



# How Rich Is Your Classroom Discourse?

Effective class discussions focus on critical thinking rather than right answers.

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You ask the students, “What is the main idea of the passage?”

Joseph responds, “Always persevere,” to which you reply, “Very good, Joseph.”

In the average classroom, as much as 70% of instructional time consists of these kinds of verbal exchanges between you and students or among students: teacher initiation, student

response, teacher evaluation of the response/feedback. Classroom discussion, dialogue, and discourse are the principal means of exchanging ideas, evaluating mastery, developing thinking

processes, and reflecting on content and shared thoughts.

Engaging students in effective classroom talk begins by creating a discourse-rich classroom culture. Begin the year by discussing what rich discourse is, the rationale for it, and answering the What's In It for Me question by specifying ways *students* benefit.

## Engaging students in effective classroom talk begins by creating a discourse-rich classroom culture.

Another key element of building a discourse-rich culture is embedding the spirit of collaboration versus competition. Classroom talk is not only a means of students supporting each other, but also of holding each other accountable by helping clarify, restate, and challenge ideas.

Students may not participate if their thoughts are ridiculed, devalued, or ignored. To that end, establishing norms of discourse helps develop safe spaces, establishes boundaries, and moves the discussion forward.

In my classroom, the norms included specifics on how to engage in active listening, address ideas versus individuals, and respectfully disagree/question. Role-playing appropriate and inappropriate actions can give students a better understanding of their expected role during classroom talk.

A third central element of developing a culture that fosters rich discourse is helping students

appreciate the processes to get there versus simply the production of right answers. Make it clear that you value students strategically thinking about, discussing, clarifying, and elaborating on ideas rather than having someone simply state the correct answer in order to save time.

## Complex Thinking Processes

Does most of your classroom talk consist of students recalling or reproducing facts? Or, do they often use complex thinking strategies such as making claims supported with evidence and reasoning, discerning the author's purpose and its effect on the interpretation of text, and applying models to tasks? As you begin to reshape and enrich your classroom discourse, planning for and assessing complex thinking processes is essential.

To begin to engage students in more complex thinking processes, be clear about the distinction between difficult and complex. I ask teachers in my professional learning sessions whether the task of spelling a word such as *antidisestablishmentarianism* is difficult or complex. Many say it's complex. However, if students have a good grasp of phonemic awareness (sounds that build words), spelling long words may be difficult, but not complex.

Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK) model (recall, skill/concept, strategic thinking, extended thinking) can be used to plan and assess the complexity of thinking as well as the presence of rigor. This tool may help you plan for the type of discourse that evokes deeper cognitive processes. You might use it to:

- Prompt students to describe and analyze the characteristics

of texts written during the modernism period.

- Identify and explain misconceptions around the discovery of America.
- Justify solutions for mathematical tasks involving equations with more than one solution.
- Cite evidence and use reasoning to support the claim that an unknown liquid is a mixture.

Webb's DOK is a powerful tool that can help you evoke complex thinking processes during discourse. You'll find a comprehensive graphic at [http://static.pdesas.org/content/documents/M1-Slide\\_19\\_DOK\\_Wheel\\_Slide.pdf](http://static.pdesas.org/content/documents/M1-Slide_19_DOK_Wheel_Slide.pdf)

## Engage Reluctant Students

You probably have a few students who need their mouths physically pried open before they will contribute. Some are fearful of being critiqued in the courtroom of classmate opinion and find solace in silence. Others are disinterested and prefer to think about everything else except what's going on in your room. Here are a few suggestions for bringing such reticent students into the fold of rich discourse:

- Invite them to discuss a topic that is important to them. Interest inventories, heart maps, and informal conversation can help you uncover such topics.
- Engage them in partner talk (e.g., pair-share, turn-and-talk) or small group before whole group. More students participate in whole-group talk if first allowed to articulate, clarify, and reorganize thoughts with a partner.
- Appreciate wait-time. When you want to know how to repair that leaky faucet in your

Figure 1. Moving from Conventional Discourse to Rich Discourse

Conventional Classroom Discourse	Rich Classroom Discourse
Convergent responses	Divergent responses
Known answer questions atypically posed	Multiple answers/explanations possible
Predominantly teacher-driven and led	Students co-construct, drive, and often lead discourse
Students rarely afforded latitude to build on peers' thoughts	Students build on, challenge, revoice, and share ideas with peers
Teacher relies on a few students to carry talk	Many students eagerly participate
Aim is to have correct answer given in shortest time	Goal is to have students articulate strategic thinking

kitchen or where your favorite retailer is located, you want the *best answer* in the shortest amount of time. Similarly, in the classroom, you may be guilty of wanting the best answer in the shortest time, given the pressure of staying on target with the pacing guide. Hardly novel but wholly effective, wait-time has been shown to improve not only the proportion of students who respond but the quality of the responses as well.

- Name the strategy after a student. For instance, when a student provides a substantive contribution, call it the *Johnathan way*, *Maureen method*, or *Sharon technique*.

Releasing the instructional reins to your students can make you uneasy. Fear of letting go may conjure thoughts of less learning taking place, increasing disorder, and the discomfort of not driving the wheels of learning. However, when students lead discourse, they clarify their own ideas and increase their levels of cognitive and behavioral engagement. It

makes their thinking visible and helps you determine the most effective subsequent instructional moves.

To introduce student-led discourse, explicitly model the talk. Have them lead discourse about a topic many are passionate about, such as social media rights for young people, as a way to get them more comfortable and familiar with leading discourse.

### Self-Checking Discourse Quality

A few questions may help you self-assess the quality of discourse in your class:

- Is the emphasis on giving the right answers rather than processes and strategies?
- Do the verbal interactions follow the teacher-dominated initiation-response-evaluation pattern?
- Is discourse carried by the voices of a few where the others are reluctant to contribute?
- Do you often provide opportunities for students to lead the discourse?

- Do you model and insist wait-time be used as a key component of dialogue?
- Do you send non-verbal signals to students based on your perception of their ability to give a quick or correct response?
- Does your lack of comfort with content lead you to pose more close-ended questions?

When you create a classroom culture rife with intellectually safe spaces and emphases on processes of strategic thinking versus production of right answers, you invite instructional episodes of rich discourse. Student-led discourse is a powerful way to let students take ownership of their own learning. 

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