Discussions used in Assessments: Guidelines for Teachers

Discussions are used as an assessment tool to give students the opportunity to provide oral evidence of their learning and research. These discussions differ from the informal conversations that may occur throughout the course of study in that they:

* include teacher-led questions
* involve more student talk than teacher talk
* are focused on evidence in relation to specific features of the assessment design criteria
* are often recorded by the student, either digitally or in note form.

Interviewing and questioning techniques have been shown to be integral to effective and successful discussions across a range of areas (Jones 2005, p10). While many teachers naturally use questions as part of their teaching and formative assessment to check their students’ knowledge of a subject area, successful questioning techniques during an assessment task are complex and involve skills that may take time to be developed.

### Key strategies to encourage student participation

The questions used in the discussion need to be directly connected to what is being assessed. Students should be guided by the teacher to discuss their work in relation to the assessment design criteria, to ensure that they have the opportunity to meet the performance standards at the highest possible level. By focusing on the purpose of the assessment, the specific features of the assessment design criteria and the performance standards, a teacher can plan questions to use in the discussion which make the assessment valid and elicit student responses that accurately reflect their achievement.

Teachers can consider using the following strategies:

* planning open-ended questions to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge
* avoiding closed questions
* avoiding ‘leading’ questions. These are questions that suggest an answer.
* using alternatives to questions, such as statements, to encourage further discussion
* planning questions with reference to the specific features of the assessment design criteria
* being familiar with the content of the students’ work so that this can be used when planning questions
* being aware of the need to incorporate some ‘wait time’ during the discussion to allow students to formulate their responses
* providing students with questions before the discussion to allow for preparation and collection of evidence (this may not be applicable in all subjects. Refer to Subject Outlines for further details on assessment types).

### Open-ended questions or closed questions

The main differences between these types of questions are summarised in this table:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Closed questions | Open-ended questions |
| - can be answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’ | - require a longer response |
| - highlight facts | - focus on reflection and elaboration |
| - are able to be answered quickly and briefly | - give control over to the student |
| Examples | |
| *Did you find any similarities between the texts?* | *How are the texts related?* |
| *Was your research interesting?* | *What evidence did you find to support….?* |
| *Do you understand …..?* | *Explain….* |

One of the purposes of this type of assessment is to elicit discussion, elaboration, justification and analysis from the students. By using open-ended questions, students are given the chance to develop their ideas and higher order thinking processes are promoted.

Statements, using words such as *explain, categorise, compare* are also used to encourage extended student responses.

### Question types

There are a number of question types and words that are used to promote student participation, in–depth analysis and elaboration of answers (Bloom 1956; Anderson & Krathwohl 2001). These words are often present in open-ended questions.

Consider the following words and how they progress from lower to higher order thinking skills.



Designing questions that promote higher order thinking skills will demand more from the students than simple recollection. By choosing suitable question types and question words students have more opportunity to be successful in demonstrating their knowledge.

### Leading questions

Leading questions are often used to suggest or imply a specific answer. Using these types of questions in discussions can often suggest the correct answer or lead the student to a desired response. These types of questions or statements discourage students from providing an original and in-depth analysis of the topic, which may hinder them from addressing some of the specific features of the assessment design criteria.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Examples of leading questions | Examples of more suitable questions |
| *There are some similarities between the texts, aren’t there?* | *Compare the two texts. Describe the similarities between them.* |
| *Was it difficult to choose your research question?* | *Describe the process you went through in developing your research question.* |

### Wait time

Research has shown that increasing the wait time after questions assists in the production of these higher quality responses (Wilen 1991; Tobin 1987). Pausing and giving students the opportunity to collect their ideas and think of their answers may increase their ability to successfully address the criteria.

### Specific reference to the assessment design criteria

As these discussions are for the student to provide evidence of their learning, the questions chosen should be designed and aligned with the specific features of the assessment design criteria. The more transparent this is, the easier it is for the students to be successful. The following steps may be useful:

* unpacking the specific features of the assessment design criteria related to the discussion with the students
* relating the specific features of the assessment design criteria to the evidence you require from the students
* planning open-ended questions or statements that guide the students to discuss their learning and make specific reference to evidence collected
* providing students with a copy of these questions which can assist them in collecting evidence and making more explicit connections to this evidence in their discussion.

Examples:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ADC | Specific Features | Examples of related questions / statements | Student comments / evidence | Teacher comments |
| Planning | P1 Consideration and refinement of a research question | How did you decide upon….?  What did you already know about this?  Explain your progress from your initial topic to the narrower, more refined research question.  How has your research question changed? |  |  |
|  | P2 Planning of research processes that are appropriate to the research question. | List or categorise the different types of research you have done so far.  How would your progress be different if alternative research processes were used? |  |  |

(*Assessment Design Criteria* and *Specific Features* taken from *Research Project Subject Outline*)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ADC | Specific Features | Examples of related questions / statements | Student comments / evidence | Teacher comments |
| Analysis | An1 Analysis of the relationship between the purpose, structure, and language features of a range of texts. | Explain the similarities between the texts.  Identify the differences between the two texts. |  |  |
|  | An2 Location, recording, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of ideas, information, and opinions from a range of texts | List the different places you found information.  Compare the different sources – discuss the differences between some of the sources you used.  Which resources were the most / least helpful, and why? |  |  |

### (*Assessment Design Criteria* and *Specific Features* taken from *English as a Second Language Subject Outline*)

### Other resources

The following sites provide more information about developing questions for assessed discussions and questioning techniques.

<http://changingminds.org/techniques/questioning/socratic_questions.htm>

<http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=381755>

<http://www.decd.sa.gov.au/assessment/pages/assessmentstrategies/taxonomy/?reFlag=1>

<http://teachertools.londongt.org/index.php?page=questioningTechniques>

### References

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