

T1583 Key Skills: Communication Level 3 Sample Pages

W1583-1 Communication through Discussion.

Teaching note

Question:

What is the single simplest method of encouraging discussion amongst students and pupils?

Answer:

Shared learning.

Shared learning relates to any situation in which pupils work together in a co-operative rather than a competitive or individualistic learning environment. It is probably the most effective and efficient method of learning in the classroom that exists. At its heart is communication – pupils cannot work in a shared learning environment without being able to communicate. Even if they are poor at communicating to begin with they will become much better once they have experienced a few weeks of shared learning work.

In terms of problem solving it has been estimated that shared learning increases efficiency by around 100%. Put another way, if it takes one hour of chalk, talk and individual work from the text book to ensure that every pupil has fully grasped a point, it will take half an hour using shared learning. (This assumes the teacher is equally adept at teaching in both ways and the pupils equally used to both types of learning. Shared learning will not appear efficient first time around – pupils and teacher have to get used to it.)

Research has clearly shown that such work leads to higher motivation on the part of those involved, combined with greater in-depth learning and long-term memorisation of the topic.

As the pupils learn from each other they thus gain communication skills, leaning skills and social skills. The more social skills they gain, the better the communication and the higher the level of motivation. To this is added a greater enjoyment (it is more fun to work together than alone) and so the pupils learn more.

As a method of learning, shared learning has additional benefits in that it overcomes tendencies towards exclusion from the main group and enhances self-esteem. It becomes a mechanism for learning about each other and understanding each other's problems and weaknesses, as well as learning about the subject in hand. Thus, as communication powers grow so self-esteem can be increased and understanding expanded.

Of course not every pupil has the ability to work with others at first and the teacher must expect to expend some energy on helping pupils and students to work together. This is always worthwhile as co-operation invariably leads to improved learning on the part of all students.

Most teachers prefer to start shared learning in pairs with the pair moving straight away on to problem solving. Once the first problems have been solved then it is possible to move on to groups of three and later four. Most teachers find that they get dramatically improved results in terms of both communication skills and learning within a few days - often reporting that within two weeks, learning and retention can develop at twice the speed that might have been expected before. Some of this improvement can be put down to the side effect of group work and shared learning: pupils spend more time on task and far less time involved in or disturbed by disruptive behaviour. Some is due to the increased motivation and enjoyment. Some because the learning has to be active. Much is due to the enhancement of communication skills.

Some teachers argue that less able pupils and students need to be kept away from this sort of work. Sometimes it is argued that expecting an able student to work with a student functioning at a lower academic level slows down the able student. Others suggest the students simply feed false information to each other. However, research shows that this is not so. The main problems in this area come from:

- Parental prejudice and this needs to be faced calmly and explained.
- Expecting pupils and students to be able to co-operate immediately, after years of competitive learning and reminders that looking at each other's work is "cheating".

Some teachers express the view that their students and pupils are not able to join in shared learning experiences because of their social background or their particular behavioural difficulties.

However research again shows that normally most pupils are able to co-operate when they understand what they are expected to do. Just because pupils are working together does not mean that their work should be unstructured. Rather, at least in the early instances, they should be working within a tight structure.

We would say that it is unwise to give students and pupils two new experiences at once. If shared learning is new for the pupil, you should not give the experience of something else that is new at the same time. Instead, help them understand problem solving first, then work on a particular type of problem. Then introduce shared learning for the solution of that particular problem.

Where the shared learning leads to the investigation of a problem this is an ideal opportunity for one of the team to report back to other groups, and for groups to compare the results found. Thus the students communicate in undertaking the investigation, and then have to prepare a report which enables practice at a different form of communication skill.

Using this approach it is possible to get a complete class to work in small groups towards a common objective, with the aim being that everyone has huge amounts of communication practice without feeling that the work is artificial or irrelevant. Such projects can get 100% on the final tests at the end of the series of lessons. Thus the task of each pupil is not to learn individually, but to ensure that both the individual and the other members of the group all communicate and learn together.

In this environment students communicate, learn and co-operate because it is interesting and rewarding. Indeed, researchers are now coming to the conclusion that non-shared learning with its inevitable tests and league tables may hinder learning rather than support learning. Research widely reported in February 1998 confirmed the view we have been propagating for some years, that giving marks out of 10 and “gold stars” is a significant hindrance to learning. Certainly traditional competitive methods hinder communication, since the objective is to beat the “opposition” not “give your best ideas away.”

Overall the great benefit of shared learning is that it encourages the pupil to reflect upon the ways in which he or she can learn best. This reflection comes automatically as part of the discussion and problem solving which is at the heart of shared learning. The pupils thus reflect on themselves and the way they make sense of the world around them, something which greatly enhances their view and understanding of the world and of other people.

Above all, for shared learning to work it needs to be linked to a spirit of inquiry. The key questions which are to be discussed in each shared learning project should be:

- What exactly is the problem here?
- How do we solve this problem?
- What rule do we use here?
- What facts (plans, tables, data, etc.) are relevant?
- What examples can we find?
- Can we group the examples?
- How are we going to remember this?

Only with questions like this can the pupils merge the necessary reflection into the whole package.

Of course the students will need to be thoroughly supported by the teacher as they venture into the world of shared learning. The role of the teacher does not disappear, but becomes that of a friendly consultant, helping the pupils to communicate more effectively, disentangle problems and find solutions, helping the group process and ensuring that energy is directed to the most productive areas.

This is why shared learning should be a focal part of the Communication programme.

How to instigate a shared learning programme in your school or college.

The best way forward is to copy these pages on shared learning to colleagues in the school and ask them to try shared learning. Work together as a project team on shared learning and see where it takes you. Then in the communication sessions think about shared learning with the pupils and get them to reflect on just how well it is working.

If you are not able to work with colleagues on any type of shared learning project, you will have to work on the issue yourself. Take any topic that you think the students should know more about and use shared learning as a way of working on the theme. For example, many teachers use current affairs topics as a way of getting discussion going. What we would suggest is that the current affairs issues should be studied and appreciated by the students working first in a shared learning situation, so that they get to know what is happening, and how.

Shared learning requires practice by both teachers and students, and it requires time – it is not possible to introduce and conclude how well it has worked after just one session.

I do hope that whatever else you do in teaching communication skills you use shared learning.

There follow overleaf some typical shared learning questions which can be explored by two or more students irrespective of the subjects being studied.

1. Give the reasons why we should not bother to try to land people on Mars?
2. What is the value of sport? Should government money be used to encourage people to be active? Why?
3. Is there any value in raising the school leaving age?
4. The first thing we should learn at school is how to learn.
5. Everyone knows how to communicate. There is no point in studying the subject.
6. Marriage is old fashioned and outdated and usually ends in divorce and anger. People should be actively discouraged from getting married.
7. Most of our problems have been caused by industry. We would all be a lot better off without it.
8. It is the duty of the government to ensure that there are enough jobs for everyone who wants them.
9. People with aids should be kept apart from the rest of society for everyone else's safety.
10. National health service money should not be spent on helping anyone who gets cancer and who smokes.

Why bother to discuss?

Unless you live your life completely on your own, you will be involved in some sort of discussion. Discussion is part of being human. It is a basic part of living with other people. Anyone who does not enter into discussions is not living life properly.

Discussion is important to us all, because it helps us to live together in groups. You are probably a member of quite a few groups:

- Your family.
- Close friends at college or school with whom you choose to spend your time each day.
- Members of any club or group to which you belong.
- People who share an interest with you.
- People who spend their spare time in the same way as you.
- Your class at school or college.

There are many different types of discussion, and they often have different names.

- Sometimes the discussions are difficult – for example if members of the family disagree. These discussions can become arguments or rows.
- Sometimes the discussions are organised for you – for example in your class, where you might be encouraged to debate a particular subject or topic as part of the lesson. In this case the activity is probably called a debate.
- Sometimes the discussion is very relaxed and friendly, without any formal rules. Everyone joining in talks because they want to be there and because the other people present are happy for them to join in. In this case the discussion is probably called a chat. Sometimes it is called “gossip” - especially if you are talking about another person who isn't there.

But why do we do all this talking?

1. Expressing ourselves as individuals

One main reason is that it is a way of saying who we are – of expressing ourselves as individuals. When we talk we often say something about ourselves, about what we think is important, about our points of view. This is a very important part of keeping up our self-esteem. If I cannot feel that I am important and that I have an identity then it is very hard for me to believe in myself. If I stop believing that I am important – at least within my own world – then my self-esteem goes down, and I will not only feel bad about myself, but about all aspects of my life.

- **Activity 1:** Working with one other person from your class find out a little more about self-esteem, why some people have more and some people have less. You can probably find information in the library, or on the internet, or on a CD. When you have finished your research you should be able to say how people get self esteem. How is it possible to lose self esteem? How high is your self esteem? How high is the self esteem of your friend? What event could raise your self esteem?

When you have found out about self-esteem and discussed the answers to these questions with your partner in this exercise one of you should explain your views briefly to the rest of the group or to one other partnership.

Discussion helps us to survive and helps each of us to be more of a person. Because this is such an advantage to survival most people find discussion fun. (It is important that things that help us survive in life are fun, otherwise we might not do them, and so our chances of survival would decline.)

Of course we don't like all discussions. We probably don't like it when the family has a row. We don't enjoy a parent saying, "I don't want you seeing that boy again," and we don't enjoy being told yet again to come home by a certain time on Saturday night.

And if something goes very wrong we don't enjoy being asked to talk about the theft, or the damage or some other crime with a police officer or juvenile liaison officer, or someone from social services. It may be that the other person wants a discussion, but we know this particular discussion is not going to be fun.

- **Activity 2:** Work with a friend from your group and consider this question. If arguments at home are no fun, why do we have them? What is the best way to stop them – or at least make them shorter?

When we are together with a group of friends, with interests in common, and we are just chatting together about our mates, about TV programmes, about football, about music, about boys, about girls, or about anything else we are interested in, it is fun. We want to do it, and given the chance most of us would probably try to do it more often.

Of course sometimes discussions – even chats with friends - go wrong. One person might start to dominate the group or start putting forward ideas that no one else wants to listen to. This person might start talking about another friend in a nasty way. He or she might try to put down another member of the group. Someone might express racist views in a group where this is not welcome.

If the group of friends has been together for a long time, then the group might put up with this for a while. But sometimes people involved in the chat will tell this person to "shut up". If the pressure of the group is strong enough, that person will then be forced out.

What this shows us is that all discussions have rules. These rules will probably never be