Facilitating Peer Discussion

Multiple research studies show that students learn a great deal by talking to each other. This is where the learning occurs – not when the teacher tells them the final answer to the question.

Pointers on peer discussion
1. Allow them enough time to discuss, and show that you value this part of the process.
2. Wander around and listen to what they’re saying (or pretend to shuffle papers, and eavesdrop) so you get a glimpse into their thinking.
3. You may ask students to think and answer on their own before talking to their peers. Either way is fine.
4. Don’t show students the results (the histogram) until they’ve finished voting.

A note on content coverage

Due to pressure to cover a certain amount of content or curriculum, many teachers feel that they can’t spend the time to due this type of in-depth learning.

While we would like to teach for understanding, many teachers feel pressured to teach for exposure – the classic “mile wide but an inch deep” problem. It’s worth noting that in research studies, some teachers found that they could teach the material more efficiently using question-driven instruction. They found that they had a deeper understanding of students’ difficulties, allowing them to tune their instruction more efficiently. Plus, in later units, students’ grasp of the underlying material helps them progress through the units more quickly.
Facilitating Class Discussion

The whole-class discussion is an important chance for students to articulate their thinking on a question, the class as a whole to decide on the right answer, and for you to make sure everyone understands which is the right answer (and why).

Pointers on class discussion

1. Don’t take the first right answer. Hear from multiple students.
2. Don’t just hear reasoning for the right answer – hear reasoning for the wrong answer and help students decide between them. Be careful to help students not feel shy about defending a wrong answer. One technique is to say “Can someone tell me why someone might have chosen A, even if they didn’t?”
3. **Emphasize the important of reasoning.** For example:
   a. Hear from multiple students, even when most of the class has the right answer.
   b. Solicit reasons why the wrong answers are wrong, as well as why the right answer is right. A wording we find helpful is, “Can anyone tell me why someone might have chosen answer C?”
4. You may call on individual students or groups of students to give their answers and defend them, or ask someone to volunteer to defend a particular answer choice
5. **DON’T** show the results (the histogram) until after the class has fully discussed the answer, or you won’t get students to speak up for an answer that the majority has voted against. If there is no clear consensus, however (like a 50/50 vote) then showing the histogram can spark productive discussion.