



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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Book Review: Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms

Steven D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 1999.

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Anyone looking to find discussion treated flatly as a “teaching technique” will be sorely disappointed in this book. For Brookfield and Preskill, discussion is not a self-contained teaching tool, but a reflection of a wider educational – and personal – philosophy. Discussion as a Way of Teaching is concerned with discussion in the classroom, but it is also concerned with discussion in a broader context: that of democratic values and practices. The authors emphasize that teachers who use discussion are playing for high stakes: “Democracy and discussion are inseparable because both have the same root purpose – to nurture and promote human growth” (29). To teach using discussion, therefore, is to make a conscious choice about what is valued both inside and outside the classroom. One of the primary lessons of this book is that teachers should bear in mind not only what we teach in discussions, but also what we are teaching simply by discussing.

The authors are themselves unabashed discussion devotees (the book itself arose from their personal discussions). At the same time, they freely admit discussion as they conceive of it may not be for everyone. Their preface raises and responds to a number of common objections about teaching with discussion. From there, the book proceeds logically through the conception and implementation of a discussion-based classroom. They begin at the beginning, laying out the “dispositions” necessary for democratic discussion, as well as some ideas

about what discussion is not – a “performance” by the instructor, or simply everyone talking. Brookfield and Preskill also helpfully provide lists of dangers and mistakes to avoid at the outset, as well as reasons why teachers often lose heart and abandon discussion. They are honest about the difficulty of discussion leading at the same time that they recommend its use.

The bulk of the book, however, is devoted to practical matters such as getting discussion going and keeping it going. This includes both methods (“Questioning, Listening, Responding”; “Creative Grouping”) and possible concerns (gender and culture differences). In the central chapters, both authors draw extensively from their own experiences with the theory and practice of classroom discussion, providing stories and advice. One of the strengths of this book is its balance of the theoretical and the practical; the authors generously include examples of actual discussion assignments and evaluations which they have found to be successful. In each case, however, the examples are tied to their theories of democratic discussion, keeping the book from seeming like a basic “how to” manual. The examples provided are both useful on their own and as a challenge to devise one’s own assignments in their spirit.

Brookfield and Preskill close with a chapter on “Evaluating Discussion,” which is a theme that runs through the entire book. True to their democratic principles, the authors emphasize the importance of continually gathering feedback from discussion participants and adapting accordingly. They provide many useful alternatives to the ubiquitous (and often dreaded) “end of course evaluation,” including weekly “Critical Incident Questionnaires,” which invite reflection on the week’s discussion, and more unusual methods such as the class-ending “stone of gratitude”

session. Discussion, according to these authors, is learned as well as taught, and they encourage teachers to always be learning how to better use discussion in class. Their book is itself a fine way to do this, for both the neophyte and the experienced discussion leader. Instructors interested in using discussion in their teaching for the first time will find a thoughtful and thorough introduction here. Those already using discussion in their classrooms will discover much to keep them thinking about and developing their discussion practices.