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First Things First

Teachers with a good many years behind them may conjure up from the mists of time their most challenging year. My most challenging year as a teacher conjures up cheeseburgers and fries. In the fall of 1989, looking at my assignments and class rosters, I discovered I had three periods of lunch duty in a large junior high school. The cafeteria was packed, and the decibel level was off the charts; those seventh, eighth, and ninth graders could talk! When these lively students came to my post-lunch history classroom, it was as if they were on the eighteenth hole at the US Open, sitting in hushed silence as I lined up for my last putt. The difference was that this crowd was considerably less interested in the outcome. I would ask a question and wait for the answer. Crickets. At least crickets make sounds, I thought, as I prepared to answer my own question or lob it to my fan club in the front row. I was determined to get the answer one way or another. That was the important thing. After all, I was in the “right-answer” business.

There is a reason for the kind of classroom silence many teachers experience on a regular basis. Students are not certain they know the answer, and if they think they know it, there is a chance it may not be the one the teacher wants. Reading teachers’ minds is an imperfect science. Not knowing something in class may be an all-too-frequent occurrence, and, as Beghetto (2017) reminds us, “most of

us don't like uncertainty. It's uncomfortable" (p. 20). Students, especially those from upper elementary and beyond, often don't answer questions from teachers for the simple reason that they don't want to be wrong. They prefer not to go out on a limb and wind up on the ground, with the possibility of pointing fingers and laughter from classmates. Better to keep quiet.

This brings us to the beauty and symmetry of paired academic conversations. Students who are reluctant to share in a whole-class setting may find that discussing something with a classmate is not at all frightening. That said, there is no place to hide in a pair. Andrew is responsible for his partner, and his partner returns the favor. That formerly passive classroom can come alive by *reversing the roles*. Students talk while their teacher listens, and the classroom becomes a much more interactive and productive learning environment—and a step removed from one previously focused on the attainment of facts and right answers.

Facts and answers—right or otherwise—are available at the click of a mouse; you can uncover them by asking that little cylinder sitting on the kitchen counter (smart speakers, such as Amazon Echo, Google Home). Zwiers and Crawford (2011) point out that it is what we do with the facts that counts; employers are relying on it: “An educated and productive person in today's world must be able to evaluate the facts and then *use* them for meaningful problem solving. Future workers need to know how to use a variety of critical thinking skills to build complex ideas and solve problems *with others*” (p. 7). That whole “*with others*” part is critical, and it begins with students talking about academic content with other students, not just with the teacher.

This is the power of collaborative learning—the power of *we*. The chapters of this supplemental volume will describe specific techniques and provide concrete tips to make implementing paired work as close to painless as possible. At the same time, if we want students to become adept at communicating, cooperating, and collaborating, there are a few teacher tasks that come under the first-things-first heading.

Help Students See Failure as Opportunity

The great wartime leader Winston Churchill famously said that success is not final and failure is not fatal. Students who are afraid of being wrong or making mistakes need to live and work in classrooms where the prevailing winds dissipate fear as part of a positive classroom climate. It is important that students understand that taking risks is how one moves forward; teachers can use examples of innovators, inventors, coaches, and others who used mistakes to accelerate the learning process. As with any new set of skills, *students will struggle with the interactive strategies in the book*. Shifting from a passive classroom climate to one that is more active entails considerable risk. The status quo is, as I have said many times, a hard taskmaster. The classroom environment must be one that encourages risk and celebrates failure. With any worthwhile endeavor that involves risk, iteration 2.0 is just around the corner.

Establish Conversational Norms

If we want students to develop excellent oral-language skills, what Kagan (1994) calls a “sequential structure” won’t work. One conversation at a time between the teacher and a given student, while others wait their turn, won’t give students enough practice at developing those skills. What Kagan calls the “simultaneity principle” (for example, fifteen simultaneous conversations in a classroom with thirty students) allows students plenty of opportunities to learn basic conversational skills (taking turns, asking questions or paraphrasing for clarity, displaying supportive body language, etc.) in *pairs* before they move into larger groups.

Teachers who help students develop collaborative norms (a set of five or six solid norms is enough) can have students self-assess their own progress in terms of those standards. The norms can be posted and—if they are to be of any use once mounted on the wall—revisited regularly with an eye toward continuous improvement. The posted norms can serve as training wheels until they are second nature to the students. They can always be revisited as necessary.

One middle school teacher structured her norms for collaboration as questions, which she posted and then asked students to review when they were finished working in groups for the day. The questions were along these lines: Did everyone participate? Did we support each other while working together? Did we ask questions or paraphrase to clarify? When brainstorming, did we avoid evaluating the input? Did we focus on the task? Questions like these can help groups improve, and you can use these questions even if paired partners or group members are always changing. They should be discussed up front, then posted. And they should be used as part of the improvement process for collaborative learning. The teacher in this sixth-grade classroom circulated around the room as students self-assessed based on these established norms, then invited some of them to share areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. She understood the value of frequently revisiting the collaborative norms as a critical component of the continuous-improvement cycle.

Leave No Buddy Behind

In one high school classroom, the teacher asked her students to discuss something with their partners. It quickly became apparent to everyone in the room that they had no earthly idea who their partners were. It will come as no surprise that confusion ensued. A set of permanent learning partners would have prevented the resulting disorder and embarrassment.

I recommend teachers have students establish at least one set of four permanent learning partners (other than those seated next to them). During the first week of school, each student can identify four “clock-face” partners (12:00, 3:00, 6:00, and 9:00). On a sheet of paper with a large clock, students can write a name next to each of the times. Samantha’s permanent 12:00 partner is Isaac. Her 3:00 partner is Mandy, and she has two more. The sheet of paper with Samantha’s four partners stays in her notebook (or on her laptop’s desktop) until the teacher decides to have them change partners. At some point, the training wheels come off as they no longer have to

refer to the sheet with the partners listed. If students are provided with plenty of opportunities to meet and talk with these learning partners, they'll quickly learn who they are.

In middle or high school, teachers might use athletic conference schools (Duke, North Carolina, Clemson, and Wake Forest, for example) as names for the four learning partners. In elementary school, students could choose the names of common birds, such as cardinal, blue jay, sparrow, and robin. There is nothing magic about the number four, and students could easily have several permanent partners. These partners can be changed every nine weeks or at the beginning of a new semester. This gives students a choice in the selection of permanent learning partners.

In one classroom a few years ago, I watched from the back of the room as students entered after lunch. On the board were pairs chosen in advance by the teacher; students simply glanced at the board, found their partners, grabbed the materials they would need, and then found some space on the floor as they awaited further instructions. In this way, the teacher took care of the often-political business of choosing partners. She knew with whom she wanted students paired; it was all quick, easy, and efficient.

I have also seen teachers bring the whole class to the center of the room (or to a large open space, free of furniture) with their right hands raised. Students are instructed to shake hands with a partner of their choice. In one elementary classroom, some upbeat music was playing as students moved away from their desks and found a partner. When the music stopped, they turned and faced the teacher, ready for whatever directions were headed their way.

So, getting students into standing or seated pairs can be accomplished through a variety of methods: student choice, teacher choice, and permanent partners. If student desks are in quads (with two desks facing two desks), students can simply turn to face their shoulder partners or look straight ahead at their face partners and initiate whatever conversation is in the offing.

Create a Relational Foundation for Progress

When I'm in a classroom observing a teacher as part of the coaching process, one thing becomes clear early. The teacher has devoted considerable time and energy to the development of effective working relationships with her students—or not. Job one for every classroom teacher is to do what is necessary to build credibility and trust as part of a highly functioning classroom community. For teachers at any level, every conversation and every contact with students works either to foster and improve relationships or to tear them down. Attempting to use any of the interactive strategies in this book in a negative and largely dysfunctional classroom climate may well fail and fail quickly. When I see students working effectively in standing pairs or seated quartets, I appreciate how much work went into creating a first-class relational foundation for learning.

The strategies in the book are effective in positive and cooperative classroom communities where students understand and follow behavioral norms. They are effective where *conversational* norms are understood and pressed into service by teachers and students every day. The strategies are successful in classrooms where students believe that improving skill sets related to communication and collaboration is in their long-term best interests.

These skills are highly valued by employers who search, often in vain, for new hires who can communicate effectively and efficiently in writing, online, and in person. There is no shortcut here; all the worksheets and lectures in the world won't get the job done. No coach ever lectured his or her way to the next game or match. At some point early in the process, we have to get students off the bench and into the game. We must get students who are used to interacting with screens several hours a day to interact face-to-face with peers in classroom settings. The strategies that follow will get students up, moving, pairing, sharing, questioning, pondering, predicting, and connecting through the use of dynamic skill sets that will serve them in the workplace and in life.