More than Words: Developing Core Speaking and Listening Skills

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Throughtful, content-based discussions have always been a classroom ideal. With an added push from the Common Core State Standards, educators are amplifying their efforts to plan for purposeful talk.

"So I had to read the first part of this book, and then the next day our teacher put us in groups of like 10 students and told us we had to have a discussion about the reading. She told us we each had to say at least one thing, and no more than three things. And then she left, and there was just silence because nobody knew what to say. It was awkward."

At some point in your career, you've probably experienced a classroom discussion that played out like this, and with good reason. "Let's not even pretend that most students are ready to naturally hold a content-based discussion that doesn't fizzle out if we aren't providing some targeted discussion scaffolds," says Pérsida Himmelheber, ASCD author and associate professor at Millersville University. "Knowing how to hold a thriving content-based conversation takes quite a bit of social maturity, time, and practice. Most [students] need to be guided through it."

Keys to Cognition

Language is how we think; it's our operating system, note Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey, authors of Content-Area Conversations: How to Plan Discussion-Based Lessons for Diverse Language Learners (ASCD, 2008). Because talk represents thinking, classrooms should be filled with it. Yet in most classrooms, talk is "frequently limited and used to check comprehension rather than develop thinking." It's not enough for students to hear academic speech from the teacher, according to Fisher and Frey; they must use academic discourse with peers if they are to acquire it. Providing time and structures for purposeful classroom discussions allows students to "own the words and ideas of content."

What's more, discussion is strongly linked to academic achievement; Erik Palmer suggests in his forthcoming ASCD book, Teaching the Core Skills of Listening and Speaking. Drawing on research, Palmer explains that, "When students discuss, they are more likely to retain the information and be able to retrieve it later .... Discussions also improve intellectual agility and help develop skills of synthesis and integration."

Core Guidance

How can educators ensure that time for talk is well spent? The six Common Core Anchor Standards for Speaking and
Listening provide a blueprint. The first anchor standard (SL.1) is particularly illuminating; its goal is to guide students to "prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively." Here educators will find a ladder of discussion skills lifting students toward the Common Core speaking and listening objectives of comprehension and collaboration.

In the early grades, SL.1 focuses more on the interpersonal skills students need to have a discussion: taking turns, listening to others, and sticking to the topic at hand. As the expectations of this standard progress through the grade levels, the skills become more complex—building, for example, from asking clarifying questions and citing textual evidence to elaborating, drawing conclusions, paraphrasing, modifying views in light of new information, and setting rules and carrying out assigned roles in discussions.

By grade 12, SL.1 prompts students to promote civil and democratic discourse, in part through evaluating the full range of evidence, probing reasoning, and identifying when and how to pursue further exploration of a topic. With this sequence of outcomes in mind, teachers can use specific techniques to bring deliberate discussions to life in the classroom.

Planning for Purposeful Discussions

Without structure, classroom discussions are doomed to be awkward and ineffective. Typically, Himmele notes, "there is no such thing as a ‘classroom discussion.’ A handful of students will always monopolize the conversation, while the majority passively observes."

By providing organized and purposeful opportunities to talk, educators can avoid common pitfalls. First and foremost, clear expectations set the stage for classroom conversations. Fisher and Frey suggest planning lessons by defining the content (the topic), language (the key vocabulary students should use to discuss the topic), and social objectives (expectations for how students will interact). Further, in Content-Area Conversations, they recommend

- Checking that the physical setup of the classroom suits the type of discussion;
- Explicitly teaching the social skills needed for the discussion;
- Creating routines that allow students to focus on making meaning;
- Having the same high expectations for talk as for reading and writing; and
- Providing supports that cue students’ metacognitive skills to use the best strategy for the task at hand.

At The Siena School in Silver Spring, Md., codirector Jillian Darefsky and her team have fostered a seminar-style environment, arranging desks "so that students can actively participate in dialogue throughout the class, whether in pairs, small groups, or whole-class discussions." Darefsky says this has "an immediate effect on the students' engagement in the class" because it "encourages all students to participate."

"Restructuring the environment helps students get into the right mindset for [communication]," adds Palmer. "It's a cue to the kind of thinking, speaking, and listening skills that will be needed."

Maintaining the Momentum

Creating a space in which students feel safe and empowered in sharing their ideas is also essential. Amanda Ryan-Fear, an art teacher at Hillsboro High School in Hillsboro, Ore., teaches protocols for discussion participation, such as "do we raise hands or jump in, how to disagree respectfully, and how to use questioning to draw out the ideas of their peers."

Palmer suggests finding concrete ways to illustrate (and promote) participation in discussions. For example, give students one or two poker chips that you will collect each time they add to a discussion. This gets students thinking intentionally about how and when they will engage in classroom conversations, says Palmer.

Assigning roles in a discussion can also help students interact meaningfully, while focusing on academic content. Palmer cites the popular Jigsaw discussion strategy, in which each student studies an aspect of a topic and then rotates in groups where students take turns presenting as "experts" on their areas of focused study.

Many students simply do not know how to effectively initiate or maintain a conversation, especially in an academic environment. Instructional supports—for example, rubrics detailing the elements of well-crafted arguments, graphic organizers to help students capture details of a topic to discuss, or multiple representations of key vocabulary relevant to the topic posted around the classroom—can alert students to the metacognitive skills they need to sustain academic discussions.

Himmele finds Bounce Cards—conversation prompts that provide cues for "bouncing" an idea off of another student's idea, summarizing information, and posing questions—to be particularly useful tools. Distributed as bookmarks, Bounce Cards (see below) cue students’ conversational skills until discussions flow naturally if you are going to place the bounce card at the end. Keely Potter, a language arts teacher at Dodson Branch School in Tennessee, shares her success with this strategy: "Bounce Cards gave [students] the words to say. Now it is so engrained, they'll [respond], 'I'm hearing you say that ... but I have a different way of looking at it.' I don't even have to cue them anymore;
BOUNCE CARD

BOUNCE:
Take what your classmate(s) said and bounce an idea off of it. For example, you can start your sentences with—

"That reminds me of ..."
"I agree, because ..."
"True. Another example is when ..."
"That's a great point ..."

SUM IT UP:
Rephrase what was just said in a shorter version. For example, you can start your sentences with—

"I hear you saying that ..."
"So, if I understand you correctly ..."
"I like how you said ..."

INQUIRE:
Understand what your classmates mean by asking them questions. For example, you can start your questions with—

"Can you tell me more about that?"
"I'm not sure I understand ..."
"I see your point, but what about ...?"
"Have you thought about ...?"

Source: From Total Participation Techniques: Making Every Student an Active Learner, by P. Himmle & W. Himmle, 2011, Alexandria, VA: ASCD. © 2011 by ASCD.

Himmle advises teachers to circulate and take an active prompting role, especially when conversation lags. By moving around the room and prompting the students who are not sharing, teachers can identify and address problems as they arise. Taking notes during the conversation also improves future discussions—this input helps the teacher to tweak groupings, adapt prompts, and identify the strengths and deficits the students bring to discussions.

Assessing and Reviewing

Concluding activities like Quick-Writes, pro-con lists, and graphic organizers help students to digest the activity. Ryan-Fear explains her approach: "To drive accountability, I'll require an end product such as an exit ticket based on the conversation." Himmle suggests collecting the students' Quick-Writes at the end of the activity, "even if it's only to glance at and initial them, because it will give teachers a good feel for where the students are in their thinking about the content."

To guide more formal assessments of student products derived from discussion, teachers should use rubrics that identify the targeted speaking and listening skills, such as paraphrasing, asking clarifying questions, citing evidence, elaborating on others' comments, and following guidelines for civil discourse.

At the state level, both of the Common Core standardized tests (from the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium) assess listening skills by asking students to listen to and watch brief audio and video on a topic and then answer questions or write an essay based on their comprehension of the ideas presented. The Smarter Balanced assessment differs in that it incorporates speaking skills by requiring students to participate in a small-group discussion before they write on a topic presented in the videos they watched.

Walking the Talk

Listening is our first learning tool, reminds Palmer. It's how infants learn the language that organizes the world around them. Through academic discussion, students build the content literacies and interpersonal skills that will serve them throughout life. When students enter college and career, they will draw on these skills as they videoconference with colleagues and classmates, watch webinars to enhance their professional learning, or speak and listen in class or at work.

Discussion is a powerful tool for both learning and the democratic ideals of education. "Involving students in discussion is like allowing them to double swipe their cognitive card," says Himmle. "It forces them to stop, reflect, process, repackage, and deliver whatever they're learning in a way that adds to their small-group discussions and to their bigger understandings of the content."

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