

I've Got Something to Say!

How Student Voices Inform Our Teaching

David Booth



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Introduction

About 20 years ago, I was fortunate enough to participate in the Peel Talk Project. With Carol Thornley-Hall and Gordon Wells, I worked as part of an action research team, funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education. Two hundred teachers in the Peel District School Board were engaged in an action research inquiry, examining and implementing strategies for building a talk curriculum in their classrooms. As the Peel teachers explored ways to promote interactive speaking and listening with their students, they shared through professional development events, such as team meetings and conferences, the results of their observations, their findings, and their reflections. They built with one another a strong awareness of the value of talk in their classrooms. What developed was called the “Talk Curriculum.”

Over the three years of the project, many schools in Peel delved further into the processes of how students learn from one another. Several teachers videotaped lessons for discussion with colleagues or wrote articles on their progress with implementing talk as a medium for learning in different components of the school curriculum. The focus was students’ active interaction.

As I reviewed their writing and videotapes from those years, I found I wanted to bring the focus back to the issues that surround talk and move it forward into a discussion of voice. That’s because teachers have the potential to create contexts that permit and encourage young people to express their thoughts and feelings about issues and concerns that matter to them. Students have many ways of revealing their voices: these range from responses to what they read and view in class to contributions to the democratic functioning of their classrooms. When we open up opportunities for them to express themselves, we help them develop a sense of self-efficacy, that they, alongside parents and teachers, can be effective agents of their own learning and growth.

In 2013, as I read through accounts of many interactive experiences with students from teachers whom I have observed and taught with, and whose writing I have included in my own professional books, I thought once again about the Peel Talk Project and its implications for the new emphasis on student voice. As I revisited in my writings the descriptions of what teachers have explored and achieved, I recognized the power of their programs to create stronger schools through incorporating student voice. I also wanted to add to this vital pedagogy ideas from teachers now working with students to implement programs that support this dialogic model of learning. In this resource, I hope that the teacher voices from the past will resonate with the classroom suggestions of teachers today, so that we will see interactive learning as a necessary component on the continuum of educational change.

Here, in *I’ve Got Something to Say!*, you will find 10 chapters — my attempt at developing a structure for implementing choice and voice in our contemporary

classrooms. Each chapter begins with an excerpt of student voices, from transcripts and journals, taken from classrooms where I have worked alongside the teachers. Some voices are from interviews, some are from literature discussions, and others are from storytelling or from speaking in role, but all voices represent students' authentic words as they engage in meaningful classroom events requiring interactive thoughtful responses. The students are thinking aloud about significant issues in their learning and in their lives.

You will find dozens of strategies for implementing a talk curriculum that supports voice and choice. Many of these are provided by teachers drawing on their classroom experiences from more than 25 years. Strategies range from classroom meetings to blogs, from peer editing to social activism. At the end of each chapter, there is also a list featuring suggestions for activating student voices in your classroom.

Those who study educational changes and trends support the idea that student voices are central to effective classroom learning; indeed, as teachers we know that when students have a sense of ownership in how their school day functions and feel secure that they will be heard, the classroom becomes a vital place. Establishing our programs of learning in an interactive, supportive, and challenging environment will do much to help our students articulate their thoughts and affirm that they have something to say.