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Making the Most of Talk

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Abstract

In this article, I explore why learning more about how talk works is worthy of our time, what the barriers are to talking in language arts, and how to create more successful groups; ultimately, I challenge us all to think of integrating talk throughout the curriculum. [...] Dan connects these ideas to Oscar Schindler; this is deep thinking for fifth graders. Middle school teachers might start by utilizing the team planning time.

Full Text

Mrs. Smith looks at her 29 seventh graders. "Okay, I'm going to have you try to work in small groups again today," she begins. "But you have to keep the noise down and get your questions answered." The students fly out of their seats and into the assigned groups. Mrs. Smith begins circulating the room. Some kids are talking about the book, while others are listening passively, and a few are discussing last night's basketball game or the breakup of a couple. "This just isn't working," Mrs. Smith sighs. Tomorrow she'll give up on talk and teach from the front. It is just easier.

Mrs. Smith is like thousands of other teachers who recognize that talking makes learning more active and that their students enjoy talking in small discussion groups. They may have tried small discussion groups when reading a class novel or during literature study (also called lit sets, book clubs, literature circles), but found that the students don't know where to begin, and are often visiting instead of working. In this article, I explore why learning more about how talk works is worthy of our time, what the barriers are to talking in language arts, and how to create more successful groups; ultimately, I challenge us all to think of integrating talk throughout the curriculum. I am concentrating on how students talk and learn in small groups, not necessarily on how teachers might themselves talk to students in large-group instruction. For more information on that body of literature, see Johnston (2004) and Power and Hubbard (2002).

Why Talk Is Important

Talk is so much a part of our lives that it seems invisible to us. We spend each and every day using talk to share information, communicate, persuade, care, disagree, report, convince,

establish social relationships, etc. Talk is one of the four basic language arts, together with reading, writing, and listening. Although we spend time each day learning how to read and write, little time is spent learning and practicing how to talk and listen.

We know that using language in order to learn is supported extensively by theory and research. Vygotsky (1986) suggests that language functions as both a psychological and a cultural tool. Using language as a tool, individuals try out ideas within a particular culture. As people challenge, build upon, and modify one another's ideas, the entire group is able to think more clearly and deeply.

Another researcher who studied talk was Douglas Barnes. In the 1970s, Barnes examined talking and learning in British schools. He found, quite predictably, that the teachers were doing the majority of the talking in their classrooms, while the students took notes, listened, or passively engaged in other activities. He devised an experiment wherein a group of students without a teacher was given a task in science, social studies, or language arts in an empty room with a tape recorder. Listening and analyzing the tapes, he found two kinds of talk: exploratory and presentational. He found exploratory talk to be hesitant, rough draft conversation where the speaker tried out new ideas on the listener. It was characterized by hesitations, false starts, and pauses. Presentational talk, in contrast, was more polished, where the speaker reported findings and adjusted the talk to the needs of the audience (Barnes, 1992).

The most exciting part of Barnes's discovery was that during exploratory talk, students built on each others' ideas, actually creating thoughts that no one in the group had previously conceived. He called this working on understanding (Barnes, 1992). I found this to be true in my literature study groups when I asked Chris (a ninth grader labeled learning disabled) what made literature groups go well. He replied, "When people share their ideas they have and then come up with one. All the ideas are shared and then matched together and we come up with one" (my emphasis, Gilles, 1993, p. 199). Chris uncovered the heart of exploratory talk. We, the group, create or form an idea-a concept or thought that is new to all. The power comes from students taking what they know about the topic from their own background and the reading, and then building on the ideas of others to come up with something new and original that no member of the group had considered before they came together.

Consider the following example. Students in Mrs. Dickinson's fifth grade had been reading Holocaust picturebooks, such as Hiroshima No Pika (Maruki, 1982), The Number on My Grandfather's Arm (Adler, 1987), The Children We Remember (Abells, 1986), and The Terrible Things (Bunting, 1980) as a part of their inquiry into World War II. The group was meeting without a teacher present:

Tina: Hey guys, I just don't get how he (Hitler) got all this power. I don't get . . . I mean, it's one man . . . he did so much damage. How did he get so many people on his side?

Dan: He was a really, really, powerful speaker.

Tina: What did he say, "I'll make the world good for you?"

Kathy: That's exactly what he said! That's exactly it!

Dan: They were going through a depression from World War I.

Jerome: And then he said he'd come and make their lives better.

Dan: I think Oscar Schindler did a great thing.

We can see how the students worked on understanding by thinking together. Tina begins with a real question. As students add their ideas, they build on one another's understanding. Finally, Dan connects these ideas to Oscar Schindler; this is deep thinking for fifth graders. Bakhtin's (Holquist, 1990) notion of dialogue also helps explain this example. Bakhtin suggested that we are surrounded by a myriad of voices, and each time we interact with someone, we store bits of that conversation and experience. From these experiences, there are thousands of possibilities that we might choose from in our transactions with others. He called this idea heteroglossia (Holquist, 1990). Rule (2006) suggests, "Dialogue involves the recognition of difference not as a way of foreclosing engagement but of 'seeing' and engaging with each other, so that they create new, shared meanings out of their engagement" (p. 86). So, being in groups with other thinkers shapes our thinking as we shape the thinking of those around us. As students try to think deeper and move to analysis, critique, and more critical conversations, they not only make their own thinking more sophisticated, but also impact the minds of those with whom they discuss.

Alexander (2008) builds on this idea and suggests that classrooms that use talk successfully are dialogic, and predicated on five criteria:

* Collective-in that the teachers and children address learning tasks together, whether as a group or as a class;

* Reciprocal-in that teachers and children listen to each other, share ideas, and consider alternative viewpoints;

* Supportive-in that children articulate their ideas freely, without the fear of embarrassment over "wrong" answers, and help each other to reach common understandings;

* Cumulative-in that teachers and children build on their own and each other's ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and inquiry; and

* Purposeful-in that teachers plan and steer classroom talk with specific educational goals in view (Alexander, 2008, p. 105).

These classrooms may be using whole-group, small-group or even pair discussions. If we want students to do more critical thinking, to probe deeper into texts, and to build ideas with others, then we must rely on talk. In fact, Barnes (2008) maintains that, "The communication system that a teacher sets up in a lesson shapes the roles that the pupils can play, and goes some distance in determining the kind of learning that they engage in" (p. 2).

The Challenges

As early as the 1980s, John Goodlad (2004) found that the main reason kids came to middle school was to talk to their friends. So, why are teachers so hesitant to capture students' natural tendency to talk and use it for stronger curricular learning? The issue centers on control and preparation. Letting a group of 25 seventh graders discuss in small groups means that the teacher has to trust that her students are able to break into groups, talk for a specified time, and then go back into a large group. New teachers may be fearful of letting

kids have that control. As one first year teacher remarked, "If I let them talk, what if they just ignore me when I try to draw them back?"

Some teachers trust students enough to work together, but give them few specific directions-often with marginal results. Since the students have been given few guidelines and no practice, many students either don't know what to talk about, dominate the conversation, or fall silent; any of these scenarios can derail the talk toward what will happen after school or the latest drama in the hallway. Other teachers encourage students to discuss on their own, seeing themselves as a kind of overseer. These teachers move from group to group, interjecting admonitions to "get busy" and otherwise encouraging students to move back on track. Although the students are talking, the teachers aren't too sure what has happened in the groups because they haven't stayed with any group long enough to actually be a participant. When students do come up against something that is difficult and need the scaffolding help of a teacher, the teacher may be with another group.

To offer more guidance in the groups, some teachers meet with all of their groups and, intentionally or unintentionally, control much of the talking and ideas that are generated with their questions. Often in these groups, the teacher asks the questions (Initiation), one student answers (Response), and the teacher says "fine," or "right," (Evaluation). This is the predicable communication pattern that Mehan (1979) found, with the teacher doing the bulk of the questioning. This resembles whole-class instruction, just with small groups. However, literature doesn't often have just one right answer, and instead of being invited into a conversation about literature, students are being interrogated on the finer points of the story (Peterson &Eads, 2000). The IRE pattern does not lead to new ideas being created by the group. Another problem is that many teachers aren't confident about what to do with the students who are not meeting in the group. These students may wander off-task or even become disruptive and interrupt the work in the small, teacher-led group.

Still other teachers give students time to talk in class, but control that talk with specific questions that must be answered in writing and turned in at the end of the session. Cuff (2010) found that although these groups may look productive, with students referring back to the text, writing and talking, many students perceive the task as answering the questions, not necessarily building on the ideas of one another to create meaning. Opportunities to go deeper, to ask one another to explain their thinking, are lost as students divide up the questions and hunt for the answers.

Sharing the Ground Rules: Making Talk Visible

Teachers who use talk in the curriculum successfully take time to teach kids how to work in pairs or small groups. This seems counterintuitive, since everyone knows how to talk. However, the invisible thing we call talk relies on largely intuitive ground rules for success. This includes taking turns, listening to others' ideas, waiting for the right time to enter the conversation, disagreeing without being disagreeable, building on one anothers' ideas, etc. We may assume that these ground rules are similar for everyone. However, various cultures and social classes have particular ground rules for talk; students will be more successful talking on their own if we spend time preparing them for the conversation (Delpit &Kohl,

2006; Heath, 2006).

Stephanie is a strong example of a teacher who takes time to help her students learn the ground rules of conversation; she has embraced helping her students use talk to learn. Since she is a language arts teacher who loops with sixth graders into seventh grade, Stephanie sees most of her students for two years. She has created a four- to six-week unit the fall of the sixth-grade year that combines reading about social justice issues with learning how to discuss. She believes that "what is not assessed is not valued" in the curriculum, so she makes talk more tangible and visible through her unit. Her essential question for the unit is, "How does talk help us think about social justice?"

Stephanie begins by finding some articles that sixth graders will find relevant and also a bit controversial, such as an article on sagging pants (Newton, 2009) or an article on child labor. She tells students that we can all learn from one another because our lives are so different. She asks students to read the article and "mark it up"-in other words, ask questions and make comments directly on the article. She then partners students and places one partner from each pair in the center ring, while the other partner is in the "peanut gallery" outside the ring. The peanut gallery partner is responsible for keeping track of what the person inside the circle is doing. What did they all talk about? What questions does the partner ask? How does he/she respond to questions and build on others' ideas? What new ideas emerge? After about 10 minutes, the whole class debriefs the conversation. Were all members respectful to one another? Did they build on each others' ideas? What kind of comments stopped the conversation? What kind of comments moved it along? Did they disagree? What came of that disagreement? Stephanie highlights the most important questions: Why is it important to talk? How can talk help us be deeper thinkers?

After students have had opportunities to be both inside the ring and on the outside, Stephanie videotapes the conversations and has her students watch and take notes on the same kinds of questions. Then they debrief. At the same time, she chooses materials that require deeper thinking. For example, instead of reading an article about sagging pants, she might read aloud The Composition, (Skarmeta, 1998/2000), a picturebook about a young boy in a fascist third-world country who is involved in a possible revolution. Students discuss the read-aloud in the same tworing style with the addition of the videotape.

Next, the class reads short articles and discusses them in small groups. Stephanie stops the small groups every 3-5 minutes to ask questions such as, "Is your conversation focused?" "Are you on topic? If not, how can you get yourselves back on topic?" "Are you making eye contact? How can you think deeper?" The last step in the unit is the actual reading of literature books and meeting in small groups to discuss them. By then, students are skillful at working with one another, discussing deeply, and being independent in their work. They also realize the power of their conversations and how they can learn more with one another than individually.

The time that Stephanie spends with her students in the fall of the sixth-grade year pays off in the future. Her students gravitate easily to book clubs and can quickly move to critical literacy issues, such as equity, fairness, and challenging societal norms. She can then spend

time helping students to analyze, synthesize, and critique literature, instead of spending so much time on how to be a book club member. Of course, students who have learned how to work in small groups in literature are ripe to take that knowledge into the science, social studies, or mathematics classroom and adapt it to particular content.

Integrating Talk throughout the Curriculum

In the 1990s, there was a renaissance of curriculum integration, including reading and writing across the curriculum. Teachers developed themes that stretched across English, social studies, science, and even mathematics. Students were engaged in addressing big ideas that crossed discipline boundaries. Many teachers found that when they worked together to help students learn content through this integration, the learning was deep and lasting (Pate, Homestead, Mc- Ginnis, &Beane, 1997; Thaiss &Porter, 2010). Teachers in all disciplines were encouraged to use writing as a learning tool in each and every area. As the disciplines tried to integrate more, there were some difficulties. Mathematics teachers often worried that participating in integrated instruction focused instructional time on some of the minor concepts of math, while taking time away from major areas. Another difficulty was that teachers had to work together to plan these integrated units, and there rarely was time in the school day to do so.

This lack of time for collaboration has been resolved, but not in the way we had expected. Although many teams in middle schools do have time to meet together, content integration has been all but buried beneath the time-consuming task of preparing for standardized tests. Once again subject areas are like silos, isolated from one another. Because of this isolation, students often learn reading strategies in reading/language arts classes, but fail to apply them in science or social studies. Last year, I completed a study examining reading strategies across the curriculum, including English classes (Gilles, 2009). One science class was reading about galaxies and stars, so during the interview, I asked students what connections they made to this piece-a strategy they had learned in English class. Many reported that they made no connections to the piece because they were not stars! These students have internalized that a strategy they learn in one setting, in this case language arts, doesn't apply to another setting, science class.

What if we drew on past experiences with integration and talk, thus promoting a "talk throughout the curriculum" idea? Such an idea has sprouted and grown strong in England. At a Cambridge University conference in 2008, researchers from the United States, Brazil, Canada, and England joined together to honor Douglas Barnes, but also to share what they were learning about Exploring Talk in School (Mercer &Hodgkinson, 2008), which investigates how talking works in all subjects, not just language arts. Scholars in mathematics, literacy, science, and social studies brought their ideas of what talk in small groups looks like in their disciplines, and how careful study of classroom talk can deepen student learning in these disciplines.

What if we taught our students how to successfully discuss in small groups and then used team time to talk with our colleagues in science, social studies, or mathematics about how they might use the same structures in their disciplines? Students who know how to talk and

think deeply in language arts can use similar structures to create meaning and inquire in social studies. Instead of subject content integrated across the disciplines, the process of talking to learn would be integrated.

The content areas, too, realize that talk is important (Chi, 2009; Scott, 2008; Solomon &Black, 2008). Now is the time to visit with colleagues and see if we can share the talk structures we are teaching with one another. When Stephanie shared what she did with her teammates, many of them decided to use the same kinds of language with their students to create and sustain small groups. Terms like piggybacking ideas or peanut gallery already have meaning in one setting, so students can more readily use these ideas in the content classes. The concepts will change, depending on the discipline, but the language the teacher uses for instructions to the groups will be similar.

Middle school teachers might start by utilizing the team planning time. Can space be made for the team to explore talking to learn across the disciplines? Perhaps the team might study a book, such as Exploring Talk in School (Mercer &Hodgkinson, 2008), that contains chapters about talk for various disciplines. Perhaps they might develop large overriding essential questions across disciplines (Wiggins &McTighe, 2005). Even if the whole team isn't interested, perhaps a couple of teachers might collaborate. Participants might explore how talk works in their classrooms and then develop a plan for implementation.

I am not advocating that students work in small groups all day long. There is certainly time and space for whole-group instruction, individual reading and writing, and silent work. Instead, I am urging that we recognize the need for talk, take time to teach our students how to be successful at using talking to learn, and then share with others the discoveries that we are making. I am challenging us to listen carefully as our students discover the intellectual power they feel when they share and build on the ideas of others, and then celebrate that moment with them. I am reminding us to support teachers like Mrs. Smith in finding the strategies she needs to encourage more talk in her classroom. Let's point her toward a colleague who can help her take the risks needed to make discussion successful in her classroom. Together, we can all make the most of talk.

Sidebar

The most exciting part of Barnes's discovery was that during exploratory talk, students built on each others' ideas, actually creating thoughts that no one in the group had previously conceived.

Instead of being invited into a conversation about literature, students are being interrogated on the finer points of the story.

Various cultures and social classes have particular ground rules for talk; students will be more successful talking on their own if we spend time preparing them for the conversation. Students who have learned how to work in small groups in literature are ripe to take that knowledge into the science, social studies, or mathematics classroom and adapt it to

particular content.

Students who know how to talk and think deeply in language arts can use similar structures to create meaning and inquire in social studies.

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