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Strategies that Put Students in Charge of Discussions

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Let's Work Together Teaching Guide

Dear Teacher,

When students are in charge of discussions about texts they've read or topics they've studied, benefits abound as they learn to:

- Become careful listeners
- Value diverse interpretations
- Use text details and inferences to support responses
- Think to clarify ideas so that when they share their thoughts, others understand them
- Sustain a conversation by asking questions
- Invest in the discussion because students are in charge
- Practice debriefing to pinpoint what worked and what could improve

By letting go of your control over discussions, you allow students to develop their critical thinking skills as they collaborate and communicate to interpret literature.

Laura Robb

THE KINDS OF TALK WE'LL FOCUS ON

Turn and Talk (Pair-Share): Partners have a one- to two-minute conversation about a question, a lesson, a read aloud text, or materials they're reading. Students can turn to the right or left to find a partner.

Partner Talk: Usually the teacher organizes partners, making sure they are no more than a year apart in instructional reading levels. Pairs analyze their texts by discussing literary elements and/or open-ended questions and work carefully to bring depth to their conversations.

Whole Class Discussion: For discussions involving the entire class, an ideal goal is for all students to participate. Realistically, full participation will most likely occur over several whole class discussions. The teacher jump-starts the conversation with a guiding question, and students maintain the flow and energy of their conversation using prompts or questions.

HOW STUDENT-LED DISCUSSIONS FIT INTO LESSONS

Here are some contexts in which you can include more purposeful talk with students taking the lead.

Daily interactive read alouds: As you read, pause once or twice and have students turn and talk to respond to a focused prompt such as:

- How did this event, illustration, or character's decision make you feel?
- What questions does this part raise in your mind? Can you explain why?
- Why does the protagonist worry? Cry? Feel angry?

Interactive mini-lessons: Pause during your mini-lesson and ask students to turn and talk to discuss a specific part of the lesson or respond to a question you pose.

Guided reading groups: Invite students to do quick pair-shares about points they're discussing in the text, about questions they pose, and about strategies they used to solve a reading problem.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS FOSTER ANALYTICAL THINKING

Asking questions is the heart and soul of any literary conversation. Questions pull students into a discussion by inviting them to consider an issue and explore it. Teach students how to ask open-ended questions and then find a balance between using their wonderings and asking questions you composed.

TEACHERS JUMP-START TALK WITH GUIDING QUESTIONS

A guiding question goes beyond text-specific questions and one book by asking students to explore multiple texts to answer broad questions, such as: *Why is stereotyping a negative force? Are wars just and justified?*

Develop your guiding questions before a unit starts, as the question drives the reading, research, thinking, and talk students do and can become a springboard for inquiry. Invite students to generate related questions that drive reading and discussion before the unit starts, and continue raising questions throughout the unit. Write students' questions on large chart paper and display the chart so students can refer to their wonderings during the study.

TEACHING TIP:

Before creating a guiding question, decide on a theme or concept you want students to explore, such as *survival, obstacles, change, water shortages*, or *fear of the unknown*. Compose a question that can't be answered in a sentence or two. Remember, guiding questions are *big*, making it easy for students to generate more questions.

For example, the theme of a unit for fourth grade students was *obstacles*. The guiding question was, *What kinds of obstacles do people face?* Inquiry enabled students to add these questions: *Why are some obstacles impossible to overcome? Is overcoming an obstacle more important than the work you did to get there? How does dealing with obstacles affect your feelings? Ability to make friends?* When students inquire and use their questions, their motivation to learn increases.

TEACH STUDENTS TO CREATE THEIR OWN QUESTIONS

When students create and use their questions for a discussion, they are more likely to be invested in the conversations with peers. Explain that there are two kinds of questions:

1. Open-ended interpretive questions that have more than one answer.
2. Closed questions that have one correct answer.

Ask students to write interpretive questions after reading a chunk of a novel or informational text, or completing a short text. Remind them that these questions have more than one answer that can be supported by the text. As soon as students determine that a question has at least two answers, they can compose another one.

Students can create questions about literary elements, text features, themes, important information, and the author's point of view. Share examples of words that usually signal open-ended questions, such as *why, how, analyze, examine, compare and contrast, evaluate, show,* and *classify*. The more practice students have with leading discussions, the sooner they become active listeners.

DEVELOP ACTIVE LISTENERS

You need to help students become active listeners. Instead of thinking about what they want to say, active listeners try to understand the points a peer is making and respond by asking a question for additional evidence, or by politely disagreeing. On a chart, post these three tips to support active listening:

- Focus on what the speaker is saying
- Push aside distracting thoughts that arise
- Think of how to respond to what the speaker says

Students can jot notes to help them remember what the speaker is saying. However, the point is for students to understand the speaker's ideas and respond to them, rather than stating their own ideas. There will be time to state ideas, but a conversation is a thoughtful give-and-take, not each person stating their position.

TEACHING TIP:

Monitor students' talk by making the rounds—walk around the classroom and listen to partners' discussions. It's not possible to hear every single discussion, but over two to four days, you can tune into the conversations of all partners.

PROMPTS THAT MAINTAIN THE FLOW OF DISCUSSIONS

During whole class discussions (small groups, too), invite a student to be in charge of keeping a discussion going. Give the student these prompts to use when the conversation slows:

- Does anyone have a different idea?
- Can you find evidence in the text that supports that?
- Is there more than one way to think about that?
- Can you explain that term?
- What points in the text support that claim?
- I'm unsure of your point. Can you clarify it?
- What made you say that? Can you give text evidence?
- Tell me more about that idea.
- I agree with ___but disagree with _____.

STUDENTS SELF-EVALUATE IN NOTEBOOKS

Have students document their discussions in their notebooks; however, avoid doing this every time partners discuss. Here are some prompts that can help students reflect on their role in discussions.

- How did the discussion change your thinking?
- What new ideas did you learn?
- Did you disagree with an interpretation? Explain why.
- Did you use text evidence to support your point? Why is this important?
- How did the discussions change or reinforce your feelings about a character, person, event, or other information?

TEACHER'S NOTES: