

# **Cultivating Classroom Conversation**

**Strategies and Activities That Build Student Dialogue  
Into Standards-Based Lessons**

by

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# Introduction

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## **Who is this book for?**

This book is for all teachers who value the role that discussion plays in helping students process curricular material. Actual face-to-face dialogue and verbal exchanges are becoming lost forms of communication for those who have grown up surrounded by social networking, texting and blogs. These are the digital-native students that we have in our classrooms today. Teachers who are seeking ways to add student-to-student discussion into standards-based lessons will find a wealth of ideas within.

## **Who are we, the authors?**

We are educators. Between us, we have taught for almost fifty years, in classrooms ranging from Foundation level to Year Twelve. We have also taught teachers, both in the university classroom and in professional development workshops. It is our interaction with teachers on the front-lines of curriculum and instruction that encouraged us to write this book.

## **Why should we be concerned about building discussion into standards-based lessons?**

Teachers are sensing the need to build on and reinforce oral language development as today's students are entering our classrooms with a decreased oral vocabulary. Our students' primary form of communication between friends occurs via texting, social media sites, image-sharing websites and blogs. With most interaction transpiring digitally, students are losing the ability to read body language and interpret facial expressions. Face-to-face contact is essential in developing empathy for others. The opportunities for dialogue within the family are decreasing. In our fast-paced culture, fewer families than ever have a nightly meal together where, in the past, "family meetings" have occurred. When children travel in a vehicle with the family today, instead of singing songs, playing word games and telling stories, as in the past, the DVD screens pop down and a movie or video is the norm. Student-to-student classroom talk is needed to supplement the loss of conversation outside of the school setting.

## **What makes a good discussion activity?**

Student engagement and the ability to embed content standards within the discussion are the key hallmarks of any effective strategy. There are several ways to structure student talk. The divisions in the book identify these structural components – individual and partner activities, small group activities and whole class activities. The goal of the day's lesson and the amount of time that can be devoted to the activity are factors in deciding which activity is appropriate for which lesson.

### **Where did we find these discussion activities?**

The strategies in this book were compiled from a variety of sources. Some were designed by us from our lesson plans and interaction with students in the classroom. Others we discovered at conferences, workshops and professional development opportunities that we have experienced over the course of our careers. These we have adapted and tweaked to make them our own. If we found a source for an activity as we conducted research for the book, the original creator is credited at the end of the strategy. Finally, some of these activities, such as Think-Pair-Share, have been in the general realm of instructional experiences for years. In all cases, we have modified the activities we chose with the goal that they be useful as possible for both the teachers and students of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century classroom.

### **A Final Thought**

The degree of sophistication and length of discussion varies within the book's activities. Many students are more comfortable and more willing to talk with one other person than with a larger group. For students who have had little experience in face-to-face communication, we recommend beginning with the partner activities or with those larger group activities that require a slightly more minimal response from students, such as Pass the Word. This will help those less certain talkers gain the experience that bolsters confidence as the year proceeds.

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### Why “Discuss” Classroom Discussion?

It may seem counter-intuitive – some may even say *counterproductive* – that we begin our book about classroom conversation with no less than three chapters of *reading* about the topic. ‘Come on!’ some of you may be thinking, ‘everyone knows what discussion is! We do it all the time – at lunch in the staff room, in staff meetings, at parent-teacher conferences, you name it.’ So perhaps it is reasonable to ask then: What more, really, *is* there to say about the role of discussion in the classroom? It turns out, quite a bit.

In 1915, a gentleman named W.S. Gray published the first standardised reading test. In short, hundreds of other tests were created and administered to measure comprehension – and students’ performance on these tests were used to diagnose learning disabilities, to predict their future success, to place them in special programs and to demonstrate the instructional effectiveness of the teachers. This practice happened particularly between the years 1930 to 1965. The pervasiveness and subsequent use of standardised testing only grew in succeeding years. And, in the last decade, as technology has become more and more sophisticated, so too have the tests and the statistical sophistication we use to measure the reliability and validity of those tests.

Those of you who have been teaching for more than ten years have witnessed what this growing commonness of testing has done to classroom instruction and, really, the entire classroom *environment*. There’s a growing schism in education as teachers and administrators struggle with the dichotomy between sound educational theory and day-to-day practice. We know what *works* when it comes to helping students learn and process material (e.g. multi-modal instruction, open-ended questions, authentic real-world tasks, cooperative learning, etc). Yet what we *do*, largely, is wait for the next formative assessment to roll around and offer a thousand and one test-taking strategies to help the students do as well as they can. Much of this flies in the face of what learning really is. As teachers, we know it.

Now consider further this list of skills most sought after by employers in the post-education world of the student. According to career development experts, PhDs Randall and Katharine Hansen, the critical skills that companies demand of their job seekers include:

- **Communication skills.** These skills address the ability to understand not just what is written, but also what is shared within the workplace verbally. Listening, writing and speaking effectively are paramount.
- **Analytic and research skills.** Employers want people who can assess a situation, seek multiple perspectives, identify key issues that need further attention and, when warranted, gather more information. Employees will have to design, plan, organise and carry out projects or tasks within an allotted time-frame. More and more, there will continue to be a need for highly analytical thinkers who have a talent for scrutinising, improving and streamlining complex work practices.
- **Flexibility and adaptability at managing multiple priorities.** Students now will need to be able to effectively cope with multiple assignments and tasks. To do so, they’ll need to successfully accept others’ points of views about those tasks, set priorities and adapt to work conditions and assignments that change and evolve constantly.

- **Interpersonal ability.** It might seem hard to imagine this one in a world of “selfies” and continuous Facebook or Twitter or Instagram updating but, truly, today’s students will need to relate to their co-workers. They will need to be able to inspire others to participate and even to mitigate conflict when the going gets tough. And because so many of today’s (and tomorrow’s) jobs involve working in one or more groups, students must have the ability to work with others in a professional manner to achieve a common goal. Yes, relationship-building is not out just yet.
- **Leadership and management skills.** A key part of the bullet just listed is that of being able, at times, to assume a leadership position. Managing co-workers to find solutions using their creativity, reasoning and own past experiences will be a commodity in the business world. Today’s students, as they become job seekers, must be able to lead co-workers to their most productive levels with confidence.
- **Multicultural sensitivity and awareness.** We are in an ever-changing world. This statement goes far beyond its usual realm of reference to our evolving technologies: we are also talking about workplace *diversity*. Job seekers must demonstrate a sensitivity and awareness to other people and cultures to build rapport with a workforce in multicultural settings.

So, is there a disconnect between “what the world wants” our students to be able to accomplish and what current education demands of them? It certainly seems so. And yet there is good news – a solution even – a way to bridge that gap between the *theory* of educational best practices and that of the current reality, the actual *practice*. What is that solution, that “magic bullet”? It’s surprisingly simple: incorporate more classroom discussion, more academic *conversation* into the classroom curriculum.

### Justifying the Use of Discussion in Today’s Classrooms

It might seem a scary proposition, especially to new teachers, to pro-actively and deliberately dedicate even more time in the classroom to talking. As we mentioned previously, the temptation is always there to take a more “drill and skill” approach when that next assessment is looming just a few weeks off. But a careful review of the literature about the powers and benefits of discussion should begin to allay most fears – and provide you with the ammunition needed to justify its place in your classroom. Consider the *skills* that are addressed when thoughtful classroom discussion is allowed. Then compare these skills to the workplace demands those same future students will face in the future. (Keep in mind too that since these *are* skills, not individual pieces of information, they are transferable across many disciplines or concepts within a single course of study.)

Discussion fosters:

- |                        |                                 |
|------------------------|---------------------------------|
| – Communication Skills | – Analytical and Logical Skills |
| – Leadership Skills    | – Divergent Thinking            |
| – Interpersonal Skills | – Listening Skills              |
| – Motivational Skills  | – Presentation Skills           |
| – Team Building Skills |                                 |

All of the bullets listed above support an educator’s goals in the classroom. But, it is also easy to see that there are plenty of reasons, from a “productive citizen” point of view, to increase the amount of discussion. Still, there’s *also* evidence that discussion will actually help all students in the classroom more *thoroughly process and retain the teacher’s instructional objectives*. Here is why:

- **Humans have an innate need to process events and ideas verbally.** How many times have you “bounced an idea” off a co-worker or tried to make sense of a problem or some source of confusion by talking it out with another individual? We are social animals. The brain is wired for social interaction. Discussion is a natural way to accommodate this fact. Furthermore, discussion develops the ability to communicate ideas and meaning clearly and is the foundation of literacy.
- **When we speak about something, we make it “visible” and more concrete – for ourselves and others.** Not everyone will ask questions about things they do not understand, but others in the room might. Discussion can elicit questions and answers that the teacher may not have considered. It is this back and forth that supports learning for everyone in the room – not just those students who already “get it”. Students, we know, acquire knowledge and insight from diverse points of view. The teacher need not be the sole source when so many others can assist.
- **Discussion provides a way of testing our ideas or exploring new ones.** In this way, we are able to further our students’ mental agility as they develop an awareness of and tolerance for, ambiguity as the complexity of a topic expands.
- **Conversation provides student practice with problems and concepts.** Discussion allows them to see connections between similar, previously taught ideas. In this way, an analogy can be formed: “I thought about Concept A this way and Concept B is similar. I wonder if the approach I took before might work equally as well here?” Students are often forced to recognise and investigate their assumptions, assumptions about both current and older objectives. Conversation provides the students with stimulus for those higher level thinking skills of synthesis and evaluation. As such, these skills can be carried over into other arenas of the school day, from cooperative learning to expository writing.
- **Students become more connected to a topic.** We’ve known for years that making the content *matter* is key to making it *stick*. Making the content relevant to real-life situations is sometimes difficult, but discussion takes some of the pressure off the teacher. Many times, it is through discussion among the students that the “So what?” question about the material at hand can be discovered. When the students talk, it is their point of view that prevails. In fact, in a room that successfully employs conversation, students become co-creators of the body of knowledge.
- **Discussion develops the habits of collaborative learning wherein attentive and respectful listening is encouraged.** In this way, each person can have a place to offer their own experiences as they relate to the content. And again, as a bonus, this skill is highly transferable across all curricular areas.

### Delineating the Difference Between “Student Talk” and “Quality Conversation”

Many of us have heard the old adage that a good teacher is more the *facilitator* in the classroom and less the “sage on the stage”. But when it comes to whole class discussion techniques or methods (which make up the bulk of this book), we must be cautious to draw a line between merely having the students “talk more” and that of actually “discussing” meaningfully the concepts at hand in a collaborative, cooperative way.

One of the most powerful ways to show (to students and teachers alike) the difference between the two is to consider the twin ideas of a “basketball style” of discussion and that of a “ping-pong style” conversation.

A ping-pong style conversation is most definitely teacher-driven. The teacher asks a question (arrow out), the student answers (arrow back). Then the teacher asks another. The student responds and sends it back to the teacher. This style of “call and response” is not *bad*, per se



and there *are* occasions when a teacher might seek to employ that particular style; for example, when debriefing directions to see if students understand the steps in a particular process, the teacher might ask, “Johnny, what is the first step? Good. Sarah, what’s next?” By doing this, the teacher can “spot check” their understanding.

Unlike the back-and-forth of the ping-pong style discussion, the basketball conversation seeks to be more organic – and more inclusive. Here, the teacher provides a question and then lets the students have the opportunity to respond before taking back the reigns. One student responds to the initial question and then another responds to that. She or he might agree or disagree with the first student. The third to join the conversation might provide a real life example of the topic at hand. The fourth student might ask a clarifying question.

Note that in both cases, ping-pong and basketball, there is certainly a lot of student talking occurring. And yet only one of those is truly a “discussion” or an inclusive whole-class “conversation”. Only one of those, the basketball style, allows for maximisation of all the delineated benefits described in the previous pages of this chapter. And that’s the style we will explore in this book.

Let’s get everyone involved. Let’s get everyone talking.

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## ABC Brainstorming

**Time Required: 20 minutes**

**Year Levels: 3–12**

ABC Brainstorming is a simple and effective way to engage students in considering what they know about the content of any given unit of study. It is a strategy that focuses on vocabulary and can be utilised across all subject areas. This is an excellent low-prep or high-impact activity, with the teacher's role being only that of a facilitator. In fact, ABC Brainstorming is so straightforward that it requires the least amount of explanation compared to nearly any other strategy in this book. The only thing required of you is to decide in advance if you want the class working individually or in pairs. Then distribute the ABC Brainstorming sheet and let the students begin working. Their goal is to list as many vocabulary words, phrases, people, places, events or any other terms as possible that begin with the designated letter of the alphabet. All responses must relate to or describe the current class topic.

Discussion becomes a part of the experience when students share their responses with other class members, either individually or in partner teams, comparing and contrasting results.

There are other ways to enhance the effectiveness of ABC Brainstorming and to adapt it to classroom instruction:

- The results of the brainstorming session can provide an excellent review tool at the end of the unit. Students can also use their individual response sheets as a study guide.
- This activity can also be the focus of a simple pre-assessment at the beginning of a unit to discern what students already know about the topic at hand. When completed as a pre-assessment, the responses can be saved and redistributed to students at the end of the unit. This will give them the opportunity to analyse the words they chose before experiencing the unit study. They can then add responses they learned during the course of the unit – or remove words that they deem inaccurate in light of their new knowledge.
- The critical thinking skill of justification can be built into this strategy. When students share their lists with other classmates, they can be required to explain why certain words or terms were chosen for inclusion. As students examine others' lists, they can highlight words they feel are not related to the topic or words that they find intriguing or insightful. When the whole class reassembles, students can be asked to share these highlighted words.
- The results of the ABC Brainstorming session can lay the groundwork for a great classroom word wall.
- Instead of only single word responses, you might have pairs of students write about what they recall of a topic by composing each entry with a beginning word in ABC order. This is

### ABC Brainstorming

**Topic:** Romeo and Juliet

**Name:** Joe

A – apothecary	N – nurse
B	O
C	P – prince, play
D – Death (lots!)	Q
E	R – rich
F – family	S – soliloquy
G	T – tragedy
H	U
I – intrigue	V – Verona
J	W
K	X
L	Y
M – Mercutio	Z

little more than a gimmick to get the students interested in writing, but it is highly effective. Thus, for example, if the topic at hand is that of adaptation, Student A might start with, "A great number of creatures have developed adaptations that help them survive in their habitats." Student B might respond: "Because of these adaptations, they are able to find food and shelter as needed for that survival." Student A: "Chameleons, for example, can change their colour to blend into the scenery." Student B: "Digging burrows underground help rabbits stay protected from predators."

- The preceding variation can also become a whole class activity. Each student is given one letter of the alphabet. A sentence pertaining to the unit of instruction is composed with a beginning word that starts with the assigned letter. The class then shares their sentences by reading them aloud in alphabetical order.
- A more involved whole class activity – and a true extension of the brainstorming worksheet – is to create a class ABC book. Using the example given above, the book could be titled, "The ABCs of Adaptation". A letter would be assigned to an individual or two letters to partners. The students first choose a word beginning with their letter that best relates to the concept of adaptation. They then design a page for an ABC book that describes the word and offers an illustration of its meaning. *G is for Googol – A Maths Alphabet Book* and *Q is for Quark – A Science Alphabet Book*, both by David Schwartz, are great models to show the class. When completed, the pages are assembled and the class has a culminating product for the unit. Editing discussion groups can be utilised to improve upon the finished product.

*Further considerations:*

- Students who struggle with this activity should be encouraged to use other resources in order to stimulate their thinking – class notes, the textbook, posters on the wall, online assistance, etc.
- It's likely that most students will have a hard time with at least some of the letters. To deal with this, once time has been called, you might let students work in pairs to compare their lists. Partners can help fill in the blank spots on each others' work.