



Haroutunian-Gordon, S. (2014). *Interpretive discussion: Engaging students in text-based conversations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

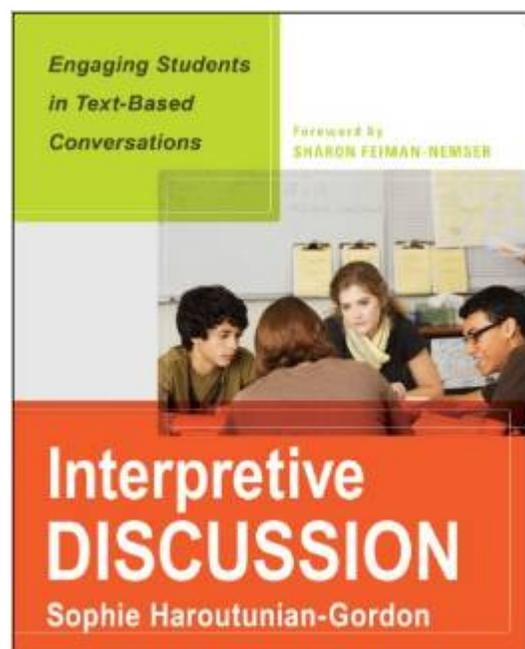
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How can teachers engage students with texts, helping them move beyond preexisting ideas, generate their own accounts and explore competing arguments and evidence? Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon advocates “interpretive discussion,” a method through which teachers can engage students in discussion of contestable issues that foster sustained dialogue. She describes how teachers can pose questions that have more than one plausible answer, then involve students in conversations that explore the alternatives and supporting evidence. Students and teachers who learn this way become disposed to ask good questions, listen carefully, provide evidence to support their claims, and remain open to new possibilities.

Haroutunian-Gordon has been exploring discussion as a teaching method for several decades – doing empirical research on classroom conversation, developing a sophisticated, dialogue-based philosophical position on teaching and learning, working with teachers to help them develop discussion-leading skills, and building guidelines and curriculum materials as tools for practitioners (e.g., Haroutunian-Gordon, 1991; 2003; 2007; 2009).



No one knows more about discussion-based pedagogy, and no one is better positioned to articulate a comprehensive account of discussion. *Interpretive Discussion: Engaging Students in Text-Based Conversations* represents a culmination of her work on this topic, articulating a clear process and rationale for the method of “interpretive discussion” that she has been developing across her career. The book provides annotated examples and detailed guidelines for teachers planning to use discussion as a pedagogical approach, and it will be useful for K-12 educators as well as those of us in higher education who would like to improve our discussion-leading skills. The book is very accessible, but it nonetheless benefits from the extensive empirical and theoretical work that Haroutunian-Gordon has done on the topic.

At least since Dewey (1902/1990) wrote his essay “The child and the curriculum,” educators have been torn between teaching students the important knowledge and skills that adults have selected for the curriculum and engaging students by allowing them to pursue topics of personal interest. Dewey has often been misread as advocating the latter and not the former, but in fact he argued that learners can be engaged with learning the curriculum if educators adopt appropriate pedagogies. Haroutunian-Gordon shows how questioning and discussion can allow teachers to solve the conundrum of the child and the curriculum, simultaneously engaging students and directing their attention toward topics that teachers consider important. Interpretive discussion can accomplish this because questions are both open and directive. By their nature questions remain open to an answer, to the active participation of the learner. But they also direct the learner’s attention toward some topic and use framing concepts. Asking good questions can thus genuinely engage students with topics from the curriculum.

In *Interpretive Discussion: Engaging Students in Text-Based Conversations*, Haroutunian-Gordon provides annotated examples and step-by-step guidelines for preparing, leading, and reflecting on question-based interpretive discussion. She first argues that teaching through discussion requires

subject matter that will support dialogue. Unambiguous subject matter with one correct interpretation is better taught didactically, because known-answer questions cannot sustain a conversation. After choosing the text for discussion, the teacher identifies a “basic question,” something he or she would like to know and is unsure about. This and all other questions must be genuine. They cannot be answerable simply by determining the facts. They cannot be evaluative questions, with answers depending on matters of taste or belief. They must be what Haroutunian-Gordon calls “interpretive questions,” which have more than one plausible answer because evidence exists to support various accounts. The teacher might prefer one answer, but he or she must find alternative answers plausible and must present the question such that it can be answered in more than one way. After identifying a basic question, the teacher develops a “cluster” of supporting interpretive questions. Answering each of these questions will help answer the basic question. In leading the discussion itself, the teacher opens with the basic question. When students offer answers, the teacher encourages them to defend and expand their answers with appropriate supporting questions from the cluster. These questions often direct students to a passage in the text and ask them to explain evidence. If students do not offer alternative interpretations or raise counter-evidence, the teacher models these behaviors for them. After the discussion, Haroutunian-Gordon describes how the teacher can reflect on the discussion and prepare for subsequent work with the students.

As Haroutunian-Gordon describes in her 1991 book *Turning the Soul*, interpretive discussion goes back at least to Socrates. In the earlier Platonic dialogues, Socrates addresses questions with no established answer – about the nature of knowledge, virtue, beauty, and the like – and explores them through open-ended conversation.

Haroutunian-Gordon shows that this pedagogical technique can be useful when teaching a wide range of texts and more established knowledge as well. Teaching through discussion requires teachers to remain open, listening to students and

expecting new insights into familiar topics. This disposition toward openness, toward careful listening, is an important outcome of interpretive discussion. In addition to learning about the subject matter, students and teachers become more disposed to consider alternative positions, listen carefully for new information, and support their arguments with evidence. Once students realize that no answer is obviously correct, and that the teacher is not hoping for a preferred answer, they are generally motivated to explore the text more deeply. With a genuine question for which the teacher lacks a correct answer, it is easier for students to remain open and consider new information. This leads to richer conversations and deeper learning. While leading discussion, the teacher also models intellectual inquiry, the articulation of arguments and the use of evidence. By asking students how their accounts can explain evidence from the text, the teacher encourages them to build strong arguments, listen to alternative positions, and consider both supporting and contradictory evidence.

In *Interpretive Discussion: Engaging Students in Text-Based Conversations*, Haroutunian-Gordon provides a clear, systematic and compelling set of guidelines for teaching through interpretive discussion. Teachers at all levels should welcome this book and take advantage of it to develop their skill at this crucial pedagogy.

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Dr. Wortham has written widely on classroom discourse and the linguistic anthropology of education. He has been a Spencer Foundation Dissertation Fellow and a National Academy of Education Postdoctoral Fellow. He serves on the editorial boards of *Theory & Psychology*, *American Educational Research Journal*, *Linguistics & Education*, *Mind, Culture & Activity*, *Critical Discourse Studies*, *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, *Discourse Processes*, *Pedagogies, Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, *Discourse, Context and Media* and *American Anthropologist*. In 1997, he was awarded the first annual Maine Campus Compact Faculty Service-Learning Award. In 2001, he received the American Educational Research Association Cattell Early Career Award for Programmatic Research. In 2008 he was named a W.T. Grant Foundation Distinguished Fellow, and in 2009, an American Educational Research Association Fellow.



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