

Raising Student Talk: Real Strategies for Real Students

APRIL J. NIEMELA

NCTE Secondary Section Steering Committee
Idaho Department of Education
Lewiston, Idaho
april.niemela@gmail.com

If you believe in the power of words, you can bring about physical changes in the universe.

—N. SCOTT MOMADAY, *ANCESTRAL VOICE: CONVERSATIONS WITH N. SCOTT MOMADAY*

As we envision an ideal classroom, we think of one where each student's voice is both welcomed and heard. Not only are these voices celebrated and nurtured, but, "in an equitable classroom environment, students of all backgrounds (e.g., race, nationality, gender) have the same opportunities to learn and develop their knowledge" (Hanover Research 3). This emphasis on opportunities to learn and development of knowledge is especially relevant when it comes to the skills of speaking and listening. How do we create learning opportunities that promote these skills? How do we empower our current generation of learners to speak with power in ways that reflect their passions and perspectives and are also thoughtful and respectful of other views? When an often-quiet student offers an insightful question in our shared-inquiry circle or a below-grade-level reader makes inferences from textual evidence that add layers of complexity, I am reminded that these daily dips into writing and speaking matter.

A systematic approach to lifting student voice and encouraging student talk allows us to first understand the challenge and then to prepare students to engage in powerful dialogue. Because we need to know what is actually taking place in terms of student talk within the context of our lessons, we can acquire these data through a talk audit. Once we understand the kinds of talk happening within our lessons, we can create scaffolds to support students as they move toward independent discussion. Finally, we can integrate multiple opportunities for students to engage in meaningful discourse throughout our lessons, providing students with practice.

CONDUCTING A TALK AUDIT

A talk audit invites me to consider who is doing the talking in my classroom. Am I conducting the lion's share of the talk, or are my students? Which students are doing the talking? What kind of talking is taking place? The goal of such an audit is to collect data so that I can be more aware of what is happening in my teaching space.

There are a couple of ways to conduct an audit. First, you can ask for help from another person, such as a colleague, administrator, instructional assistant, or student teacher. Instruct this person to record the number of times you speak versus the number of times a student speaks, using hash marks. Second, you can record yourself teaching and conduct the audit yourself. You do not need to have a great camera or even range of the classroom. You need to be able to hear and get a sense of which student is speaking.

Think about your ultimate objectives, then design your note-catcher or data grid. Perhaps you want to capture teacher versus student talk. The hash-mark option works great for that. Perhaps you want to see who talks when; record talk during the lesson, using a grid to capture who is speaking each minute. Perhaps you want to know the kinds of talk students are engaged in: Do they primarily answer teacher-asked questions, answer other student-asked questions, ask questions, extend thinking, provide evidence from the text, offer an insight or inference? Or perhaps you are interested more in ensuring that each student has a voice in your class. To answer this question, you would want to know who is doing the talking, so you would capture hash marks by student name, perhaps using a seating chart.

Once I have gained clarity around the talk happening in my room, then I can decide next steps and determine how I am going to create scaffolds for my students, support them in their class discussions, and integrate protocols that give them plenty of practice.

PROVIDING SCAFFOLDS AND SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

Not all students have been provided intentional instruction or sufficient support in speaking and listening. To increase productive student talk in the classroom, then, we can begin by integrating appropriate supports that allow all students the opportunity to grapple with complex ideas, refine them into sentences or images, and share these thoughts with peers. Among many other strategies, three come to mind: quick-draws or quick-writes, sentence or paragraph frames, and the fishbowl. These activities are described in a variety of resources; my current favorite is Jennifer Gonzalez’s website, *Cult of Pedagogy*, and several of these strategies are found there (www.cultofpedagogy.com/speaking-listening-techniques/).

QUICK-WRITES OR QUICK-DRAWS

It can be challenging to share your thinking when you are put on the spot or when you are not yet sure what you think. Even though a lesson may have provided students with multiple opportunities to dive into the text to find evidence for a given claim or identify and analyze character traits, it can still be helpful to spend some silent time in thought to identify and clarify thinking before sharing through discussion.

One way to do this is through the quick-write. In a quick-write, students write as much as they can in response to a question or topic in a brief amount of time, such as two minutes. The assignment often comes at the end of a chunk of learning within the cycle and asks students to capture their new learning. The quick-write can be in bulleted format, in words, or in sentences. A quick-draw accomplishes the same objective, but this time asking students to capture ideas in a sketch, through symbols, stick figures, and arrows to signify relationships. Both strategies are geared to help learners extend thinking and prepare for subsequent dialogue.

SENTENCE FRAMES

To provide students with the opportunities to talk and to be heard, we can help them “learn the language of accountable talk . . . through sentence

frames” (Fisher et al. 90). There are many paragraph or sentence frames that target specific kinds of class discussions, but some examples follow:

- I agree that _____, a point that needs emphasizing because so many people believe that _____.
- Although I concede that _____, I still insist that _____.
- Although I don’t agree with that, I do recognize that _____.
- The evidence shows that _____.
- My own view, however, is that _____.

FISHBOWL STRATEGY

One way to both name and illustrate specific speaking moves is through a fishbowl strategy. A fishbowl is set up where two students (or a teacher and a student) sit in chairs in the middle of a circle, while the other students sit in a circle around them. The two in the middle practice the specific talking moves that the teacher has identified and taught as essential, such as clarifying, paraphrasing, extending, inferring, or asking follow-up questions.

The students observing the conversation take notes, record the various talk moves, or identify extension topics or follow-up comments. This allows the observing students to see the specific talk moves or sentence stems in practice and gain familiarity with what productive talk looks like.

PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES TO TALK

Once students have had the opportunity to think about their own thinking, capture it, and refine it, they are ready to practice accountable talk. By intentionally integrating class discussion protocols into our lessons, we provide students with daily opportunities to practice these essential skills of speaking and listening. And the more we practice a given strategy, the more likely we are to develop “muscle memory” around it—and the more likely it is to become a part of our skill set. Among many other strategies, three come to mind: the snowball discussion, conver-stations, and shared inquiry.

SNOWBALL DISCUSSION

In the snowball discussion strategy, students pair up to share their ideas or consider a concept. Once they come to consensus, they pair up with another pair (becoming a group of four) and share their ideas. Once they've come to consensus, they group up with another group (becoming a group of eight). This continues until the entire class is participating in the discussion and a classwide consensus is reached. The discussion objectives may vary depending on the needs of the student, lesson, or teacher and can include consensus building, idea sharing, or evidence gathering.

CONVER-STATIONS

This small-group discussion strategy comes from Sarah Brown Wessling and the *Teaching Channel* and encourages diverse thought through discussion and movement. Desks are grouped in pods of five to seven students. The students respond to a question and discuss it within the small group, taking notes as they talk. After a set amount of time, two students from each pod rotate to the next group. They take their group knowledge and increased understanding to the next group, where a new discussion prompt is provided.

At the end of the set time, two new students rotate. This rotation and discussion continue until all of the questions are answered.

SHARED INQUIRY

In shared inquiry, students sit in a large circle and the facilitator (teacher or student) asks an open-ended question about a shared text that everyone has previously read. Students engage in thoughtful dialogue, providing evidence from the text, and extending each other's thinking or asking questions of each other. This is also known as a Socratic seminar, and there are many variations, from highly scaffolded to an inner and outer circle (with specific roles) to a more free-form experience.

CONCLUSION

How do we create a more equitable opportunity for students to engage in discussion in our English classrooms? What supports will make it more likely that each student is not only prepared to discuss but also knows a multitude of strategies? When we reflect on our own practice, integrate specific scaffolds, and provide students with repeated opportunities to practice accountable talk, we are coming close to that “equitable classroom environment [where] students of all backgrounds have the same opportunities to learn and develop their knowledge” (Hanover Research 3).

In my work with students, two simple mantras offer guidance. First, *everybody writes; everybody talks*. A talk audit gifts us the opportunity to view our classes through new eyes and determine whether each student is participating in both writing and speaking, while the integration of routine practice creates automaticity and facility. A second mantra, *go slow to go fast*, reminds me to use backward design and systematically integrate strategies that support students toward the end goal: speaking truth in a way that honors and respects the truth of others. When we create the conditions for deeply reflective dialogue, we are raising the caliber of student talk. **EJ**

WORKS CITED

- Fisher, Douglas, et al. *Text Complexity: Raising Rigor in Reading*. International Reading Association, 2012.
- Gonzalez, Jennifer. “The Big List of Class Discussion Strategies.” *Cult of Pedagogy*, 15 Oct. 2015, www.cultofpedagogy.com/speaking-listening-techniques/.
- Hanover Research. *Closing the Gap: Creating Equity in the Classroom*. Hanover Research, 2017, www.hanoverresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Equity-in-Education_Research-Brief_FINAL.pdf.
- Momaday, N. Scott, and Charles Woodard. *Ancestral Voice: Conversations with N. Scott Momaday*. U of Nebraska P, 1989.
- Wessling, Sarah Brown. “Conver-Stations: A Discussion Strategy.” *Teaching Channel*, 2019, www.teachingchannel.org/video/conver-stations-strategy.



A former high school English teacher, **APRIL J. NIEMELA** serves as a regional coach of the Idaho Coaching Network's Teacher Leader Program, and she is also a codirector of the network. Connect with her on Twitter @AprilJNiemela.