

Talking to Learn

Why are student-driven discussions worth the effort? Three reasons: learning, freedom, and fun.

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I didn't participate in a true student-driven discussion until I was learning to be a teacher. My fellow student teachers and I sat in a circle with copies of the Pledge of Allegiance on our desks. An experienced teacher asked, "What do you think is the most important word in the Pledge of Allegiance?" prompting the most stimulating text-based discussion I had ever experienced.¹ Who knew there was so much to say about the Pledge of Allegiance? I didn't—not until I really dove into it with fellow learners. I've never thought the same way about the pledge, or about discussions, again.

Unfortunately, it took 13 years of public schooling, four years of college, and half a year of graduate school for me to experience that moment. We can do better for the students we serve.

Why?

Why bother with student-driven discussions? Your answer to this question is important. If you answer "because it's a Common Core skill" or "because you (or someone else) said so," that's probably not sufficient.

Here's my first answer: Talking matters for learning. Although it's possible to think without talking—and to talk without much thinking—each can strengthen the other. Talking also provides windows into what students are learning. I want schools to be places of rich learning, and therefore I want them to be places of rich talk.

Here's my second answer: Deep down in my “why I'm an educator” bones, I believe that dialogue matters for democracy and for making the world a better place. Thinking, speaking, and listening are practices of freedom. Schools should help students learn to exercise that freedom, for their own good and for the collective good.

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And here's my third answer: It's fun. Some of my happiest, most rewarding moments as an educator have been hearing what comes out of learners' mouths when I get out of the way.

Learning, freedom, and fun seem like a potent combination. So why are teachers still doing most of the talking in the classroom? And even when students are talking, why are they so often doing more talking than learning?

Why Not?

To persuade people to learn something new or to change their behavior, we have to address their (usually rational) answers to the question “why not?” Here are my top three theories about why there isn't more student-driven dialogue in classrooms.

1. *We have other priorities.*

It doesn't matter if you say it's important, or if “student talk” or “accountable talk” is written down in your school improvement plan. If it's

not happening, it's not a priority. Educators often say, “We've got too much to cover”—which is another way of saying that we don't value student discussions as much as we value other things.

I'm sympathetic to this perspective because in my current role teaching graduate students, I rarely let my students drive discussions. I invite (OK, require) them to read several dense texts; and in class they engage with these texts using prompts I've generated. Even without the pressure of standardized tests or any prescribed curriculum, both my students and I feel self-imposed pressure to “cover” a lot of material so they'll be well-prepared as education leaders. Although I know that less is more, it's hard to break the cultural habit of more is more.

2. *We lack the skill to step outside traditional roles.*

Students are fully capable of driving discussions; they regularly do so outside the classroom. Teachers are capable of listening and not being the hub through which all discussion flows. But in most classrooms, teachers and students play specific, well-rehearsed roles in which the teacher initiates a question or prompt, a student responds, and the teacher steers the “discussion” from there. Teachers and students need to learn how to talk and listen differently.

3. *We're afraid.*

Student-driven discussions can feel risky to all involved. We're afraid of losing control (teachers). Of not knowing how to play the game of school correctly (students). Of sounding stupid (students and teachers). Of silence (teachers and students).

These three barriers can reinforce one another. If we don't prioritize and don't develop knowledge and skill, we're likely to leave our fears untested and be immobilized by them. But if we had more knowledge and skill, maybe we wouldn't be so afraid and we'd prioritize discussions more. Or if we prioritized student-driven discussions more, maybe we'd learn how to have them, and we'd try them, and we would see that our fears don't come true—or that if they do, the world does not end.

A Balancing Act

There are four fulcrums that must be balanced for a successful discussion: *safety*, *challenge*, *authentic participation*, and *ownership*. The fulcrum metaphor acknowledges that student-driven discussions are a dynamic balancing act. At any given moment, a facilitator is assessing, diagnosing, and making multiple decisions about whether, when, and how to intervene.

Safety first. You can't possibly have a conversation in which learners will risk expressing their ideas if they feel they might be attacked. At the other extreme, if participants merely agree with one another, you've got a boring, tiptoeing discussion where few learners put more than a toe in the intellectual water.

Challenge requires striking a balance between too hard and too easy. But what's too hard or too easy varies by learner and by the content being discussed, and we tend to underestimate the level of challenge our students can handle. To maintain the most appropriate level of challenge, we must pay attention to what all students are doing—not just those who are talking, but also those who are daydreaming, trying desperately to get a word in edgewise, or looking confused. In addition, we must notice how the discussion is focusing on the ideas in the text.

Are students hopping from idea to idea and valuing all ideas equally, including those that are unsupported and perhaps unsupportable? Or at the other end of the spectrum, is the conversation opaque or circular, failing to go deeper?

Authentic participation may take different forms, including thinking and listening, but the one that's easiest to notice and assess is speaking. At one end of the fulcrum is nonparticipation: A few learners toss out ideas, but participants don't really talk with one another. At the other extreme is superficial participation, in which students are talking to hear themselves talk or to earn points (figurative or literal) rather than to add value. When this fulcrum is in balance,



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students offer questions or comments that deepen their own or others' understanding and make space for multiple voices and ideas to be heard.

Ownership is the fulcrum in which the meaning of "student-driven" emerges. At one end of this balance is the dictatorship, in which the teacher's questions and notions of what matters rule the day. A student's "I'm curious" question is redirected to another topic or replaced by a teacher's (often carefully prepared) "I want you to discuss" question. The conversation flows through the teacher, with little student-to-student interaction. At the other end is anarchy, in which the students don't drive the conversation, but rather veer wildly from one side of the intellectual road to another while the teacher sits back like a powerless passenger. Disagreements sound more like emotional arguments, and often a few students dominate while the others look on as if they're watching reality TV.

How to Share the Driving

In student-driven discussions that successfully balance all four fulcrums, students ask most of the questions, connecting with and building on one another's ideas, taking responsibility for the tenor of the conversation, and talking with one another. They don't wait for the teacher to intervene. In fact, it might be hard for the teacher to jump in, even with a comment or question that will push the conversation forward. The teacher is valued and respected as a member of the discussion community—albeit one with more experience or expertise—but she or he is not deferred to as the authority.

Here are five concrete ideas for making classroom discussions more student-driven and intellectually rich.

Set the Stage

Arrange the furniture so that students can see one another's faces. Circles and U-shapes work well. People tend to talk more to faces than to backs of heads, and if the main face they see is the teacher's, that's the face they'll talk to.

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Pair-Share

Have learners pair up and talk with a peer about a particular question or idea, preferably after everyone has had a moment to think or write about it. This one simple intervention can help with safety (most people are more comfortable talking with one person than with a group); challenge (giving students time to process ideas); authentic participation (helping students figure out what they have to say); and ownership (making the on-ramp to participation a smoother ride for everyone).

For example, in a discussion about the Pledge of Allegiance, a teacher asks, "What do you think is the most important word in the pledge, and why? Think for a moment, and then share your idea with a neighbor."

One student says to another, "I think *indivisible* is the most important word because as much as people might disagree in the United States, we stand as one country in crises." Her peer replies, "I think *justice* is the most important word because the country was founded on people



having rights, and people still come to the United States for those rights."

Pair-share is, quite simply, my favorite discussion technique. I use it at different points in the conversation: at the beginning, to prime the pump and build learners' confidence in their ideas; in the middle, to give students additional processing time and get more voices in the mix; and at the end, to give students the opportunity to make sense of the conversation and reflect on the implications of the discussion.

Use Discussion Protocols

Protocols are guidelines for discussions. They provide architecture. More structured protocols offer more safety and can help with authentic participation, whereas less structured ones often leave more room for the learners to drive. Protocols also help with prioritizing because they regulate how time is used. Here are two of many available discussion protocols.²

Save the Last Word is a small-group discussion protocol that lasts 20–30 minutes and is designed to help participants pull the main ideas out of a text, listen to one another, and build on one another's ideas. Participants read a text in advance and choose a sentence or passage they consider important or striking. After a participant has read the passage he or she has chosen aloud,

the other participants each have one minute to respond. Then, the first participant gets “the last word,” with two to three minutes to explain why she chose that passage and to connect her thinking to that of her fellow participants.

For example, here’s a Save the Last Word discussion of the “Conclusion” of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. The first student reads the quote she has chosen:

STUDENT ONE: (*Reading*) However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names. It is not so bad as you are. It looks poorest when you are richest. The fault-finder will find faults even in paradise. Love your life, poor as it is.³

STUDENT TWO: I like this passage. I think Thoreau is saying we should accept what we have, whatever that is.

STUDENT THREE: Don’t you think that seems unrealistic, though? I mean, we can’t all live on our own in the woods. Some people have responsibilities. I do agree with him that some people will find the worst parts in any situation.

STUDENT FOUR: I’m a little confused by the part where he says, “It is not so bad as you are.” What do you think he means by that?

STUDENT ONE (*concludes*): I chose this quote because it fits with how I see the world—I don’t have it that bad, even when I sometimes think I do. He’s saying it’s all about attitude, and I agree with that. I’m not sure what he means by “It is not so bad as you are,” but I think he’s saying that life just is what it is, and it’s the people that give it labels like good or bad, and that we’re all flawed.

Four As enables a group to explore different perspectives on a text. Learners read the text with four questions in mind: What do you *agree* with in the text? What *assumptions* does the author of the text hold? What do you want to *argue* with in the text? What parts of the text do you *aspire* to? Then, the group holds a conversation about the text in light of each of the *As*.

For example, when discussing Leslie Marmon

Avoid These Traps

As you’re prioritizing, learning how to have student-driven discussions, and overcoming your fears, don’t be led astray by these common misconceptions.

Misconception 1. Only the “advanced” learners can drive discussions.

Or they’ll do it better than “other” kids. Or there’s some sequence in which students must master the “basics” before they can participate as discussion drivers. Not true! In fact, learners labeled “advanced” in one way or another are often the most tentative in discussions, either because they’re used to being rewarded for “right” answers or because they’re terrified of saying something unbrilliant. Other learners often shine when given the opportunity for a different mode of learning and expression.

Misconception 2. Silence should be avoided at all costs.

What if silence means that people are thinking, not that they are waiting for you to rescue them? And so what if they *are* waiting for you to rescue them? Try keeping yourself out of the discussion by avoiding eye contact, taking notes, mapping the conversation, doodling, or counting to 10. If you must jump in, try asking a question instead of making a statement. And if you have a deep suspicion that people aren’t thinking during the silence, try asking why it’s so quiet.

Silko’s novel *Ceremony* (Penguin, 1977), one student says, “I think Silko assumes that stories are healing.” Another student says, “I think she assumes that stories can be healing, and that words are only part of what heals.” Another student says, “I think she assumes that Western culture is bad,” and another adds, “I’m not sure she assumes that Western culture is bad as much as she assumes that Native Americans are participants in their own challenges. I think she also assumes that nature is powerful and steady and ultimately can’t be destroyed.”

Use Texts

Although it’s possible to have student-driven discussions without texts, most of the successful student-driven discussions I’ve seen and been part of have been text-based. Texts provide common ground for the conversation—terrain on which people with different experiences and ideas can engage. Texts also offer pathways to content, sometimes through new ideas and



sometimes through enduring ideas that cut across time and cultures.

For example, after reading the poem “We Wear the Mask” by black poet, novelist, and playwright Paul Laurence Dunbar, students in a seminar might discuss such questions as, “Why do you think Dunbar refers to *the* mask and not *a* mask?” and “What do you think lines 8 and 9 mean?” (*Nay, let them only see us while/We wear the mask*) and “In what situations do you wear a mask—or, in what situations do you *not* wear a mask? Why?”

Texts don’t have to be print; they can include art, music, maps, primary documents, essays, political cartoons, or math problems. In one seminar, students view two photographs of

spend a few minutes reflecting on the progress they made with the goals. Individuals and groups can track this progress over time.

The components of the fulcrum can be helpful for talking about process: How did we do with safety today? How challenging was the conversation? Another way to focus on process is to enlist observers, either participants or colleagues. (In fact, this can be a great way to involve people who, for whatever reason, haven’t prepared for the discussion.) Focus the observers’ attention on something important to the group, such as looking for evidence of disagreement, counting how many times girls speak as opposed to boys, or comparing how many times participants build on points that are made in the conversation and how many times they abandon them.

Thinking, speaking, and listening are practices of freedom.

Abraham Lincoln, one taken shortly before he became president and one taken in 1865, two months before his death. After students discuss what the two portraits show about the man and the observable differences between them, the facilitator asks, “If you could ask Lincoln one question to better understand the differences between these two photographs, what would you ask him and why?” (Lesson plans for discussions of these and other texts are available at www.paideia.org/teachers/seminar-lesson-plans.)

Focus on Process

Although the content of the discussion is the central focus, a little attention to process can make a big difference in quality. Facilitators and participants can set individual goals for themselves at the beginning of the discussion (such as “Talk more,” “Listen more,” or “Ask a question”). They can also set a collective goal for the group (such as “Let’s try to connect with one another’s ideas” or “Let’s refer to the text more”). At the end of the discussion, participants can

Becoming Ourselves

Although my student-teaching days are long past, I am still learning to be a teacher and a leader. I am still asking why and why not, acknowledging my fears while trying to become skillful enough to know what to prioritize and how to make my ideals of learning, freedom, and fun a reality. I am ever in the act of becoming—and, as Paulo Freire said, of “making it possible for the students to become themselves.”⁴ Student-driven discussions are one way for all of us to become ourselves. ■

¹For a sample seminar plan for the Pledge of Allegiance and the U.S. flag, go to the National Paideia Center website at www.paideia.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/bellamy_congress_flag-pledge.doc.

²See the School Reform Initiative website (www.schoolreforminitiative.org) for *Save the Last Word, 4As*, and other discussion protocols.

³Rossi, W. (Ed.). (1996). *Walden and resistance to civil government* (2nd ed.). New York: Norton, p. 219.

⁴Horton, M., & Freire, P. (1990). *We make the road by walking: Conversations on education and social change*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, p. 181.

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