outer circle. All listen to the discussion while the teacher scores contributions from members of the small group. Discussions last from eight to twenty minutes, depending on the topic and grade level; the small group members keep the discussion on track with the help

of a discussion agenda.

Scored discussions have several compelling attributes:

- They are comparatively easy to score, thus reducing the amount of time classroom teachers spend grading.
- They provide a means of alternative assessment, thus helping teachers move away from sole dependence on paper-and-pencil evaluations.
- They reflect a sensitivity to various student learning styles, providing additional opportunities for student success.
- They represent a teaching strategy that the teacher structures but does not lead directly, allowing students to take responsibility for their learning.
- The format is flexible, providing opportunities for teacher creativity.

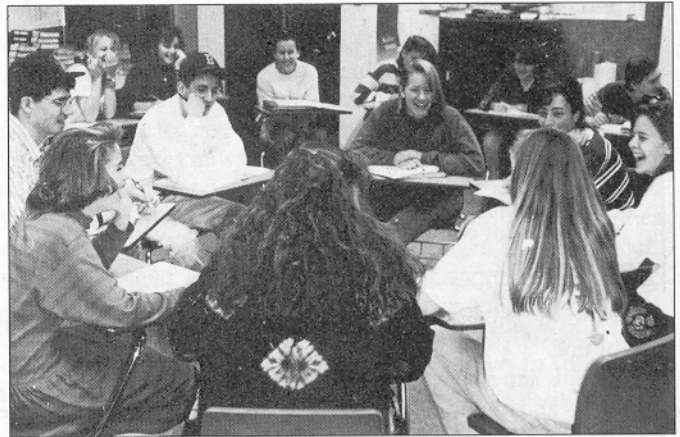


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Too often, classrooms are filled with teacher talk to the exclusion of student talk and interaction. Although structured by the teacher, scored discussions provide opportunities for students to talk with, and listen to, other students. As an alternative to traditional reports or research projects, scored discussions allow students to practice research skills without forcing the teacher to grade a large pile of written papers. Not a substitute for written assessment, scored discussions help teachers obtain an additional evaluation of student abilities and at the same time provide a means for students with various learning styles to shine in the classroom before their peers. Scored discussions have been used successfully by teachers from primary grades through senior high school and college.

Scoring Discussions

Students in a scored discussion receive points, either positive or negative, each time they participate in the discussion. These points are listed in the model scoresheet in figure 1.

The teacher awards positive points for such activities as taking a stand on the issue, presenting factual or research-based information, making a relevant comment, and drawing another student into the discussion. Drawing another student into the discussion is a means of ensuring wide participation and reinforces an important social skill—including others in a discussion. This is an example of one situation in which a student can combine activities to gain additional points. Points are usually awarded for a single activity, such as presenting factual material or stating a position. However, if Bill presents his information and then adds, "Tanya, what can you add to this part of the discussion?" an additional point will be added to Bill's score. This

Figure 1. The Discussion Scoresheet

Positive		Negative	
<i>Points</i>		<i>Points</i>	
(2) Taking a position on a question	_____	(-2) Not paying attention or distracting others	_____
(1) Making a relevant comment	_____	(-2) Interruption	_____
(2) Using evidence to support a position or presenting factual information	_____	(-1) Irrelevant comment	_____
(1) Drawing another person into the discussion	_____	(-3) Monopolizing	_____
(1) Asking a clarifying question or moving the discussion along	_____	(-3) Personal attack	_____
(2) Making an analogy	_____		
(2) Recognizing contradictions	_____	Total points	_____
(2) Recognizing irrelevant comments	_____	Grade	_____

makes for a “three-point play” whether Tanya has anything to add or not.

Students can also receive positive points for asking clarifying questions and moving the discussion along. Listening skills are reinforced by earning points for politely noting when a speaker has made a contradiction or has contributed irrelevant information. Finally, the teacher can award positive points for making analogies. These represent a specific form of higher-level thinking and serve as a means of extending the discussion.

The teacher assigns negative points for distractions, interruptions, monopolizing discussions, personal attacks, and making irrelevant comments. One of the pleasures of running scored discussions is hearing students excuse themselves for interrupting a group member who is speaking. As long as the interrupting student politely retreats, no points are lost. Monopolizing is, perhaps, the most heinous offense in the scored discussion process as it prevents other students from making contributions and earning points. Irrelevant comments receive negative points whether a member of the discussion has pointed them out or not. Irrelevant comments include repeating information that another student has already contributed or making comments that are clearly off the subject.

Teachers can use negative points to keep the student audience quiet and attentive. The teacher tells the audience that once the discussion has begun, they can receive negative points without further warning. These points are then deducted from those students’ scored discussion point totals. Most students behave appropriately while listening to their peers’ scored discussions for a variety of reasons. They want to avoid lowering their own point total, they do not want to sacrifice points already earned, they may be genuinely interested, or they may be listening for information to use in the final project.

When the scored discussion is complete, all positive and negative points for each student are added up to achieve individual scores. A point system for discussions lasting roughly eighteen minutes in length is: 0–7 points = F, 8–13 points = D,

14–19 points = C, 20–25 = B, 25+ = A.

The scoring of discussions might appear, on the surface, to be a prodigious task for a single teacher; it is, however, actually quite easy. After discussion groups have been assigned, make an expanded copy of the scored discussion point sheet as illustrated in figure 2. Write the names of the discussion group members in the space below each type of discussion behavior. To score the discussion, place tally marks by a student’s name each time he or she exhibits a particular behavior.

Teachers often find themselves wrestling over whether a comment by a student was either “using factual information” for two points or “making a relevant comment” for one point. Factual information includes statistics, direct quotes, and other data. On the other hand, relevant comments pertain to the topic but might lack a reference base; they often sound more casual. An example of a “relevant comment” from a discussion on capital punishment might be, “You have to

commit a pretty serious crime to be eligible for the death sentence.” Although a degree of subjectivity is inherent in scoring a discussion, it is probably no greater than the subjectivity present when grading essay tests or research papers.

Teachers who have had the greatest success with scored discussions acknowledge that, in the end, a student’s points get distributed fairly over the course of the discussion. In fact, teachers quickly realize that a comment can be barely out of a student’s mouth before the way to score it becomes apparent. For example, cues such as “I believe...” or “It is my opinion...” or “If it was up to me...” clearly indicate that someone is taking a position on a topic. A reason for the position should be included, otherwise it counts only as a relevant comment. Names, dates, definitions, and other information from readings or research tend to be worth two points for providing factual information. Unless a student “draws another person into the discussion,” each contribution receives points in only one category on the scoresheet. That is, reciting three facts at once, for example, is still worth only two points.

Because it is inappropriate for the teacher to interrupt the

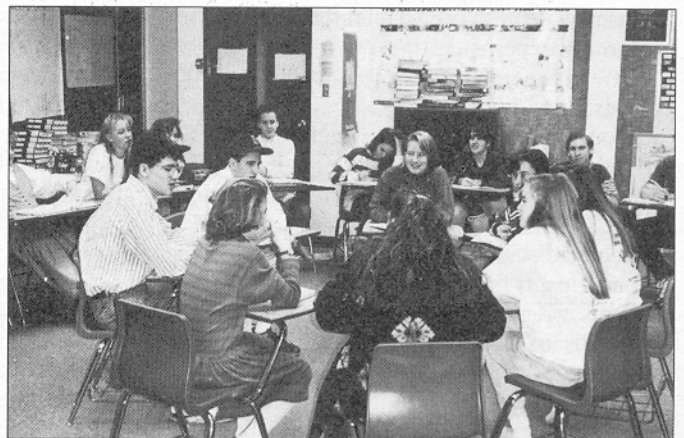


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discussion once it has begun, it is useful to take notes on issues that need to be discussed and clarified when the group is finished. These might be factual errors, concepts to be reinforced, or statements that deserve additional consideration by the class as a whole. It is crucial that the teacher debrief both the discussion process and the information and ideas presented in each scored discussion.

To communicate scores to students after the discussion is complete, make a number of scoresheets like those illustrated in figure 1 on half sheets of paper. Transfer individual scores from the master scoresheet to these individual scoresheets, provide an overall comment, and assign a grade. These can be distributed the following day. They take little time to complete—far less than would be required to grade a research paper on the same topic. It is also necessary to explain in advance that since there is no “instant replay,” the teacher’s scores stand as accurate. Assure the class that you will recognize each of their contributions to the discussion and score them fairly.

The Discussion Agenda

The discussion agenda is an essential component of the scored discussion process. This agenda, created by either the teacher or the students, structures the research process and the discussion itself. For example, a twenty-minute scored discussion on “Miners of the Old West” might look like this:

- I. Introduction of discussion topic
- II. Discovery of gold
 - A. Who, when, where, how
 - B. Effects on local communities
 - C. Effects of “gold fever” on the rest of the country
 - D. Getting to the gold fields
- III. Miners’ lives
 - A. Mining techniques
 - B. Daily life
 - C. Stories of success and failure
- IV. End of the gold mining era
 - A. How did it end?
 - B. Lessons for history
 - C. Personal lessons or insights derived from studying gold mining
- V. Conclusion of discussion topic

The agenda provides guidance for student research, a structure for organizing research notes, and a process for conducting the actual scored discussion. Because the scored discussion is not an exercise in memory, students are either allowed, encouraged, or required to use notes. In addition, each student in the small group must be prepared to discuss every item on the agenda; in other words, they are not to divide the discussion and turn it into a series of individual oral reports.

The agenda also provides a way of organizing all information so that it is readily accessible during the discussion. Successful students carefully label and categorize their information, much as they would if they were writing a standard research paper. This process of organization familiarizes the student with his or her information and serves to reinforce the integration of research information into long-term memory. It becomes easy for a student, when discussing “mining techniques,” for example, to share data on hydraulic methods, panning, and other ways of obtaining gold ore. Point out to students that the participants on *Washington Week in Review* come prepared with notes when presenting some aspect of the news. The scored discussion is not unlike those presentations except in terms of the relative



Photo by John Zola

length of each contribution.

Students generally have a difficult time developing their own agenda for scored discussions. If time is available to work with each group, the teacher knows what his or her instructional objectives are for a given unit and a teacher-generated discussion agenda will focus upon these objectives. Thus, the question of whether students or the teacher should create the agenda is a difficult one. On one hand, it is a worthy activity for students to determine what they want to discuss. On the other, a teacher-generated agenda outlines the content that the teacher deems most important to research and discuss. Teachers will have to judge for themselves how to create agendas for scored discussions.

The most useful aspect of the agenda is that it helps students keep track of their scored discussion. Because members of the group facilitate the scored discussion, and because there is a specified time limit, students who are attuned to the agenda engage in high-quality discussions. When explaining how to earn points for “moving the discussion along,” however, the teacher should emphasize that students expressing the need to “get going” should present this as a suggestion to the group. Tim might say, “We’ve been discussing mining techniques for a while and I think we should move on to the daily lives of miners. Does anyone have any last comments on mining techniques?” This gives students a final opportunity to present information, and prevents an overly anxious student from racing the group through its agenda.

Not all scored discussions require elaborate discussion agendas. Teachers might structure a scored discussion on current events with a simple agenda posted on the chalkboard. In this case, the agenda might include the basics—“Who, what, when, where, why, and what is your reaction?” Teachers or students may also structure current events agendas around specific stories related to local, state, national, and international news.

The length of a scored discussion is related to the structure of the agenda and will vary depending on the age of the students and the topic discussed. I have successfully used scored discussions of seventeen to twenty minutes with six to eight students in grades 7–12. Discussions of seventeen to twenty minutes are long enough for pursuing a topic in-depth, yet short enough to allow for two discussions during a single class period. Shorter lengths of time, roughly eight to twelve minutes, work well for discussing specific current events topics.

Assigning a writing task for students to submit after all of the scored discussions have taken place can help students to be attentive listeners when they are sitting in the outside circle. A

Figure 2. Master Discussion Scoresheet

Group: 2
Topic: Gold Miners

Points	Positive	Points	Negative
(2) Taking a position on a question		(-2) Not paying attention or distracting others	
Amy 22	Joan 2	Amy -2	Joan
Yvonne 2	Christine 22	Yvonne	Christine
Don	Bill 2	Don	Bill -2
John 2		John	
(1) Making a relevant comment		(-2) Interruption	
Amy ////	Joan //	Amy	Joan
Yvonne ///	Christine ### //	Yvonne -2	Christine -2
Don ###	Bill ### /	Don -2	Bill -2
John ///		John	
(2) Using evidence to support a position or presenting factual information		(-1) Irrelevant comment	
Amy 222	Joan 222222222	Amy	Joan
Yvonne 222222	Christine 2222222	Yvonne -1	Christine
Don 2222	Bill 22222	Don -1	Bill -1-1
John 22222		John	
(1) Drawing another person into the discussion		(-3) Monopolizing	
Amy /	Joan ////	Amy	Joan
Yvonne ///	Christine ### //	Yvonne	Christine
Don ### //	Bill //	Don	Bill
John ### ### /		John	
(1) Asking a clarifying question or moving the discussion along		(-3) Personal attack	
Amy /	Joan //	Amy	Joan
Yvonne //	Christine ///	Yvonne	Christine
Don //	Bill //	Don	Bill
John /		John	
(2) Making an analogy		<u>Student Totals</u>	
Amy	Joan 2	Amy	14
Yvonne 2	Christine 2	Yvonne	21
Don	Bill	Don	19
John		John	22
(2) Recognizing contradictions		Joan	30
Amy	Joan	Christine	35
Yvonne	Christine	Bill	16
Don	Bill		
John			
(2) Recognizing irrelevant comments			
Amy	Joan		
Yvonne	Christine		
Don	Bill		
John			



unit on U.S. foreign policy in Central America, for example, could consist of four scored discussions—one each on U.S. involvement in Panama, Cuba, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Students could then be asked in the summary assignment to propose a comprehensive U.S. foreign policy for Central America based on prior U.S. involvements in these nations during the twentieth century. Students who listen to scored discussions on alternative explanations of causes of the Civil War might be asked to write a textbook entry that reviews each of the causes.

Uses of Scored Discussions

The uses of scored discussions are limited only by a teacher's imagination. Sometimes a teacher should expect all students to engage in a scored discussion on consecutive days, at other times the teacher should expect students to participate in one scored discussion over a period of six to nine weeks. In this configuration, teachers might conduct scored discussions weekly on current events topics expecting that each student will sign up for at least one during the quarter.

Scored discussions are also effective in classrooms with mainstreamed students. The discussion agenda helps the resource room teacher structure and guide the mainstreamed student's research while the scored discussion format itself provides a specific and concrete process that teachers can rehearse with their students prior to the actual classroom experience. Scored discussions put the resource teacher in the role of a coach who can provide help in obtaining information and practicing specific discussion techniques or strategies. Mock scored discussions in the resource room with other classmates can help develop confidence for later performance in the mainstreamed classroom. Experience has shown that mainstreamed students perform well in the scored discussion environment when provided with such assistance.

Teaching the Scored Discussion Process to Students

The initial response of students to the notion of engaging in scored discussions is often less than positive. The format is unfamiliar enough that the first reaction is one of panic or dismay. As the process is reviewed with a class, many students wonder why they cannot write a paper or give a traditional oral report. To overcome these first impressions and to help students do their best in the upcoming scored discussions, it is imperative that they engage in practice discussions. Practice discussions tend to reduce initial anxiety and serve to make an abstract process far more concrete. The practice discussions need be no more

complicated than five- to seven-minute discussions of some issue of interest to the class. The most successful process I have found for doing this has been conducting simple fishbowl discussions in which students score one another.

To begin the process, identify in advance two simple discussion topics. These could be brief opinion essays from the editorial page of the local newspaper, topics of current interest such as whether students should have real power for decision making in the school through restructured student governments, or in what ways males and females are inherently similar and different. Create brief discussion agendas with no more than two or three subtopics for each of the two topics. Divide the class into four groups of equal size; give groups 1 and 3 one discussion topic and groups 2 and 4 the other. Allow several minutes for students to consider their topic and prepare to discuss them with group members. Next, explain that groups 1 and 3 will be on the inside of two separate fishbowls and groups 2 and 4 will each be on the outside of one of these fishbowls. Individual students on the outside are to score only one student on the inside during the practice discussion using copies of the discussion scoresheet (see figure 1). Form the fishbowls and be sure that each student on the inside is being scored by one student on the outside. Before starting the discussions, remind students on the inside how to gain points and to stick to the agenda. After five to seven minutes, stop the discussions, allow students on the outside to share scores with students in the discussion group and then repeat the process with the roles of scorer and discussant reversed. Debrief the sample scored discussions with the class and answer any questions about the process.

Students carry a good deal of anxiety into their first scored discussion. Feedback after the discussion is over, however, generally reflects an attitude that the time went much faster than anticipated, the process was easier than originally feared, and the technique resulted in a positive sense of learning. Frequently, the most positive students are those who have not succeeded on traditional written research projects. Some students have faced written projects and evaluations with little chance of success for years on end. Respect for divergent learning styles would indicate that these students deserve opportunities to show what they know in a manner more conducive to the skills they possess. On the other hand, not all students find scored discussions an enjoyable or successful learning strategy. Often these are students who are skilled writers and are uncomfortable when asked to provide evidence of learning through nonwritten means. Scored discussions provide a format for helping these students stretch and develop confidence as oral communicators.

Conclusion

Individuals in societies spend a great deal of time talking with each other. Sometimes this talking is social in character, at other times individuals talk to share information and ideas as citizens. The scored discussion process provides a means of helping students learn and practice many communication skills. Additionally, scored discussions are an alternative way of assessing and evaluating students' knowledge or performance.

Note

¹I first learned about this technique from Fred Newmann while a methods student at the University of Wisconsin in 1975, and as a student teacher in the Madison (Wisconsin) Public Schools, with Marsha Stewart. An early list of discussion criteria can be found in Fred M. Newmann, with the assistance of Donald W. Oliver, *Clarifying Public Controversy: An Approach to Teaching Social Studies* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1970), p. 291.