

Academic Conversations

Classroom Talk That Fosters Critical Thinking
and Content Understandings

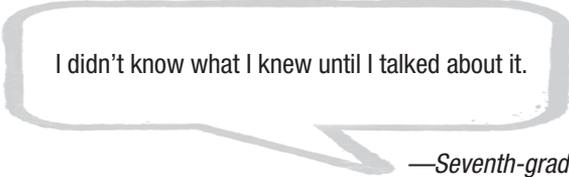


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Introduction



I didn't know what I knew until I talked about it.

—*Seventh-grade science student*

Since the dawn of language, conversations have been powerful teachers. They engage, motivate, and challenge. They help us build ideas, solve problems, and communicate our thoughts. They cause ideas to stick and grow in our minds. They teach us how other people see and do life, and they teach other people how we see and do life. Conversations strengthen our comprehension of new ideas.

Conversations are also powerful sculptors. They shape our identities, thoughts, beliefs, and emotions. We all have had intense conversations from which we walked away (or lost sleep) mulling over the ideas that we discussed. Conversations can leave us pondering and processing ideas for hours, days, and even years. These ideas, in turn, contribute to the inner dialogues that we hold in our heads throughout each day (Vygotsky 1986), which sculpt our thoughts—whether we like it or not.

More than we realize, we are the products of thousands of conversations.

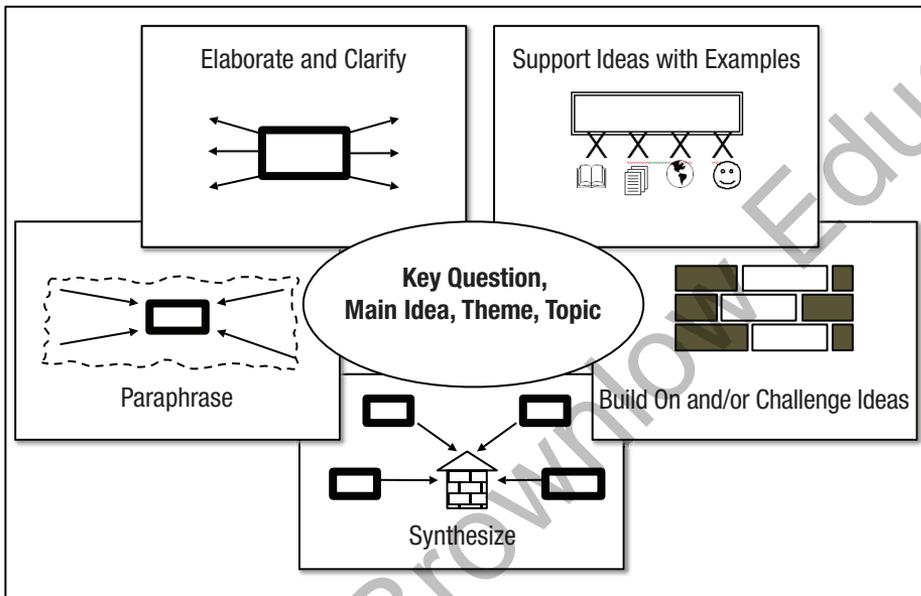
As we worked in classrooms as instructional coaches and began to tap the teaching and sculpting power of extended, back-and-forth talk between students, an approach emerged that we called academic conversations. We then wrote down some of the ideas, stories, and examples, and hope that they will help you sharpen and deepen the learning that is already happening in each of your lessons. But be ready for a louder classroom.

What Are Academic Conversations?

Conversations are exchanges between people who are trying to learn from one another and build meanings that they didn't have before. Partners take turns talking, listening, and responding to each other's comments. Academic conversations are sustained and purposeful conversations about school topics. These topics vary widely, ranging from themes in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* to causes of the French Revolution, from the role of geography in culture to the debate on the use of stem cells. But regardless of topic or content area, in our classroom observations and analyses

of transcripts we found five core conversation skills: elaborate and clarify; support ideas with examples; build on and/or challenge a partner’s ideas; paraphrase; and synthesize conversation points. The diagram depicts how these skills, described in more detail in Chapter 2, are used to explore and focus on an academic topic.

Five Skills That Focus and Deepen Academic Conversations



These skills (some of which are also called discourse moves) work together to help students focus on and explore an important question, idea, or topic. You will notice most of these skills in your own conversations with colleagues and friends. And even though this book emphasizes paired conversations, these are skills that empower students to communicate well in a variety of situations, such as whole-class discussions, small groups, workplace meetings, social gatherings, and family interactions. These communication skills also align very well with the skills needed for high-quality academic writing and reading.

A Brief Background of Academic Conversation Work

In the years leading up to the writing of this book, we observed, as instructional coaches, many classrooms that used a wide variety of what were considered “best practices.” We saw some

students who were engaged and talking productively. But the other students, many of whom were English language learners (ELLs) and speakers of nonmainstream dialects of English, weren't talking much. And as we listened in to what students were talking about, we realized that they weren't having *productive* conversations. They could answer questions in short think-pair-shares and use memorized sentence starters to respond to the teacher, but they seldom took turns to negotiate meaning or dig into a topic. Students seldom co-constructed ideas, clarified thoughts for each other, or supported their opinions.

During our work with teachers, the focus on classroom talk intensified one day when we asked a fourth-grade student what she liked to do. Her eyes got really wide, and without hesitation, she emphatically said, "I *love* to talk!" This was quite true, but most of her talk, like that of others in the class, was not academic. And a handful of students in the class did not like to talk, especially in whole-class discussions. Many discussions and "conversations" were similar to this:

A: *Why did the author write this?*

B: To teach us about courage.

A: *Yeah, the guy was brave.*

B: Okay. What do we do now?

We then looked at the literature that argues for more and better student talk in classrooms, and we wondered if we could do something that tapped into students' passions for talking and also encouraged shy students to talk academically—and to each other. We had seen quite a few resources on teacher-led whole-class and group discussions, but we found few practical resources on training students to converse academically in pairs and small groups on their own.

Teachers whom we coached and their colleagues became interested in the topic of classroom conversations and joined the discussions, expressing their desire to improve students' oral language skills, critical thinking, and content understandings far beyond what tests required. Teachers also wanted a way to see students' learning that didn't show up in their writing or on multiple-choice tests. Teachers wanted to transform their classrooms into places where students initiated and maintained conversations, creating, shaping, applying, negotiating, and sharing academic ideas.

To inform our work with teachers and to write this book, we built on the extensive research and fieldwork on classroom discourse and cooperative learning. We often referred to the work of experts in this area, such as Courtney Cazden (2001), Roland Tharp and Ronald Gallimore (1991), Claude Goldenberg (1991), Neil Mercer (1995), Norman Fairclough (2003), John Dewey (1963 [1938]), Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1986), Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), Barbara Rogoff (1990), Mary Schleppegrell (2004), and Jerome Bruner (1986). The bulk of our work was done in language arts, social studies, and science classrooms. For conversation work in math, we recommend resources by Chapin, O'Connor, and Anderson (2009).

Audience for This Book

This book is most appropriate for teachers of language arts, social studies, history, and science in grades three through twelve. It is also meant for literacy coaches, special education teachers, curriculum specialists, and teachers of ELLs.

Parents can also benefit from this book. Many ideas in the following chapters can be used at home to improve conversations with toddlers, children, adolescents, and even spouses. The more and earlier that we have productive conversations with children, listening to their ideas, validating them, and clarifying them, the more practice children get at conversation skills and thinking. This prepares them for school interactions and thinking throughout life. Parents can use conversation strategies to talk about a story, an object, a TV show, animals, day trips, current events, and so on.

Objectives of This Book

This book attempts to equip educators to do the following:

- » Teach students to converse in academic ways, using the five core academic conversation skills described in Chapter 2.
- » Teach students content understandings and vocabulary through conversations, discussions, debates, and other oral interactions.
- » Weave conversations into what teachers already do, every day. Teachers will be able to fortify lessons with authentic and extended conversations, including discipline-specific methods (e.g., case studies in the history chapter, creative writing projects in the language arts chapter, and labs in the science chapter).
- » Train students to become more aware of how they think (metacognition) and to clearly express their thought processes to others.
- » Use conversations as formative and summative assessments of a wide range of knowledge, skills, and engagement indicators.
- » Build students' independence in facilitating their own academic conversations in pairs, small groups, and even whole-class settings. (Students will depend less and less on teacher prompts and guidance for their thinking and will become managers of their own ideas as they think together in conversation. Students will become prompters of one another's deep thinking, without relying on the teacher.)

- » Build students' academic communication skills, which are the skills that tend not to be practiced in social situations outside of school, particularly in low-income homes and communities that do not speak mainstream dialects of English. (These highly valued oral skills are not emphasized in most state tests, curriculum programs, or intervention efforts, yet academic and professional success depends on them. They are major gate-keeper skills, and too many students who lack them are being stopped and turned away at this gate.)

Overview of Chapters

The first half of the book offers a wide-angle view of conversation and how it can be used across disciplines; the second half emphasizes specific disciplines and assessment. Chapters 2 through 10 contain multiple activities (denoted in the text by a pencil-and-paper icon) and examples of student conversations.

Chapter 1 describes the core principles of learning that provide a rationale for using and teaching academic conversation skills in the classroom. We delve into how students develop and learn through talk. Chapter 2 describes what teachers should do to prepare for conversation work. It outlines the five core conversation skills and behaviors. Chapter 3 presents activities to teach the skills described in Chapter 2. Chapter 4 covers the design of prompts and conversation tasks, and Chapter 5 includes specific strategies for teaching various conversation skills and for training students to hold advanced conversations across content areas. Chapter 6 focuses on how we can use conversation to build grammar and vocabulary, the two main gears of language.

One of the challenges of teaching conversation skills is that different disciplines have different rules and approaches for conversations. Chapter 7 highlights how conversation skills can be developed and used in language arts and English classes. It emphasizes conversations about literature and for writing analytical and persuasive essays. Chapter 8 covers conversations about history and social science issues, which can be used to develop students' critical thinking skills of debate, persuasion, interpretation, and application. Chapter 9 describes how to build scientific thinking skills through conversation, and how to build conversation skills through science. This chapter covers how to converse about scientific inquiry and experimentation, emphasizing the importance of connecting to previously learned science ideas to form hypotheses and foundations for claims. Chapter 10 describes how to use conversations as assessments, to show us how students are learning, the meanings they have built, and their abilities to make new meanings

with another person. Conversations can show language skills, conversation behaviors, content knowledge, and even engagement. This chapter offers ideas and rubrics for formative and summative assessment of conversation as well as ideas for using conversation to assess reading, writing, and content understandings. Finally, Chapter 11 concludes with a synthesis of the previous chapters and offers practical suggestions.

At the end of each chapter we include a set of prompts that encourage readers to reflect on salient points in the chapter and begin to apply the ideas to their specific settings.

Like you, we are passionate about developing language, conversation skills, thinking skills, content understandings, and student character in classroom settings, especially in schools with high numbers of ELLs and speakers of nonprivileged dialects. We have worked extensively in urban settings with students who communicate in ways that do not neatly merge and align with the language of mainstream school and professional settings. These highly intelligent, motivated, and diverse students deserve classroom experiences that help them develop into deeper thinkers and clearer communicators. We hope that the following chapters will help you create such experiences.