Toward a Grammar of Discussion

Tom Gally

> Without an art, without some simple system of rules, gathered from experience of such contingencies as are most likely to mislead the practice, when left to its own guidance, no act of man nor effort accomplishes its purposes in perfection. ... Endless are the purposes of man, merely festal or merely comic, and aiming but at the momentary life of a cloud, which have earned for themselves the distinction and apparatus of a separate art. Yet for conversation, the great paramount purpose of social meetings, no art exists or has been attempted.
>
> — Thomas De Quincey, "The Art of Conversation" (1863, pp. 150–151)

Discussions play an essential role in many areas of human endeavor. Whether the people holding a discussion are university students preparing for a group presentation to their class, businesspeople planning the design of a new product, or physicians trying to diagnose a previously unidentified illness, the success of their presentation, product, or diagnosis often hinges on the success of their discussion. Yet not all discussions are successful. As anyone who has participated in serious discussions knows, some discussions are focused and productive, resulting in knowledge, ideas, and decisions that were not known before the discussions began, while others collapse into repetitive and inconclusive meandering, off-topic chatting, or unresolved disagreements. If the quality of discussions could be improved—that is, if more discussions could be guided to fruitful conclusions—then more ventures that depend on discussion would succeed as well.

The purpose of this paper is to survey past and current thinking on the purposes and preferred forms of discussion and to propose a novel approach to making discussions more effective. The brief survey of past writing might be interesting in its own right from the perspective of intellectual and social history, and the proposed approach might make a small contribution to the theoretical understanding of human discourse. However, the ultimate goal of this study is practical. The author hopes that, through a clearer understanding of how good discussions come about, better methods for teaching people how to participate in discussions more effectively can be developed and applied.

Discussion Defined

The subject of this paper shall be defined as follows:

> A discussion is a goal-oriented conversation on a serious topic among a small group of people.

In this definition, "conversation" is used in its most traditional sense: "The spoken exchange of thoughts, opinions, and feelings; talk" (American Heritage Dictionary, 2006). While discussion-like exchanges can take place in writing, such as in e-mail correspondence, the letters columns of magazines, or online forums, here we will focus on oral conversations that take place in real time, either in person or using a communications system such as the telephone or videoconferencing. The reason for excluding exchanges in which significant time lags are allowed between individual contributions is that there is a qualitative difference between situations in which participants have time to ponder, draft, and revise their contributions before presenting them to others and situations in which there is little time to think. It is precisely the lack of such time lags in real-time spoken exchanges that causes many discussions to fail. On the other hand, real-time discussions, through their spontaneity, have at least the potential to yield serendipitous results that might not emerge from more deliberate exchanges.

This restriction of discussions to real-time conversation entails that the number of participants be fairly small. Real-time goal-oriented conversations on serious topics do take place among large groups of people, such as during parliamentary debates. Such conversations, however, are qualitatively different from smaller discussions: many or most of the speeches are prepared in advance and their conclusions are often foregone, and thus little new knowledge and few ideas are generated through the debates themselves. A less formal conversation among a large group of people, assuming that all members of the group take active part, is rarely able to cover enough ground while maintaining sufficient focus for new conclusions to be reached before either the meeting ends or fatigue sets in. Furthermore, the larger the group, the more likely it is that there will be a domineering member or two with fixed ideas and an unwillingness to listen or compromise who hijack or sidetrack the discussion. In contrast, spontaneous conversations among small groups—with "small" ranging from two people to perhaps fifteen or twenty—do have the potential of leading to insights and decisions that could not have been anticipated before the conversations began.

A discussion as defined here must be goal-oriented and on a serious topic in order to distinguish discussions from informal social conversations. In the nineteenth century and earlier, before the dawn of telecommunications, the quality of social conversation was a subject of much interest, as most human interaction took place through in-person talking. Among the middle and upper classes in Britain and the United States, a person's skill in talking at the dinner table and in the parlor played a large role in determining that person's social success, and the "art of conversation" was the subject of many books and essays. In one such work, *The Art of Conversation with Directions for Self Education*, published in New York in 1868 and attributed to the journalist, humorist, and folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland, the topics covered include using "correct" language and avoiding slang, shunning gossip and sarcasm, being a good listener, paying compliments skillfully, not talking about oneself, and avoiding arguments and disagreeable subjects. Another work, *The Principles of the Art of Conversation* by J. P. Mahaffy (1887), makes similar

points about how a speaker talks, including the avoidance of strong local accents and the "meaningless repetition of catchwords and phrases" (p. 19). In both of these works, and in others such as *The Rhetoric of Conversation: Or, Bridles and Spurs for the Management of the Tongue* by George Winfred Hervey (1853), *Conversation; Its Faults and Its Graces* compiled by Andrew P. Peabody (1856), and *The Man Who Pleases and the Woman Who Charms* by John A. Cone (1901), the goal was to enable the reader, through skilled conversation, to be better liked and respected by others. The content of the conversation, aside from the avoidance of unpleasant topics, and the issue of whether the conversation accomplished anything beyond its social functions, was of little importance. While the advice given in such books would, with some updating and changes in emphasis, no doubt be useful to people today who wish to succeed in friendships and careers, such personal success is not the goal of discussion as considered here.

Discussion must also be contrasted with debate. In the short book *Organized Discussion* (1945?), which aims to show how "a satisfactory decision can be reached by what is known as the 'Discussion Group' method" because "[i]t is one of the basic principles of democracy that decisions are reached by discussion and consequent agreement" (p. 3), J. Windsor Musson makes the following remarks about

> ... the difference between the discussion and the debate. The main difference is that the latter is marked by great formality. The subject is supported by a Proposer and Seconder, and opposed by two speakers. The very atmosphere of formality often tends to discourage what is essential, namely, a steady flow of speakers. ... Controversy is essential to the debate, while this is not the case for all discussions. They may concern themselves with the attempt to discover more about a subject by the pooling of information. (p. 9)

While Musson does not exclude disagreement as an element of discussion, it is, as he points out, not discussion's main purpose. But neither is total agreement. In fact, the prodemocracy motivation for Musson's book seems to have been resistance to totalitarianism, for he presumably had Nazi Germany and perhaps the Soviet Union in mind when he wrote that "a nation used to arriving at decisions by discussion and agreement will never willingly allow itself to be dragooned into registering approval of someone else's opinion by blind unthinking acceptance" (p. 3). Disagreement is necessary to democracy and thus unavoidable in democratic discussions, but those discussions, and the democratic process itself, are intended to move toward consensus and at least a partial resolution of disputes, unlike debates, which are a celebration of disagreement.

A similar political motivation was behind a book published more than two decades earlier, *Joining in Public Discussion: A Study of Effective Speechmaking for Members of Labor Unions, Conferences, Forums, and Other Discussion Groups* by Alfred Dwight Sheffield (1922). As the title suggests, the book was aimed at "working men and women," whose "unused talents" were being wasted, Sheffield thought (p. v). "Thousands of men and women," he wrote, "are sitting silent in labor meetings who, with a little training, would find their voices and their true rôles as contributors to labor's counsels" (p. vi). Like Musson, he saw the goal of such discussions as being not the victory of the majority but a consensus in which opposing ideas are brought into harmony, with contributions by the minority as well (pp. ix–x).

While Musson's and Sheffield's aim to improve discussion skills in order to foster greater political participation is somewhat different from the educational motivation behind the current study, the author would be pleased if the suggestions herein might, at some time in the future, offer even a little support to the improved functioning of the democratic process as well.

Discussion and Education

The inspiration for this paper was a project begun in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Tokyo in 2008 to develop a program for fostering students' discussion skills (Komaba Organization for Educational Excellence, 2010). The impetus for that project, which was funded by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, was surveys that had been conducted of students finishing the two-year liberal arts program required of all incoming undergraduates at the university. When asked to rate the extent to which they had acquired certain types of knowledge and skills, the students gave the highest ranking to academic knowledge, with 77% of the respondents stating that they had acquired either "a lot" or "some"; similarly, 67.8% of the students said they had acquired the ability to think logically and analytically, and about half reported acquiring the abilities to express their own knowledge and ideas, to identify and solve problems, and to act autonomously. In contrast, only 22.3% reported that their ability to hold discussions with others had improved, and a mere 3.8% stated that their discussion skills had improved by a large amount. This low result led the university to begin investigating ways in which discussion could be incorporated more actively in lower-division classes and other educational programs.

Awareness of the importance of discussion in education, of course, is not new. The dialogues of Plato and the *Analects* of Confucius are, in addition to works of philosophy, the records of a teacher's discussions with his students, with the learning acquired at least in part through the dialogic process. In his essay titled "The Art of Conversation" (1863), Thomas De Quincey encapsulated this educational value of discussion: "Social discussion supplies the natural integration for the deficiencies of private and sequestered study. Simply to rehearse, simply to express in words amongst familiar friends, one's own intellectual perplexities, is oftentimes to clear them up" (p. 165). In the 20th century in the United States, inspired again by the desire to "introduc[e] democratic principles into the educational process," many efforts were made to adopt more group work and other discussion activities in the classroom (Hill, 1962 and 1969, p. 14). More recently, Polycarp Ikuenobe (2002) has emphasized the importance of group discussions to the fostering of critical thinking, stating that "evaluating a belief in the context of having a substantial amount of available evidence in a social group is important for determining whether one thinks critically" (p. 372). Sharples (2005) goes so far as to call learning itself "conversation in context" (p. 2). Many educated adults, upon retrospection and introspection, are likely to realize that they recall more from the discussions they took part in years or decades earlier than they can from the books they read or the lectures they heard during the same period of their lives, and they will probably thus agree with such assertions about the powerful impact of discussions on learning.

There are many barriers, however, to the effective use of discussion in education, ranging from the

trivial to the profound. On the Komaba Campus of the University of Tokyo, many classrooms, including not only large lecture halls but also rooms that can hold no more than about forty students, have had desks and chairs fixed to the floor in closely packed parallel rows facing the front of the room, making it difficult for students to move around the classroom during class or even to face each other when working in small groups.[1] At many universities, budget restrictions often require that a large number of students be taught by a single teacher, making it difficult logistically to incorporate discussion in the classroom. Furthermore, curricula often require that a certain amount of material be covered and tested in a course, and in-class discussions can thwart such plans because of their time requirements and unpredictability. In some cases, teachers may dislike involving their students in discussions because, by giving class time to inexpert students, the use of discussion seems to call into question the teachers' own authority; some students, meanwhile, seem to prefer their teachers' perceived expertise to the more inchoate knowledge and views of their peers.

Why Discussions Fail

Perhaps the most significant barrier to the increased use of discussion in education, however, is not institutional roadblocks, educator pride, or student preferences but the failure of many classroom discussions to lead to new knowledge or understanding for the participants. In this regard, the educational context is little different from the community, business, and political arenas in which discussion is also important but can also fail to achieve its ends.

If the purpose of discussions is, as stated above, to obtain "knowledge, ideas, and decisions that had not been known before the discussions began," then that purpose will be thwarted by the dominance by a single speaker, whose conclusions will usually have been decided in advance. This was noted colorfully in 1912 by Mary Greer Conklin in a book titled *Conversation: What to Say and How to Say It:*

> Monopolizing tyrants of society who will allow no dog to bark in their presence are not conversationalists; they are lecturers. (p. 25)

Jonathan Swift (1713?/1910) noted both how common such "tyrants" are and the general distaste to which they are subject:

> [N]othing is more generally exploded than the folly of talking too much; yet I rarely remember to have seen five people together, where some one among them had not been predominant in that kind, to the great constraint and disgust of all the rest. (p. 184)

Conversely, discussions are also less successful if not everyone participates:

[1] In fact, one of the very first steps taken to facilitate discussion in classes at Komaba was to remove the fixed desks and chairs from several classrooms and replace them with movable furniture.

> It is most desirable that there should be no "passengers," and with a little tact and patience even the most retiring can be made to contribute their share to the common pool of knowledge. (Musson, 1945?, p. 12)

This concern is especially important in educational contexts, as a student who keeps silent during discussions will almost certainly learn and retain less than his or her peers who participate actively.

The harms of monopolization and silence combine when one person attempts to dominate a discussion by silencing another:

> There are two faults in conversation, which appear very different, yet arise from the same root, and are equally blameable; I mean an impatience to interrupt others; and the uneasiness of being interrupted ourselves. (Swift, 1713?, p. 190)

In order for a discussion to lead to conclusions not anticipated before it began, the knowledge and ideas of the individual participants must be not only expressed but also understood:

> The art of listening well is often preferable to that of speaking well. (Society of Gentlemen, 1846, p. 25)

Not paying attention also increases the risk of off-topic digressions:

> Another fault in speakers, which must be watched, is the tendency to irrelevance. This is fatal, for it breeds boredom and antagonism to the individual. Personalities then start to enter the picture. Such irrelevance must be checked, kindly but firmly. (Musson, 1945?, p. 12).

Perhaps the most unpleasant way for a discussion to fail is for it to degenerate into an unresolvable argument between two or more participants:

> Two men are engaged in conversation and a question of religious belief or of politics is brought to the front. Each takes a side in the discussion and maintains his opinions to the end. Neither is searching for the truth, but is eager to defend his side of the question against the attacks of his opponent. It does not occur to either that anything else can be the truth except the things he has been taught to believe. (Cone, 1901, p. 30)

These problems noted by writers past—monopolization and nonparticipation, interruption and inattention, irrelevant comments and unresolvable arguments—continue to be the primary reasons why discussions fail today, and any proposed method for improving discussion skills should attempt to solve these problems.

Proposed Solutions

It is easier to identify bad discussions than to devise ways to prevent their recurrence. In this regard, they are similar to ungrammatical sentences in a natural language, which can easily be identified by a

native speaker but whose ungrammaticality can be fiendishly difficult to explain, especially to a linguistically naïve second-language learner. A language, once learned, is a habit hard to break, and the habits of a first language can nearly overpower attempts to learn a second; similarly, the habits, attitudes of mind, and personality characteristics that can lead to pointless or broken-down discussions are also difficult to shed. But constructive approaches to the bad-discussion problem have been proposed, most productively—at least in the literature examined for this study—by Sheffield in *Joining in Public Discussion* (1922) and Musson in *Organized Discussion* (1945?), as those authors' focus on serious discussions as part of the democratic process comes closest to the interests of the current paper. Sheffield's recommendations to individual speakers at group meetings, all sensible, include talking clearly and with standard pronunciation, especially if one is speaking in a foreign language (pp. 22–24); avoiding stage fright by planning ahead and not taking one's task too seriously (pp. 28–30); understanding and expressing the feelings of competing parties in disputes (pp. 37–40); and avoiding "a belligerent tone" (p. 52). Musson focuses on discussion management, recommending that discussions be guided by leaders who do not themselves become involved; a leader's purpose, he says, is to be "master of the situation, receiving, clarifying, or re-stating, and inviting comment as and when he thinks necessary" (p. 11). While not rejecting "spontaneous discussions," which, he writes, are often "very good," he cautions that "lack of suitable preparation on the part of the leader and group often means a waste of everyone's time" (p. 13). Other methods for keeping discussions on track are the use of previously agreed agendas, often seen in formal meetings; step-by-step procedures, such as the Group Cognitive Map proposed by Hill (1962 and 1969, pp. 22–31)[2] ; and even parliamentary procedures such as *Robert's Rules of Order*.[3]

But each of these methods has a price. Even a moderator who refrains from injecting his or her own opinions into a discussion does affect the content of the discussion through the choice of what to clarify or restate and whom to call on, thus limiting, at least to some extent, the free participation by all members. Agendas keep discussions on track, but they can discourage temporary discursions that might result in

[2] Hill's Group Cognitive Map consists of nine steps for guiding classroom discussions, from "Definition of terms and concepts," which is aimed at avoiding unproductive arguments, especially about the meanings of terms, through "Evaluation of group and individual performance," which is intended to ensure that students have mastered the discussion techniques themselves. While no doubt useful in a school context, it seems unlikely that such rules could be applied in business, the professions, or other settings among adults not trained to use them. The grammatical approach proposed below has a better chance of being effective even when not all of the discussion participants have been trained in its application.

[3] A quirky example of the use of formal procedures in group discussions was the adoption of *Robert's Rules of Order* for regular business meetings among the members of the Grateful Dead, a free-form San Francisco rock band that flourished from the 1960s to the mid-1990s. As reported by Barich (1993), "Initially, the meetings were free-for-alls ... but somebody dug up a copy of 'Robert's Rules of Order,' and they riffed on it until they had devised their own warped version of parliamentary procedure." Even in a group dynamic and cultural milieu that emphasized individual freedom, nonhierarchical relationships, and mutual tolerance, a consensus apparently emerged that some structure was necessary for discussions after all.

unanticipated but fruitful conclusions. Step-by-step discussion procedures such as Hill's also limit the spontaneity that is essential for serendipitous advances. And while parliamentary rules are no doubt necessary for large deliberative bodies, they would only multiply the restrictions entailed by moderators, agendas, and procedures; in any case, such rules can be used only when all participants are familiar with them and are willing to follow them, a requirement rarely met by groups formed ad hoc to discuss a particular problem. What is needed instead is a methodology for enabling the participants themselves to keep their discussions on track without preventing fruitful discursions; to steer their discussions toward productive conclusions without those conclusions being decided or even known in advance; and to discourage monopolization and arguments without limiting any other participant's contributions.

Such a methodology, this writer would like to propose, might be developed by regarding discussions as similar to sentences in a natural language, with the forms and structures of discussions being determined by a set of grammatical rules. This grammar of discussion would provide a framework for evaluating the "grammaticality" of discussions—that is, their perceived quality, whether in terms of reaching a productive conclusion or decision or, more subjectively, being emotionally satisfying to the participants. This framework could then be adopted for the development of pedagogical methods that would enable students and others to become more adept at producing "grammatical" discussions, just as students of a second language learn rules and do exercises in order to become able to speak and write that language more correctly.

One key difference, however, must be noted between how grammatical utterances are created in natural language and in discussions. In a spoken language, the forms and sequences of words in a sentence are determined by the individual speaker as he or she speaks, and the resulting sentence is considered grammatical or not based on the extent to which it adheres to the rules of the language. Many different theories have been proposed, of course, for exactly what rules compose a grammar; for how those rules might interact with each other, with other components of the language, such as the vocabulary and sound system, and with various situational and pragmatic considerations; and for how judgments of grammaticality should be made. Nevertheless, because spoken sentences are nearly always produced by individuals, all grammars of spoken languages necessarily assume that the grammaticality of a spoken sentence is determined by the success or failure of the individual speaker's application of the grammatical rules. In contrast, spontaneous discussions are created by two or more individuals speaking one after another, none of whom knows beforehand what the other speakers will say. The grammaticality of any discussion, therefore, depends on how well the individual speakers, speaking in turn, apply the rules of discussion grammar to their individual utterances in such a way that the resulting collectively-created discussion is effective as a whole.

Therefore, in order for people to create fruitful discussions cooperatively but without prior coordination, each participant in a discussion must be adept at applying the grammatical rules of discussion in real time as the discussion unfolds. Among accomplished discussion participants, those rules are presumably applied largely unconsciously, because continuous conscious attention to grammatical rules would distract from the discussion's content—just as native speakers of a natural language apply the language's sentence grammar unconsciously as they speak. Whether there are "native speakers" of

discussion grammar—that is, people who have been able to participate well in discussions ever since childhood—is unknown, but if they do exist they are likely to be in the minority, judging from the many faulty discussions that do occur. Rather, it seems likely that most people need to learn how to contribute to discussions productively and that, as in the case of second-language learning, the rules for discussions need to be practiced until they can be applied unconsciously during the spontaneous give-and-take of actual discussions.

When formulating the rules for a grammar of discussion, it might be tempting to represent them with a formal symbolic system, perhaps with abbreviations for particular types of speaker contributions, arrows of various sorts representing the relationships among those contributions, and algorithms for evaluating whether any combination of symbols represents a well-formed sequence. While symbolic systems have been developed and applied to sentence grammars, at this stage, at least, a similar system is unlikely to be productive for discussion grammar because of the difficulty of determining objectively whether any particular discussion is grammatical or not. If grammatical discussions are those that, as stated earlier, are "focused and productive, resulting in knowledge, ideas, and decisions that had not been known before the discussions began," then it seems unlikely that any binary grammatical-ungrammatical dichotomy, or even a multivalue grammaticality rating system, can be developed without obscuring the impressionistic and emotional considerations involved in assessments of the productivity of any particular discussion. Furthermore, because the purpose of this exercise is to formulate grammatical rules that can be taught and practiced so that average people can learn how to contribute more effectively to discussions, symbolic formalisms, to which many people are temperamentally resistant, should be avoided. Instead, the rules of discussion grammar should be expressed in plain language, and their complexity should be kept to a minimum.

A Grammar of Discussion

An example of what a grammar of discussion designed for educational uses might look like is shown in the ***Figure***. This example defines the basic terms of the grammar, and it gives five rules, called "guidelines," for determining how much any particular contribution by a discussion participant helps the overall discussion achieve its goals. These guidelines are obviously simple (and can perhaps be fairly criticized for being simply obvious), but the author would like to suggest that many of the problems that cause actual discussions to fail can be prevented if the guidelines are applied conscientiously. The monopolization of a discussion by a single speaker, for example, can be blocked by suitable application of the Collegiality guideline; since a monopolizing speaker is often repetitious as well, the Novelty guideline provides additional protection against a single participant's domination. The Collegiality guideline also helps to draw reluctant members out of silence and to prevent interruptions. Linearity ensures that participants listen to each other, for it is not possible to make a contribution relevant to what was just said unless one has been paying attention. Thanks to the Comprehension guideline, the possibility of violations of the Linearity guideline is reduced. Both Relevance and Linearity work to ensure that a discussion stays on track. Since unresolved disputes during discussions tend to degenerate into repeated assertions by the opposing sides, they are prevented by the Novelty guideline.

Definitions

A **discussion** is a goal-oriented conversation on a serious topic among a small group of people. A member of that group who participates in the discussion by making statements or asking questions is called a **participant**. A statement or question by a participant during a discussion is called a **contribution**.

The **topic** of a discussion is the subject, issue, or problem on which the discussion was convened. A contribution is **relevant** to that topic if its content directly concerns that topic.

The **productivity of a discussion** is determined by quality of the resulting knowledge, ideas, or decisions as perceived by the discussion participants and by other people concerned with the results of the discussion. The **productivity of a contribution** is determined by the extent to which a contribution increases or decreases the productivity of the overall discussion.

Guidelines

RELEVANCE

A contribution is more productive if it is relevant to the topic of discussion.

LINEARITY

A contribution is more productive if it is relevant to the immediately preceding contributions.

NOVELTY

A contribution is more productive if it conveys information previously unknown to other participants.

COLLEGIALITY

A contribution is more productive if it encourages other participants to make productive contributions.

COMPREHENSION

A contribution is more productive if it is understood by the other participants.

Figure. The outline of a grammar of discussion.

Even more important than these guidelines' apparent ability to prevent discussion failures is their positive potential for guiding discussions to success. Few people are able to think productively about several topics at once; by keeping the discussion on track, the Relevance and Linearity guidelines enable participants to remain focused on achieving the discussion's goal. The Novelty guideline, meanwhile, encourages participants to be bold: to introduce new information and propose new ideas that, through the subsequent give-and-take, can lead to serendipitous insights. Similarly, the Collegiality guideline ensures that there are contributions from all participants, thus expanding the pool of shared knowledge and increasing the possibility of synergistic advances.

These guidelines are easy to understand, of course, but it is not apparent that they would be easy to apply, as their implementation requires that each participant in a discussion be able to formulate, in real

time, productive contributions as defined by these guidelines. A participant would have to decide either immediately before speaking or while actually talking whether what she says is relevant to both the general topic and to what has just been said, whether other participants already know what she is about to say, whether her contribution will encourage contributions from others, and whether the others will understand what she says. This might seem like an impossible task, until one considers the similarly complex processing that takes place in linguistic grammar whenever we speak. When a native speaker of English, for example, produces a sentence in conversation, he must decide in real time how many objects are referred to by each noun (to determine whether to use singular or plural forms), whether the referents of nouns are already known to the listener (to determine whether to use definite or indefinite articles), whether the events described take place in the past, present, or future (to determine the tense of verbs), whether those events are continuing or completed (to determine the aspect of verbs), and many other grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic components. Amazingly, native speakers are usually able to make all those decisions correctly, unconsciously, and effortlessly in real time and are not even aware that they are doing so.

For a second-language learner, of course, the process can be much more cumbersome. A person who has learned grammatical rules in another language only by rote can spend a long time trying to piece together a single grammatical sentence and is very likely to make mistakes in the process. However, with practice, both in controlled situations like classroom drills and in uncontrolled real-life situations, learners can gradually become more and more fluent, producing better and better sentences with less effort and fewer mistakes.

It seems likely, therefore, that the ability to participate more effectively in discussions can be taught just as the grammar of spoken languages is usually taught to teenagers and adults: through conscious exposure to systematic rules; through guided practice; and through the attentive application of those guidelines in real-life situations. The grammar of discussion proposed here, while tentative and as-yet untested, provides suggestions for how pedagogical strategies and techniques might be developed to enable people to learn how to participate in discussions more effectively. The resulting skills, it is hoped, will not only enhance their learning in school but also make them more effective participants in work, politics, community, and other spheres of life.

Works Cited

American Heritage dictionary of the English language. (4th ed., 2006). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Barich, B. (1993, October 11). Still truckin'. *The New Yorker,* 59(33), 96–102.

Cone, J. A. (1901). *The man who pleases and the woman who charms.* New York: Hinds & Noble. Facsimile retrieved November 27, 2009, from http://www.archive.org

Conklin, M. G. (1912). *Conversation: What to say and how to say it.* New York: Funk & Wagnalls. Facsimile retrieved November 27, 2009, from http://www.archive.org

De Quincey, T. (1863). *The art of conversation and other papers.* Edinburgh: Adams and Charles Black. Facsimile retrieved November 27, 2009, from http://www.archive.org

Hervey, G. W. (1853). *The rhetoric of conversation: Or, bridles and spurs for the management of the tongue.* New York: Harper & Brothers. Facsimile retrieved November 27, 2009, from http://www.archive.org

Hill, W. F. (1962 and 1969). *Learning through discussion.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Ikuenobe, P. (2002). Epistemic foundation for teaching critical thinking in group discussion [Electronic version]. *Interchange*, 33/4, 371–393.

Komaba Organization for Educational Excellence. (2010). *PISA taiō no tōgiryoku yōsei puroguramu no kaihatsu* [PISA対応の討議力養正プログラムの開発 Development of a program for improving discussion skills in accordance with PISA]. Retrieved August 27, 2010, from http://www.komed.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp/tougi/

Leland, C. G. (Attributed). (1868). *The art of conversation with directions for self education.* New York: Carleton. Facsimile retrieved August 14, 2010, from http://www.archive.org

Mahaffy, J. P. (1887). *The principles of the art of conversation.* London: Macmillan. Facsimile retrieved November 27, 2009, from http://www.archive.org

Musson, J. W. (1945?). *Organized discussion.* Bognor Regis, Sussex, U.K.: John Crowther (Educational). Facsimile retrieved November 16, 2009, from http://www.archive.org (The facsimile edition consulted is undated, but online bibliographies such as http://catalog.loc.gov/ give the publication date as 1945.)

Peabody, A. P. (Ed.). (1856). *Conversation; Its faults and its graces.* Boston: James Munroe. Facsimile retrieved March 7, 2010, from http://www.archive.org

Sharples, M. (2005). Learning as conversation: Transforming education in the mobile age. Retrieved March 16, 2010, from http://www.fil.hu/mobil/2005/sharples_final.pdf

Sheffield, A. D. (1922). *Joining in public discussion: A study of effective speechmaking for members of labor unions, conferences, forums, and other discussion groups.* New York: George H. Doran. Facsimile retrieved November 16, 2009, from http://www.archive.org

Society of Gentlemen. (1846). *The art of conversing, written for the instruction of youth in the polite manners and language of the drawing-room.* Boston: James French. Facsimile retrieved March 7, 2010, from http://www.archive.org

Swift, J. (1713?). Hints toward an essay on conversation. In Krans, H. S. (Ed.). (1910). *The lost art of conversation: Selected essays.* New York: Sturgis & Walton. Facsimile retrieved November 27, 2009, from http://www.archive.org (The date of original authorship or publication could not be determined with certainty.)