EFFECTIVE DISCUSSION STRATEGIES

WE ALL LIVE IN A SOCIAL WORLD AND WE COME TO KNOW IT BY INTERACTING WITH OTHERS. BY POOLING OUR UNDERSTANDINGS AND TALKING ABOUT WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW, WE EMERGE FROM INSTRUCTIONAL CONVERSATIONS WITH DEEPER UNDERSTANDINGS AND A CLEARER FOCUS FOR MORE LEARNING.

WHILE TEACHER-DIRECTED QUESTIONS DO HAVE THEIR PLACE IN OUR CLASSROOMS, WE PREFER CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS TO INITIATE THEIR OWN INQUIRIES, TO RESPOND TO ONE ANOTHER, AND TO EXTEND INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES. IN OTHER WORDS, WE WANT OUR STUDENTS TO GENERATE THEIR OWN TALK. HOW CAN WE GET STUDENTS TO TALK ABOUT WHAT THEY ARE LEARNING? CRISS STRATEGIES HELP PROVIDE FOCUS FOR DISCUSSIONS. HERE ARE SOME IDEAS . . .

THINK-PAIR-SHARE

Think-pair-share is a discussion approach used with many of the CRISS strategies (Kagan, 1989). It is particularly powerful because every student becomes an active participant. It works well as a prereading activity, as a problem-solving strategy, as a break in a lecture, or as a follow-up activity. In each case, the procedure is similar.

The teacher or student begins by suggesting a topic or asking a question and everyone THINKS and writes down what they know or have learned about that particular topic. Then they PAIR with another student or with a small group of students to talk about their responses. Finally, they conclude with a SHARE session in which each pair or group adds to a whole class discussion.

FOCUSED DISCUSSION WITH COOPERATIVE TEAMS

Encourage discussions by having cooperative teams work on developing a learning guide over a section of text or a short story (e.g., character maps, opinion/proof notes, two column notes, or frames). This procedure inspires discussion and focuses students on a specific purpose. Sometimes this helps to keep discussions from getting "off target" with lively students.

STICKY-NOTE DISCUSSIONS

Sticky-note discussions work effectively when students are in literature groups. As students read or after they have read a selection, ask them to use sticky-notes to mark the places they want to talk about. These might be parts they have questions about, sections they really enjoy, humorous sections, or parts where the author has an interesting or vivid description.

Sticky-note discussions also work well in content areas. First, establish a purpose for the students' active reading and discussion. Perhaps you want them to mark evidence supporting a particular point of view or theory. Begin by modeling. Read the text or class materials with the students and mark evidence with a sticky- note. Explain how the parts you mark support the point of view or theory. Once students have the idea, you might suggest they mark additional evidence or select a new theory or idea to support. Begin discussions by having students talk about the places they marked and explain why they chose that material.

The focus for the sticky-notes will vary according to the content and reading material. In addition to marking evidence, teachers in our district use sticky-notes to mark: 1) sections that represent bias; 2) difficult vocabulary; 3) key steps in a process; 4) major events leading to a decision, solution or resolution; 5) information relevant to students' city, state, or geographic area; 6) important information (or extraneous information) in math word problems. The purpose can be general or very specific.

After students have practiced using the

sticky-notes with whole-group activities, divide them into cooperative teams and select one student as facilitator. The purpose for marking information from text can be determined by the teacher or by each group. Students read and mark the assignment individually. Then, the facilitator leads the discussion by going through the assignment page by page. Each student in the group talks about the parts they have marked.

READ-AND-SAY-SOMETHING

Read-and-say-something works effectively for difficult materials. Rather than having students struggle with the meaning alone, have them untangle the message together. In pairs, students read their assignment silently paragraph by paragraph or page by page. (More difficult assignments probably call for paragraph by paragraph reading.) After students have completed the paragraph or page, have them turn to their partner and say something. They may say anything they want related to the selection, e.g., react to ideas, descriptions, or images; or they may ask questions over parts that are confusing.

You will find that conversations about the meaning of the selection will occur naturally. You may want students to conclude this session by writing down questions that they would like answered by the whole class or other teams. Use this strategy as a way for students to review class notes. They read through their notes with a partner and then say something to one another. Incorporate read-and-say-something as part of problem solving in mathematics. Have students write out their solutions in words, switch papers with a partner, then read and say something at each step in their partner's solution. Reactions can also be focused on specific topics. For example, a language arts teacher might have students focus on descriptive writing or a history teacher might have students attend to issues regarding human rights.

AUTHENTIC QUESTIONS

In most situations, there is no set of questions that is appropriate to ask every reader. Individual readers have their own questions as they read and their own ideas. As students read or listen to class material, have them write out questions about information they do not understand. These authentic or genuine questions come to mind during reading. We want our students to know that all good readers have questions when they read. Having questions is not a sign of comprehension failure, but a sign of a successful reader who monitors his or her own comprehension.

Model questions that arise as you read aloud. You might ask questions about why something operates they way it does, why did the character or leader behave the way he or she did, what does this term or expression mean, would it make a difference if the order of events or steps in a solution were rearranged? Ask students to read a selection and come up with questions. Accept every response. Write some of their questions on the board and discuss possible answers. It may not be possible to answer some of the questions. Ask students to record in their journals or on a separate sheet of paper any unanswered questions they have as they read. Then have students use their questions in cooperative team discussions or as part of a whole class discussion.

CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

Concentric circles help in reviewing content in whole groups or in groups of six or larger (Kletzien & Baloche, 1994). Ask each student to prepare an index card. On the index card, they review or explain a key concept. Students stand facing each other in two concentric circles.

1. Each student in the inside circle pairs

with a student in the outside circle.

2. Both students use their cards to explain the concept to one another. (Give students a time limit of one to two minutes per person.)
3. The partners ask questions to make sure they understand the information.
4. After completing both explanations, the two students trade cards and the outside circle moves clockwise one person. Each person is now paired with a new partner.
5. Students must now explain the information described on their new card to their new partner. Then the process repeats and students again have a new partner.
6. With small groups, the conversation can continue until students receive their original card again.

With little teacher intervention, the students can review key concepts, personal interpretations, and vocabulary. This turns out to be a great way to review for a test.