



DOUG LEMOV'S FIELD NOTES

Reflections on teaching, literacy, coaching, and practice.

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05.16.14 RUE RATRAY ON PURPOSEFUL DISCUSSIONS- PT. 1



Rue Ratray is an teacher I truly admire. Watching his lessons at Edward Brooke East Boston this year has been a revelation- the craft of teaching intentionally applied with the constant goal of building rigor. He's featured in some previous posts [here](#) and [here](#).

Rue's classroom is particularly noteworthy for the rigor and discipline of his discussions. A few days ago he sent me an email... he'd been working on something about discussions. Would I read it? I would, I did and it was

pretty amazing. I asked if I could post it here. Interestingly it aligns closely to the new chapter on discussions from TLAC 2.0- though Rue's version is arguably better written. I find it incredibly useful and insightful... right from the start where he asks start their why discuss things in the first place. I offer part 1 to you here. I'm posting because it's long but absolutely worth the read. Save it for this weekend if you need to, brew up a cup of Sunday morning coffee and ensconce yourself.

Rue Ratray on Purposeful Discussions--

Back in the day, I was under the very false impression that I was leading some amazing discussions in my class. They were at least amazing in length. It was not uncommon to see me spend FIFTY minutes on some godforsaken discussion of Ralph and Piggy. Kids would ask, politely, "Um, Mr. Ratray, might we be doing *anything* other than talking today?" With the amount of confidence that only be forged from deep reserves of ineptitude and ignorance, I would point my finger at them and say, "Why no!" Those poor children.

It wasn't like I was trying to be a terrible teacher. There was a ton of work being done in those discussions. Unfortunately, most of it was by me. I rephrased every answer, answered every interesting but unrelated question, told anecdotes, did a little stand up, and, and this is the worst part, after we talked and talked and talked about some question, at the end of the discussion, we would do....nothing. All of that talk simply for sake of talking.

Why are we talking?

I decided to watch other people who had effective discussions, and I started noticing a pattern in effective discussions:

The most effective discussions were based upon a few, simple, powerful ideas.

When I asked teachers how they got their discussions to be so effective, what they told me was, "I have a vision in my head of what the discussion should look like. Then I insist that it happens by doing a few, simple things again, and again. No exceptions." Wait, what, you can *insist* on things? That was a revelation.

So I started with a vision of my perfect discussion. It would only be as long as it needed to be. It would make their work better. It wouldn't be derailed by crazy answers. And the kids would do

Welcome to Field Notes. I've named this blog to emphasize the idea that just about everything in my books is someone else's brilliant idea. My idea was just to write it down. I like the role of the observer and think there's a lot of power in it. Think about it—there isn't a problem in teaching or learning that someone somewhere hasn't solved. We just need to find them and take some field notes. So, join me here for discussion and observations related to *Teach Like a Champion*, *Practice Perfect*, and whatever else fits under the banner of teaching and practice.

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all the work. They'd push on answers that were good but not answering the question, they'd identify wrong answers and push each other to correct them, and they'd always push each other back to the text. That was my dream. So I set out to figure out how to make it real.

The more I kept thinking about all of the discussions I was watching, I kept coming back to a question it took me forever to answer. And my discussions didn't become more effective until I did. The question was: Why have a discussion?

I'm not anti-social or anything. I like talking to people. But in class, really, why are we having a discussion? Why is that the best use of that piece of time? For me as a reading teacher, a more refined version of the question was, "Why is discussing this better than writing about it?" But I would argue that it holds true for any subject. Why talk about a math problem rather than do more math problems? Why talk about the experiment rather than write about the experiment?

To me, the right answer is that if I have judged the rigor of a task correctly, kids can get a partially correct answer on their own, but need a little help to get all the way there. A discussion, using the right routines and procedures, can serve as that help. That's the only reason we talk. For anything else, we write.

And yes, there are wrong answers. To me, "Sometimes they just need to talk it out!" is a wrong answer. I mean, yes, critical listening and speaking skills need to be developed, and that's only going to happen if kids practice. But when I see a class talking something out, I immediately ask myself two things:

- How does the teacher know everyone is listening?
- How does this discussion improve *everyone's* thinking more sound?

I think that if you can't answer those questions quickly, you are probably dealing with a wrong answer. You're probably saying to yourself, "Okay Ratray, if that's the case, can *you* answer those questions?" Yup. Well, for the most part. That's what the rest of this document is. Everything starts with four sentences.

The Four Horsemen^[1] of Purposeful Discussion

When you watch the video of my terrible discussions, a few things are apparent right away:

- No one listened to one another.
- People talked about and around the question, rather than answering it.
- Wrong answers were aired and no one said anything.
- People used opinions, not evidence to defend their thinking.

And of course, all of the heavy lifting was on me. So I got lots and lots of practice thinking about the text. And kids got almost none.

So remember, we said before that we could insist on things. So I began to insist that people did four things. I insisted that kids...

- REALLY listened to each other
- REALLY answered the question asked
- REALLY called wrong answers out
- REALLY used supporting evidence.

All of the "REALLYs" are there because the fake versions of these things can look a lot like the real deal. Most kids have had tons of practice just thinking about their own answer when others are speaking, answering the question THEY want to answer, ignoring wrong answers, and conflating what they think with what the text says. You're going to have to run a pretty tight ship to build some air tight new habits. But it can be done. If I did it, *anyone* can do it. But only if you make the Four Horsemen automatic and mandatory. And they have to come from the class, not from you. That's the heavy-lifting-on-them part. Here they are:

- "What did they say?"
- "Are you answering the question?"
- "That's wrong."
- "Prove it."

A little (a lot) more on each of these...

"What did they say?" – The first thing that you need to insist upon is that everyone listens to one another. Just because they're tracking doesn't mean they're listening. Just because their hand is up, it doesn't mean they're listening. Even if they are doing everything that would make you think they're listening, it doesn't mean they are. So the first step is to get people to start revoicing the previous speaker before they get to talk. In action it looks something like this:

Kid speaks, immediately revoices – Awesome! This isn't going to happen much at the beginning. You're going to get a ton of this...

Kid speaks, doesn't revoice. Okay. What now?

IMMEDIATELY intervene and ask, "What did they say?" One of three things will happen.

1. They will accurately revoice. Awesome! Praise them and let them continue!
2. They say something that is sort of related to what was said, but isn't what you wanted. Don't take sort of. Immediately deliver a logical consequence and move on. Go back to them later and let them try again.
3. They say... nothing. They will sit there and just hope that the words will magically appear to

3. They say....nothing. They will sit there and just hope that the words will magically appear to save them. They won't. What will happen is that the class will grind to a halt because our friend wasn't listening. Nope. Give them one second, say, "You need to be listening." Then deliver the consequence and move on.^[2]

Once you get this routine down, you have won a major victory and some cool things will start happening. Some things that make the breaking in process go smoother and quicker...

- When you let kids off the hook, you undermine hours or maybe days of work. You also undermine your authority. Never do it. They have to do this every single time.
- Cold call early and often.
- Warm call kids who are having a hard time with this. Some kids have a harder time with this than others, so modify by warm calling.^[3]
- Maintain standards for strong voice. If I can't hear, I can't revoice.
- No phone-a-friend. It's just opting out with a fun name^[4].
- Most importantly, lead with the positive. Yes, give demerits for whatever you do for non-compliance. But the specific praise will get this done waaaaay more effectively.

"Are you answering the question?" – Once you have everyone listening to one another, the next step is to get the class to hold itself accountable for answering the question. This one is trickier, but super powerful once you get it established. I use a good old I-We-You for this one. So someone is gives an answer that's related to the question, but not answering it. Here's an example:

Teacher: When Lois Lowry writes, "They know nothing," The Giver said bitterly^[5], "what are we supposed to infer about how The Giver feels about the Elders?"

Student: Well, I know that The Giver sometimes gives advice to The Elders, so I think we can infer that he respects them.

Hey! No fair! My question was asking you to closely read that sentence and key off the word bitterly to infer. You went and said something that was true and related to the question, but didn't answer it. Come on!

I used to get this all the time and say something like, "Interesting!" when I meant, "No." Or I'd say, "Sort of", which is the most useless thing anyone could ever say to anyone about anything. Is my house on fire? Is today the end of the world? Will I ever find true love? Sort of.

What I should have said was, "Did you answer my question?" I think it's slightly more rigorous than, "Answer the question", especially if you occasionally ask it after they DO answer your question.

So I'd start by asking, "Did you answer my question?" every time they don't. You will get people who confess and sheepishly say, "No". But you'll also get people who say, "Yes! Yes I did!" There is no one strategy that I can tell you about to best deal with. It's too tied to the question asked and the wrong answer they give and content and all that. But I will say that doing a close reading of the question usually does the trick, especially if they can see the question.

The next step is to start to transfer this question to the class. Remember, the goal is for them to note when their classmates are not answering the question and force them to answer the actual question asked. So now, transfer the question to the class. This can be done either publicly or privately. This is what both versions would look like:

PUBLIC

- *Someone dodges the question*
- YOU: Hey wait! Did that answer the question?
- *Another kid shakes head no*
- YOU (to the no kid): Make them do it!
- NO KID: How?
- YOU: Ask them the question!

PRIVATE

- *As someone dodges the question*
- YOU (quietly to someone who generally knows what's up): Hey, are they answering the question?
- KID: Nope.
- YOU: Make them.
- KID: How?
- YOU: Ask the question.

This usually starts to happen pretty quickly. Kids LOVE calling their classmates out. They generally just need to be given the language and most importantly, the permission to do it. Once they have both of those, you are generally good to go.

"That's wrong." – This is much less something you say, but an idea you normalize and something you train kids to identify and correct. So, you've got them listening to each other and listening to whether or not people are answering the question. Now, what about all those wrong answers kids have been giving? Maybe up to this point you were asking these great questions that kids were actually answering, but they were giving you these crazy answers that you weren't expecting that just completely derailed everything. At least that's what always happened to me. Someone would say something random and I would panic and freeze. If you could see inside my brain, you'd see all of the following racing around my brain:

brain, you'd see all of the following racing around my brain...

- Where did that come from?
- WHY did they have to say that NOW?
- Why did they have to say that when my principal/coach/the 400 people from Achievement First were in the room?
- What do I do now?
- Should I just tell them the answer?
- Should I try to fix their thinking? It was such a disaster last time...
- Maybe I should try and escape out the window and pretend it's part of a fire drill...

All the while I just stood there, frozen and panic stricken while I tried to convince the principal and the coach and the 400 people from Achievement First that this was actually just really, really effectively wait time. Not panic! Strategy!

The whole time, I just wished I had known I was getting a wrong answer. Because they can be really useful used properly and purposefully. But that rarely happens when they show up unexpectedly. So the first part of "That's wrong" is to manage the following about wrong answers:

- Their content
- Their frequency
- The order in which they appear

Remember, the end goal is for kids to be running most of these discussions. They can manage wrong answers. But not as well as you or as many as you. So the wrong answers the class will work with need to be managed by you BEFORE the discussion happens. So here's a procedure that works...

- Look at their work
- Figure out who's right, wrong, and WRONG
- Decide who to call on ahead of time
- Write it down. I write in on a seating chart, but the classwork works, too.^[6]

It only took me more than a decade of teaching to figure this complicated system out. No seriously, it took that long. Remember the insisting business from before? I realized that I could insist on not getting jumped by wrong answers I didn't want. A lot of times in life it's just the deciding that's hard.

Again, the finer details of the number of right vs. wrong answers, the order, etc. is too tied to content/task/context/grade to get into here. But there's one idea that's central: vary your pattern. If you always start with a wrong answer, kids will figure that out in a hurry.

So now, they're listening to one another, they're holding each other accountable for answering the question, and we have control of which wrong answers we're getting. This is progress! The idea of being wrong is being normalized and most importantly, kids are watching you and learning how to fix up a wrong answer. That's important because now we're going to hand the processing of those wrong answers to the class.

Go and re-read "No Opt Out" and "Right is Right"^[7]. Notice that those are the first two techniques in the taxonomy? I don't think that's an accident. They're that important. They're so important that you are going to teach them to your class.

How you fix wrong answers varies from person to person and content to content and so on, so we won't get into the details of that here. Here's how I would coach kids to fix each other's thinking.

This would happen right before the discussion started. State, "So when somebody gives a wrong answer, I usually fix up their thinking. But that really should be your responsibility. So today, you get to do it. Let's practice a little bit before our discussion."

Call on a solid citizen and have them come to the front of the room. Or pretend to call on them. This whole exercise has been engineered (that's okay – see below) so they already have a pretty tough question prepared. So the kid, not you, says the question, and then has them turn and talk. It's a rigorous question so there's a good chance there will be wrong answers. But just in case, you've engineered a wrong answer. Coach the kid to circulate and script (just like you did above) and then they say, "Come back in 3...2...1." They cold call, but they already know what they're getting. When you met before, you talked through different ways to deal with wrong answers. So at this point, they're basically executing a script you gave them.

Then you say, "That's what it looks like. Let's practice in a ten minute discussion." I would split the class, so half are talking and half are note taking on how the wrong answers are dealt with.^[8] Frame whatever the discussion is about and start them. It's up to you if you just let them go or coach them through it. So if they don't deal with wrong answer properly or at all, you'd stop them and do it again. They will pick this up waaaaay faster if you coach them through it. And there will be wrong answers. You engineered a very wrong and a very subtly wrong answer beforehand, to the point that you called them when to bring it up ("Say this random thing three minutes into the discussion, okay?). I would record the whole thing and watch the parts where they did a great job fixing the wrong answers and parts where it didn't work at all. And I mean watch it with the class, analyze it, and re-run those parts immediately.^[9]

This will take some time. Think evolution, not combustion. But they will get better at this, especially if...

- You praise specifically a ton.
- You practice it a little bit every day (or as much as you can)

- You practice it a little bit every day (or as much as you can).
- You are super prepared so you know how to best deal with wrong answers, so you can model that for them.

You might be saying to yourself, “This certainly seems like a lot of time and effort. Is it worth it?” Well first, it is a lot of effort, but it’s not actually that much time. What I described above is, what, fifteen minutes? Maybe thirty with the video analysis? It is a lot of work, but think about what you get in return: A class where usually, everyone listens to each other, where everyone is held responsible by their peers to answer the posed question, and where the heavy lifting of identifying, analyzing, and correcting wrong answers is put onto the class, not the teacher. I’ll take that for 30 minutes a day.

“Prove it” – By this point, true progress has been made. The amount of thinking required to hang in a discussion in your class has gone through the roof. Now to add one more layer to make the discussions in your class even more rigorous: Prove it.

Full disclosure: I’m pretty sure that this works much better in reading, history, and science classes than in math class, at least until you get to proofs or something. “Prove it” works a lot better when you are arguing and pretty terribly when there are right and wrong answers. Look, I used to be a calculus major at one point, but that was a long time ago and I’m a pretty die hard middle school reading guy at this point. So if you teach math and you’re like, “Ummmmm”, just know I agree. Also, I am probably wrong about this.

I don’t think we need to talk anymore about how you get kids to do this. To be honest, it’s probably just going to start happening on it’s own. But to get to 100%, you’re going to have to coach them, but you already know how to do that. Also, it’s not that complicated at all. Basically, it’s just, “Show me where it says what you claim in the text and explain how it supports your claim”. Over and over again. That’s not complicated. It’s just hard work. So rather than be repetitive, here are some general principles that might help:

- Keep the text very limited at first. You can have a very rigorous discussion about a single sentence.
- Make sure that they can see the text.
- Use a procedure to make sure everyone is tracking the proper spot in the text. “Put your finger on the spot” works great for this.
- Praise specifically and effusively when warranted. Positive beats negative every time.

A note about regression...

It’s going to happen. They’ll make progress in one area and then slip in one that had been solid. Go back and fix it up before moving on. It won’t take long if you get on it early. Then continue forward. But if you let it go for awhile, one day someone will raise their hand and say, “Remember when we used to revoice people’s thinking before we spoke?” And then there’s lots of confused faces. This has happened to me on multiple occasions when I let things slack for awhile, so get after even small amounts of regression right away.

A note about rigor...

Nothing described in this document will work if the Target Task is too far over rigor. It will work if it is below rigor, it will just be really boring. But if text or the questions around it are just too hard, you will get wrong answers that no one, not even you can fix. And it’s going to happen. We all want our lessons to be rigorous so we’re going to go over rigor from time to time But any discussion related to that Target Task will fall apart. That’s life. But in your post-mortem^[10], try and figure out whether there’s some problem with a discussion strategy or if what they were doing was just too hard.

^[1] I had to go with either “The Four Horsemen” or “The Fantastic Four”. I’m pretty sure MTR likes me better than Marvel Comics in case there was some sort of a lawsuit, so I went with the Horsemen!

^[2] Check your IEPs. You might have some kids who have modifications that require more wait time.

^[3] Like me. I have a really hard time with this, even when trying. So don’t confuse ignorance with defiance.

^[4] It’s a dumb name, if you ask me. There. I said it.

^[5] He’s actually bitter about Taylor Swift.

^[6] I don’t do this for everything. For Pepper questions, they just roll, since they tend to get a majority of them right anyway, and the only feedback I’m giving in “Yes” and “No”.

^[7] Did you just ask, “Where? In what?” Not serious questions.

^[8] I always split the class for discussions. More below.

^[9] If you know who Irene is and know that Irene is a bad thing, this all may sound very familiar.


^[10] I’ve found they’re most effective when you do them with your class right after the disaster ends. Even better, in the middle before it gets too bad...

ONE RESPONSE TO "RUE RATRAY ON PURPOSEFUL DISCUSSIONS- PT. 1"

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