

Evaluating classroom discussion

Children regularly talk amongst themselves, but how much of that talk is concerned with actually 'getting things done?' The next activity will allow you to attempt a reduced version of a similar evaluation. It will also allow you to compare your evaluation with that provided by one of the unit team (in comments following each example). And, finally, it may also allow you to consider the extent to which you feel such evaluations are valid and useful.

Activity 2 Evaluating discussions

Allow up to 2 hours

Examine the following two sequences, which are extracts from classroom discussions involving two sets of children (all aged 12–13). In each of the sequences, the children have been asked to try to complete a specific task together (as is explained before each sequence). When reading each sequence, consider the following questions:

1. How 'on task' does the talk seem to be?
2. How well does the discussion operate as a forum for sharing relevant information, evaluating ideas and reaching joint decisions?
3. Does everyone in the group participate to a similar extent? If not, why do you think this is so? Does unequal participation matter?

Compare your own answers to these questions with the evaluative comments below.

Sequence 1

This sequence comes from the discussion of a group of four pupils (two girls and two boys) about the causes of vandalism. Preparation for this included reading an interview with the leader of a gang (called Ron) who regularly engaged in such behaviour; and the children were prompted by the question: 'What do you think this interview tells you about the cause of vandalism?'

At the point the extract begins, Robert has just rejected the idea that young people engage in vandalism because they 'aren't given enough things to do'.

- Robert** Oh I, I don't, I, I think it's partly that, but if you get some people that, really want to be vandals, really want to smash things up just for't pleasure of it, and you get some that an't owt better to do so they just go around smashing things up. It's a bit daft really, in't it ...?
- Christine** Say summat, Margaret (whispered)
- Margaret** You an't said owt yet (whispered)
- Christine** I've said 'Yeah', 'Yeah' (whispered)
- Robert** Do you think Ron's any good?
- Christine** No.
- Margaret** Do you think Ron's what? (said aggressively)
- Christine** He dun't give, he dun't give good answers.
- Robert** No, he just said that he wanted to be 'somebody'. He could have been somebody if he worked hard couldn't he, instead of ...
- Margaret** (interrupting) Yeah, but not like that.
- Robert** Instead of, he always wanted to make people be frightened of him.

Sequence 2

In this sequence the two twelve-year-old girls who speak are members of a group who have been asked to talk together to choose a suitable set of objects for storing in a 'time capsule'.

- Pupil A** We've got to start selecting which ones we want now, so let's have yours.
- Pupil B** A Mars bar definitely... clothes... this is the sixth one now that we're going to have.
- Pupil A** Right, six... now we'll all keep the same so we send them clothes... number one.
- Pupil B** I'm only going to send them some chocolate, cos they know...
- Pupil A** What?
- Pupil B** They might not have things like that.
- Pupil A** Yeah, all right then... number two.
- Pupil B** Number two... chocolate.
- Pupil A** Right, just a minute.
- Pupil B** Photos is a good idea.
- Pupil A** Yeah, cos then they know what you look like.
- Pupil B** Yeah.
- Pupil A** Right, let's have a look at yours.

Source: Phillips, 1992, p.153