Discussions used in assessment

Discussions are used as formative or summative assessments across a range of subjects in the SACE. This video will highlight some strategies that some teachers can develop to give students the opportunity to successfully address the specific features of the assessment design criteria. This will help them develop their critical thinking skills. It is easy to underestimate th importance of interviewing and questioning techniques. Successful questioning techniques focus on the evidence presented by the students including their connection to the specific features of the assessment design criteria, which in turn promote higher order thinking skills including analysis, evaluation, reflection, justification and synthesis.

They also incorporate strategies such as question types, wait time and the level of student centredness.

For example, the ESL range of subjects use discussions as an assessment. The specific features that are a focus for this interactive discussion are taken from the following performance standards: knowledge and understanding, analysis, application and communication.

The teacher needs to consider what specific features are being assessed by the discussion and how a student can demonstrate or provide evidence to address this. What questions need to be asked to elicit student responses that reflect their achievement accurately? To answer this, it is often easier to consider what the purpose is for asking the question.

Using the template available on the SACE website is an easy way to record and plan this information. Let’s look at an example of a discussion. As you are watching, consider the following questions: Is this a successful discussion? Consider elements such as: What kinds of questions are used? Does the teacher provide any wait time?

Are alternatives to questions used? Does it look like either the student and/or teacher prepared for the discussion?

What aspect of gender equality have you researched and was it interesting?

Equality in the parliament and how many women are in parliament.

In what country are you talking about?

India.

What is the current situation there?

61 women were elected in 2014.

How many women were elected in that election?

61. 61, ok.

Do you think that is enough?

No. No.

So what’s the issue here?

There are not many females in India parliament.

Is there a rule or a law that says there should be more women in Parliament?

People want more women in parliament.

Was this a successful discussion? If we consider that the discussion needs to be student centred, with the student providing evidence to support their learning, then no, this was not successful. Let’s look at some of the reasons why.

The questions were closed questions, questions that only required yes / no answers, double-barrelled questions, leading questions, or questions that ask student to recall rather than analyse. Other elements that can contribute to the lack of success of this discussion include not using alternatives to questions, little or no wait time and lack of either student or teacher preparation.

Let’s take a closer look at the questions used and where they fit on a table that highlights the levels of critical thinking. This table is also found on the handout that accompanies this video.

Models such as Bloom’s taxonomy and Costa’s Levels of Critical Thinking illustrate the movement from descriptive questions and responses to more critical and analytical ones.

As you can see, the questions used in the previous discussion fall in the range of lower order thinking skills such as remembering and understanding (using Bloom’s ideas) or ‘Level 1’ or input (using Costa’s ideas).

Higher order thinking skills which relate to the requirements of the assessment, involve skills such as ‘processing’, or what Bloom refers to as applying and analysing, and ‘output’, or evaluating and creating.

An important element of these are the words and language functions used to promote these types of answers

If we consider the questions we used before, how could we transform these questions so that they can promote more successful responses?

Changing the purpose of the questions increases the level of higher order thinking skills.

For example, 'What is the current situation?' asks the students to simply remember information. Changing the question to 'what is your opinion of the current situation and why?’ asks the student to evaluate and justify their decision. As you can see, the questions would now allow a more in-depth discussion, deeper analysis, and more opportunities for the students to provide evidence of their learning.

Let’s take a look at whether this is the case. As you are watching, consider the same questions as previously.

Could you please identify and describe the aspects of gender equality which you have researched for your chosen country?

I have chosen to study gender equality in India with a focus on the imbalance between males and females in the houses of parliament. I also wanted to look at the things which have been…

What is your opinion on the current situation in India?

I think the current situation is not good, there needs to be more female members of parliament in order to make it more evenly balanced. This means that other countries…

What examples can you give to explain the main issues?

In 2009, 59 women were elected to the house of parliament compared with 61 in 2014. This is only a very small increase and means that of the 543…

Is there evidence to suggest that it would improve if there were more female members of parliament?

There is evidence of countries all over the world taking steps to increase the number of females in parliament. This Bill sets out to have a minimum of 33% represented by women…

The student was much more engaged in this second discussion. They were also more in control of the discussion as the questions allowed them to present evidence of their learning. What were the main differences between the two discussions? The questions were mainly open-ended questions in the last discussion. They encouraged analysis rather than just recall.

Alternatives to questions, such as statements using words like identify and describe were also used to encourage extended student responses.

Wait time was increased.

Pausing and giving students the opportunity to collect their ideas and think of their answers may increase their ability to successfully address the criteria.

Preparation is also essential – on the teacher’s part as well as the student. Planning the questions, scaffolding the task, giving students time to practice and prepare are all strategies that can make the task requirements more transparent.

Where to from here?

Plan your questions before the discussion based on the specific features of the assessment design criteria. Check that they are focusing on higher order level thinking skills by using the table shown before. You can find a handout with this information and templates to use on the SACE website.

Another idea to incorporate into your planning is scaffolding the task with your students. This can benefit them and assist you in your planning. Following these steps can help students identify the rhetorical patterns and language involved in these types of tasks: Activate – find out what your students know.

Deconstruct – analyse the elements that go into a successful discussion.

Reconstruct – get students to collaboratively apply successful elements.

Practice – peer practice and evaluation assists student performance.

Reflecting on questions or how discussions are led can assist in improving student learning and assessment.

If asking questions or leading discussions is something that you are interested in there are many ways to use it as part of your ongoing development.

One idea is to record a discussion with a student. Use a table like this to analyse the questions you use. Do the questions reflect the outcomes you desire? Would you change them if you conducted the discussion again?

For further advice and strategies on effective questioning, take a look at the accompanying video handout. As well as the range of supporting documents that are available on the SACE website.

This video was produced with the kind assistance of St George College, Mile End, South Australia.