

Fostering High-Quality Classroom Discussions

(Originally titled “Speaking Volumes”)

“Students love to talk. So do teachers,” say Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (San Diego State University) in this *Educational Leadership* article. But classroom talk is not always productive, and in many classrooms, especially those with low-achieving students, teachers are talking as much as 80 percent of the time. Fisher and Frey suggest a number of ways to maximize the quality of small- and large-group classroom discussions and their impact on thinking, reading, and writing:

- *Offer meaningful and complex tasks.* The prompt for a discussion should be relevant, interesting, and engaging, not just completing an assignment or activity.

- *Model behavioral cues.* Teachers often need to explicitly teach and then carefully monitor the body language of good group work – students leaning in, gesturing, with attentive facial expressions. Videos of groups are helpful, as is a fishbowl in which students observe an effective group at work.

- *Encourage argumentation, not arguing.* Students need to learn how to disagree without being disagreeable – making claims, offering evidence, seeking clarification, using accountable talk, offering counterclaims, agreeing to disagree, or reaching consensus.

- *Use the best format.* For whole-group discussions, a circle or U-shape allows students to see each others’ faces, which makes a big difference.

- *Provide language support.* Some students are shy and rarely give voice to their ideas. Teachers can help students take part in discussions by providing sentence frames, language charts, word walls, audio devices, peer support, or teacher modeling.

- *Find the right group size.* Small groups ideally have 2-5 students, say Fisher and Frey, and don’t all have to be the same size; some students work best with one partner, while others thrive in a larger group – but not more than five. Heterogeneous groups can be formed by making a list of all students in order of achievement, cutting the list in two, and forming each group with students from the two columns.

- *Listen, question, prompt, and cue.* Teachers should tune in on student talk and intervene strategically, say Fisher and Frey: “In addition, teachers should be aware that their comments can build students’ sense of self – their self-esteem, agency, and identity – or damage it.” Here are some helpful prompts:

- Can you tell us more?
- Would you say that again?
- Can you give me another example so we can understand?
- I’d like to hear what others are thinking about Robert’s comment.
- Take your time. I can see you’ve got further thoughts about this.
- Why do you think that?
- Where could we find that information you just brought up?

- I'll restate what you just said. Listen to make sure I got it right.
- That's a great question. Let's pose it to the rest of the class. What do you think?

“Speaking Volumes” by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey in *Educational Leadership*, November 2014 (Vol. 72, #3, p. 18-23), <http://bit.ly/1vj7z7l>; Fisher can be reached at dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu, Frey at nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu.