

Getting Them to Talk:

*A Guide to Leading Discussions
in Middle Years Classrooms*

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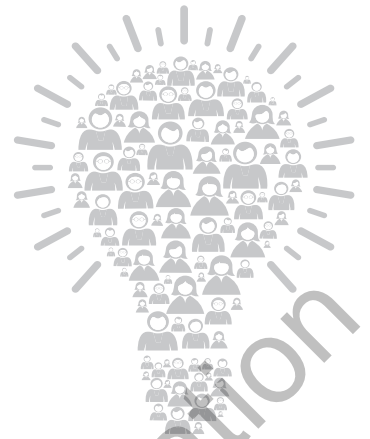
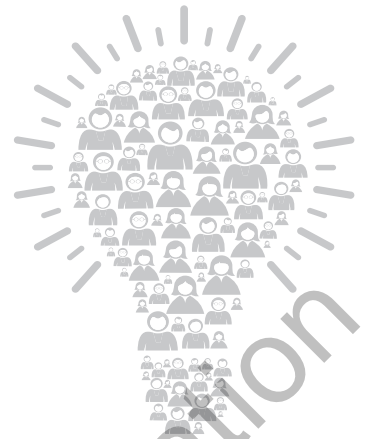


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Chapter 1

Value of Talk in the Middle Years

Why is talk important for learning? It helps us articulate what we know and believe and gives us the chance to try out different ideas to see if they have credibility under scrutiny from others. If we can learn to listen to others and really hear their arguments, we can then reflect on how they coincide with our own thinking and beliefs and refine our own thinking.

The challenge for middle years teachers is: In our subject areas, with our content standards, how can we best help our students move from the concrete thinking of their primary days to an ever-increasing analytical, complex way of thinking? How will we develop their thinking and communicating with others so that they become successful adults capable of thoughtful contributions to their communities at large?

The adolescent brain is developing in areas of reasoning/problem solving, decision making/hypothetical situations, processing information/efficiency, expertise/use of experience and moral reasoning/social cognition. Our challenge is to support and encourage our students in all these areas so that they can reach their goals. Is it easy? No. Is it doable? Yes.

This book will show you how to create questions that help students in their intellectual development. It will provide strategies, background and advice on the mechanics of class

discussions that could open up the world to them – the world as others think about it and experience it. Discussions allow them to develop empathy and intellectual depth, and as they learn to share, they find out that they are not alone in their journey through adolescence.

Before we get to strategies for encouraging productive student talk, let us first discuss the reasons for making this a priority. First, research on adolescent development shows that middle years students learn best through social interaction and active learning. Second, the strength of our democracy lies in its citizens having the ability to productively engage in civil discourse. Third, we know that the future employers of our present middle years students highly prioritise communication and collaboration skills. And fourth, the standards require it. Let's discuss each of these reasons in a little more depth.

Developmentally Appropriate

Sandra Schurr (2003) offers these reasons for the importance of class discussions in middle years classrooms:

1. They provide the teacher with feedback about student learning.
2. They lend themselves to higher-order thinking skills.
3. They help students develop interests and values as well as change attitudes.
4. They allow students to become more active participants in their learning.
5. They enable students to hear and offer alternative points of view and to explore complex issues. (p. 26)

Identity formation.

As educators, we can't overestimate the effect that class discussions can have on young adolescents' identity development. Middle years students, in forming their identities, must try out ideas and try on different personas in the process of figuring out how they as individuals link to society and as they link their childhoods to their adulthoods. All the ways they interact with others in small and large groups affect who they become: whether they speak or hold back in groups, whether they agree or disagree with the majority view, whether they hold onto their position or change it due to peer pressure, whether others really listen to them or the teacher dismisses them as "off topic" before really understanding how they are linking their ideas together.

Young adolescents "negotiate" their views of themselves – how competent they can be, how independent they can be, how well they can get along with others – in their interactions with other people. Over time, in the "give and take" of these interactions, they form a stronger sense of identity or reinforce beliefs of inadequacy. (Strahan, L'Esperance, Van Hoose, 2009, p. 67)

Social interaction. If you have spent 2 minutes in a classroom full of middle years students, you know that you are working against a force of nature to suppress students' talking. In her study of what types of teaching practices students prefer, Theobald (2003) found that of the 155 Year 7 students surveyed, 82% said they either liked or really liked discussions. Why not harness this force for good? Acceptance among their peers is at the forefront of middle years students' minds. If they are able to navigate those social relationships successfully, they are more likely to turn their attention towards academic work (Brighton, 2007; Strahan, L'Esperance, Van Hoose, 2009). Allowing students to talk with each other gives them the opportunity to develop their ability to interact positively with their peers within a structured environment and under the guidance of a teacher.

Social and cognitive connections. Vygotsky's studies (1978) of the connection between cognitive development and collaborative activities showed "social interactions – with other children and with adults – enable children to expand their prior knowledge and their use of language ... language as a social tool for sharing thoughts and language as a psychological tool for constructing thoughts" (Wood, Roser & Martinez, 2001). Other studies have shown the significance of dialogue in shaping the way adolescents understand the world and how social learning connections result in products that are far more complex than those constructed individually. Strahan, L'Esperance and Van Hoose (2009) summarised it:

When conversation becomes purposeful dialogue, collaboration is more than getting along nicely. It is actively interpreting, processing, and making sense of new information. These dynamics clearly integrate neurological, cognitive, and social modes of reasoning, all of which flow together in learning through experience. (pp. 31–32)

Active learning. Abundant research shows that young adolescents learn best when they are actively engaged in learning as opposed to passively receiving knowledge. When teachers facilitate activities that allow students to take ownership and responsibility for their learning through collaboration with other students and the teacher, learning is greatly enhanced (NMSA, 2010). An additional key characteristic of successful middle years education is for teachers to use multiple learning and teaching approaches, one of which is interaction and dialogue among students and with the teacher. Progressive educators have proposed for over a century that we stimulate students' growth through activities that encourage inquiry, problem solving, creativity, collaboration and self-expression and that teachers should act as facilitators of learning rather than knowledge givers (Guttek, 2004; Schiro, 2008).

Democratic Education

Obviously, our country has difficulty with productive civil discourse as evidenced by the inability of political parties in parliament to reach informed decisions through discussion, critical analysis and reflection. And TV is rife with talk shows and reality shows of people talking “at” rather than “with” each other. Perhaps if middle years students learn to listen to opposing viewpoints and engage in critical analysis, they will appreciate the necessity of doing so and have the skills to do so as adults. I do not believe early adolescents have an innate ability to consider opposing viewpoints in a civil manner. In fact, the amount of violence in middle schools appears to be evidence that they have difficulty with this, so we must teach them the skills of presenting alternative viewpoints in a constructive manner.

Some suggest that one of the main priorities of schooling should be preparing students to be active participants in our democratic society by critically analysing and reflecting on topics and issues. An open flow of ideas and the ability to consider the ideas of those who have a different perspective is critical to the discourse necessary in a democracy. Classrooms that prepare students to be engaged citizens encourage a community of learning where all early adolescents consider a range of ideas, engage in discussion and debate, and develop critical thinking skills as they make informed conclusions about problems and ideas (Apple & Beane, 2007; Beane, 2013).

Teachers have the opportunity to use class discussions as a tool not only to teach content, but also to teach the skills necessary to participate in civil discourse. Teachers can guide students to really listen to the ideas of others, to consider ideas intellectually, to look for evidence to support or discredit different claims, to introduce an opposing point of view in a

productive way, to analyse data together and to support their own opinions with evidence.

Employer Demands

Hansen & Hansen (2010) shared a review of 20 skills and values employers look for in job-seekers. Eight of those skills can be directly influenced and developed through class discussions: communication skills, interpersonal abilities, multicultural sensitivity, problem solving, teamwork, adaptability/flexibility, positive attitude and willingness to learn. When teachers use class discussions as a pedagogical tool, they are helping to prepare their students to be successful in the workforce.

Research shows that people with strong verbal skills have more success both professionally and socially because they can communicate clearly, avoid misunderstandings and have power in persuading others to adopt their points of view. Those with strong communication skills are simply more impressive to others, both in person, on the phone and through electronic media.

Comprehension and Collaboration

In Years 6–8 students are expected to, engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on year level topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly. This book is designed to provide you the tools to help your students develop their comprehension and collaboration skills. The middle years Australian Curriculum: English content descriptions in the Language strand include a focus on speaking, listening and using textual information to support claims. Other example standards include:

- Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- Come to discussions prepared, having read or studied required material; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence on the topic, text or issue to probe and reflect on ideas under discussion.
- Follow rules for collegial discussions, set specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed.
- Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text or issue under discussion.
- Review the key ideas expressed and demonstrate understanding of multiple perspectives through reflection and paraphrasing.
- Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g. visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how it contributes to a topic, text or issue under study.
- Delineate a speaker's argument and specific claims, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not.

Table 1.1 lists the skills students must demonstrate before and during discussions. This book will focus on explicitly teaching these skills and providing strategies for students to actively practise them.

Table 1.1

<p>Before a Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read or study material being discussed• Come prepared with evidence for conclusions• Understand rules for collegial discussions• Set goals and deadlines• Interpret information in diverse media and formats
<p>During a Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Build on others' ideas• Express their own ideas clearly• Refer to evidence• Probe ideas under discussion• Reflect on ideas under discussion• Respond with elaboration and detail• Understand multiple perspectives• Paraphrase contributions of others• Distinguish claims supported by reasons and evidence from those that are not