

Why class discussions often fail

Reading-related class discussion activities often fail because there is not enough pre-speaking support for students. Unless students have a chance to organize their thoughts and write notes before the discussion begins, what usually happens is:

- stronger students speak during the discussion, and weaker students listen, but say nothing (because they feel embarrassed speaking in front of the whole class).
- the teacher has to enter the discussion, asking questions of individual students, in order to keep the class conversation going. Sometimes by doing this, the teacher can end up speaking more than the students, which is not using class time efficiently if the goal is to give students speaking practice.

Team work discussion is a solution

One solution to the problem of organizing reading-related discussion work effectively is to divide the class into small 'reading teams' of 5-7 students each. By giving each team member a different, staged, and clearly-defined task to perform when preparing for the discussion, the teacher can make sure that:

- shy students will feel less embarrassed about speaking, because they are speaking in front of a small group of teammates, rather than the whole class.
- all students have enough time to prepare their thoughts, and all have something that they can say in the discussion. This means that the teacher won't need to enter the discussion themselves in order to make it work.

Giving Reading Team Task Sheets to students

The Dominoes Reading Team Task Sheets are designed to give students pre-speaking support, and thinking time, before they begin a reading-related discussion. There are seven different Reading Team Task Sheets, which the teacher can assign to different teammates - initially on the basis of students' interests and language abilities. Each Task Sheet lists tasks the student should focus on while reading a story or chapter.

With classes that are new to the idea of Reading Teams, the teacher can give pairs of students the same task in each group (for example, two team captains, two picture dictionary compilers, two character portraitists, two scenic artists, two special events photographers, etc.). In each new discussion lesson, the teacher should make sure different students get different Reading Team Task Sheets, for variety.

Once students have had some practise in 'Reading Team' discussions, the teacher can leave the choice of which teammate gets which Task Sheet to the students themselves.

The different Reading Team Task Sheets

The Reading Team Task Sheets (with notes on suitable students for each task) are:

Team Captain

The teacher should give this task to a student in each team who has strong language skills and who likes organizing people. The Team Captain's job is to be a mini-teacher for his/her group and to make sure teamwork is efficient.

Picture Dictionary Compiler

The teacher can give this task to a student who likes puzzles (the gapped sentences), and who likes drawing (the pictures).

Character Portrait Painter

The teacher can give this task to a student who likes drawing (the picture), and who is interested in people (the character words).

Scenic Artist

The teacher can give this task to a student who likes drawing (the artwork), and who is interested in theatre (the scene words).

Special Event Photographer

The teacher can give this task to a student who likes drawing (the 'snapshot'), and who is interested in action (the story event).

Mapmaker

The teacher can give this task to a student who likes drawing (the map), and who is interested in what characters do (marking routes).

Setting Detective

The teacher can give this task to a student who likes investigating things (the research), and who is interested in history, geography, and nature (the time and place words).

For teams of fewer than seven students, the teacher can leave out the Mapmaker and Setting Detective Task Sheets, which may not be relevant to all stories. For example, the Setting Detective Task Sheet will not be relevant to a modern story in a familiar geographic setting, and the Mapmaker Task Sheet will not be relevant to a story where the characters do not move about much.

Preparation time

It is important to give students enough time to prepare for discussion. If there is little classroom time available, the teacher can set students the reading and pre-discussion preparatory work as homework the lesson before the discussion class.

Materials

Each student needs a copy of the story. Students will also need different things according to their tasks:

Team Captain

- Pen and paper for writing, and pencils for drawing

Picture Dictionary Compiler

- Pen and paper for writing, and pencils for drawing

Character Portrait Painter

- Pen and paper for writing, and pencils for drawing
- Magazine pictures and glue for collage
- Internet access and printer for web images

NOTE: students could make a character puppet. They will need some card and paper fasteners for this.

Scenic Artist

- Pen and paper for writing, and pencils for drawing
- Magazine pictures and glue for collage
- Internet access and printer for web images

NOTE: students could make a 3D model scene. They will need a shoebox and some card for this.

Special Event Photographer

- Pen and paper for writing, and pencils for drawing
- Magazine pictures and glue for collage
- Internet access and printer for web images

NOTE: Students could take a real photo of classmates posed in a scene from the story. They will need a camera (on a mobile phone, for example) and a printer for this.

Mapmaker

- Pen and paper for writing, and pencils for drawing

NOTE: The map could be a bird's eye view (from on top); a cross-section (from the side) or a 3D view (from the top and front).

Setting Detective

- Pen and paper for writing, and pencils for drawing
- Magazine pictures and glue for collage
- Internet access and printer for web images
- Internet access or library access for research

Task name badges

The teacher can use these pictures to make badges for different teammates to wear.



Whole class feedback

Once the Reading Teams have had a chance to discuss their stories – or at the end of a specified time limit – the teacher can ask each Team Captain briefly to summarize his or her team's discussion for the whole class.