Student-Led Discussions

(Originally titled "Talking to Learn")

"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," says Elizabeth City (Harvard Graduate School of Education) in this *Educational Leadership* article. "Talking matters to 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." Rich classroom conversations also go to the heart of democratic schooling, she says: the better students get at thinking, speaking, and listening, the better off we'll all be.

So why do teachers do most of the talking in classrooms? And why is so much student talk unimpressive? City believes there are five reasons:

- We have other priorities. Curriculum coverage. Test preparation. Even if "accountable talk" is in the school-improvement plan, other things push it aside.
- It's hard to step outside the traditional paradigm: the teacher steers discussions, the students follow in familiar roles.
- We're afraid. Teachers fear losing control. Students fear not knowing how to play the game of school. Both fear sounding stupid.
- We believe that only "advanced" learners can drive discussions.
- Everyone thinks silences should be avoided at all costs.

There's no question that having rich, authentic discussions is difficult, says City. It involves balancing each of these elements: safety, challenge, authentic participation, and ownership.

Students must feel safe from being attacked, but discussions shouldn't be *so* safe that no one takes risks. The level of challenge must be just right – not too hard and not too easy. This is tricky, but City believes we often underestimate what students can handle. "Authentic participation means students offer questions or comments that deepen their own and others' understanding and make space for multiple voices and ideas to be heard," she says. And ownership is key: not anarchy, in which students "veer wildly from one side of the intellectual road to another while the teacher sits back like a powerless passenger," nor dictatorship, with the teacher saying, "I want you to discuss…" In a successful discussion, says City, "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… The teacher is valued and respected as a member of the discussion community – albeit one with more experience and expertise – but she or he is not deferred to as the authority." How can this happen?

• *Set the stage*. Students should be in a circle or U so they can see each others' faces.

• *Think-pair-share*. Getting students to think, jot down ideas, and chat with an elbow partner is an excellent way to ramp up participation and authenticity.

• *Use discussion protocols*. In *Save the Last Word*, students read a text in advance and choose a sentence or passage they consider important or striking. A group convenes, one person

reads the passage he or she chose aloud, the others have one minute each to respond, then the first person gets "the last word," with 2-3 minutes to explain the choice and connect with what others said. In *Four A's*, students read a text with four questions in mind: What do you *agree* with? What *assumptions* does the author hold? What do you want to *argue* with? And what parts of the text do you *aspire* to?

• *Use texts*. It's possible to have student-driven discussions without texts, says City, but well-chosen texts are very helpful. They provide common ground for a conversation and offer pathways to ideas, experiences, and feelings. They don't have to be print – art, music, maps, primary documents, essays, political cartoons, and math problems are fine. One discussion used two photographs of Abraham Lincoln, one taken shortly before he became president, one shortly before his death.

• *Focus on process*. Content is the central focus, says City, but "a little attention to process can make a big difference in quality." Facilitators and participants can set goals – "Talk more," "Listen more," "Ask a question" – or a collective goal like "Let's try to connect with one another's ideas" or "Let's refer to the text more." And at the end of the discussion, it's good to reflect on how it went. How did we do on safety? How challenging was the conversation? Who participated and who didn't? How authentic and educative was it?

"Talking to Learn" by Elizabeth City in *Educational Leadership*, November 2014 (Vol. 72, #3, p. 10-16), http://bit.ly/1wMkBce; City can be reached at elizabeth_city@gse.harvard.edu.