

Benefits of Discussion

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This section has been abstracted from the text by Richard Skemp titled "The Psychology of Learning Mathematics". Even though most of the ideas presented here were written originally towards learning mathematics, they are pretty much applicable to any subject that we intend to learn. Thus it begins.

So far we have centred our attention on teacher-learner relationship. But discussion with fellow-students can also be an important contribution to learning. The mere act of communicating our ideas seems to help clarify them, for, in so doing, we have to attach them to words(or other symbols), which makes them more conscious. 'A problem clearly stated is half solved' and we have all found on occasion that in the process of formulating some problem, personal or academic, to a willing listener, we ourselves arrive at a solution. I met a teacher who uses an interesting technique when, in discussion, a student makes a misstatement. A common response is to ask another student to explain to the rest of the class the reasons for his statement. The usual result is either that he discovers his own error after a few sentences; or that the rest of the class learns something new.

But there is more to discussion than just thinking aloud. Another factor is the interrelating of our ideas with those of others- the accomodation of our own schemas to theirs to enable us to assimilate their ideas; and the explanation of our ideas to them to enable them to assimilate our ideas to their schemas. Both are demanding, in different ways. The former requires flexibility and open mindedness; the later the ability to see just where lie the differences between one's own schema and that of the learner ('to see things from his point of view') in order to know what explanation is necessary to bridge the gap. But if we can meet these demands, our own schemas will become enlarged thereby. More important still, they become more flexible:

that is to say we, as total personalities acquire habits and attitudes which favor further growth of our schemas.

Discussion also stimulates new ideas. One factor is simply the pooling of ideas, so that the ideas of each become more available to all. Imagine a jig-saw puzzle in which the pieces are distributed among several persons, who cannot see those of each other. Each might be able to complete part of the puzzle, or the pieces of each might be quite disconnected. But spread the pieces out on a table where everyone can see all the pieces, and they can all work together at fitting them together to a form a meaningful whole.

The cross-fertilization of ideas is another benefit which comes from discussion. Listening to someone else (or reading what they have written) may spark off new ideas in us which were not communicated to us by the other, but which we would not have had without their communication. These may then, in turn, spark off new ideas in them; the result being a creative interaction which, at its best can be exhilarating to all concerned.

Probably the best numbers for a creative discussion of this kind are small-two only or atmost 3. Sometimes a new and fascinating idea is evoked, but before we can grasp hold of it the other person says something else, unwittingly distracting one's attention, and the fleeting glimpse is lost. A friend has suggested to tme that there should be signals in discussion whereby either party may ask for silence if he needs it. Pencil and paper would also help the future retrieval of the idea, and allow talk to resume. In this way a situation would be established unifying public discussion, private thought, and written notes. This suggestion requires, and describes, good personal relationships between those taking part; so points the way to another aspect of discussion.

Attitude within groups:

These benefits of discussion are also very dependent on friendly and fairly informal personal relationships between the members of the group. This does not mean quite informal. There must be certain agreed forms of behavior, such a willingness to take turns to speak, to listen, to consider the viewpoint of others. These are important parts of civilized discussion, and are not too easily achieved. We do not much notice these forms of behavior because they facilitate the main task, and do not intrude themselves on it.

If we do not like the fellow members of our group, we are unlikely to be

interested in sharing ideas, relating our own to theirs, or looking at things from their point of view. Rather the opposite- both we and others will, according to temperament and circumstances, either try to make the group conform to our own ways of thinking or insulate ourselves from the pressures of the rest of the group.

This does not mean that members have to agree in all their ideas or viewpoints; it means that they have to disagree in the right kind of way. That is they have agreed that they will conduct their discussion on a rational basis, and will neither make, nor react to , attacks on their statements or arguments as if these were attacks on themselves. And they have to agree on the final goal of any discussion- a step forward, by all, in the understanding of the subject.