Speaking Volumes

*Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey*

**These quality indicators for productive student talk can help a classroom move from good to great.**

Students love to talk. So do teachers. When there's a balance in the classroom between student and teacher discourse, good things happen. When students assume increased responsibility for discussions, when they interact with a wide range of peers on diverse topics and supply evidence for their thinking, great things happen. This is probably why questioning and discussion are the only instructional routines specifically referenced in Charlotte Danielson's (2007) Framework for Teaching, which states that

> a teacher's skill in questioning and in leading discussions makes a powerful contribution to student learning and is valuable for many instructional purposes: exploring new concepts, eliciting evidence of student understanding, and promoting deeper student engagement. (p. 79)

Of course, not all classroom talk is useful. Sometimes, students (and teachers) are off topic. Other times, the conversations barely scratch the surface of a topic. In the hands of a skilled teacher, however, the speaking and listening that students do result in deeper understanding, increased engagement, and significant satisfaction with schooling.

**Why It's Important**

Gone are the days when a quiet classroom was equated with a good one. Productive student talk is essential to teaching and learning—and here's why.

**The person talking is probably thinking.**

It matters who’s talking in class because the amount of talk that students do is correlated with their achievement. One study found that in high-achieving classrooms, teachers talked about 55 percent of the time; but in classrooms in which students were identified as low-achieving, teacher talk consumed a whopping 80 percent of the instructional minutes (Flanders, 1970). A more recent large-scale study of elementary classrooms similarly reported that 91 percent of instructional minutes were devoted to whole-class teaching or individual work, with "few opportunities [for students] to learn in small groups, to improve analytical skills, or to interact extensively with teachers" (Planta, Belsky, Houts, & Morrison, 2007, p. 1796).

When students aren't asked to talk and think, well-meaning teachers fill the time with their own speaking. That's not to say that listening is devoid of thinking, but rather that talking something through facilitates understanding. When we
understand a concept, it's easier to talk about it, which is probably why teachers talk so much when they're delivering content. They—as opposed to the students—are doing most of the thinking.

In classes in which students have opportunities to talk about the content, the thinking falls on them. Take Jeff Bonine's 10th grade biology class. He teaches at a school where 100 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and 60 percent of his students are English language learners. Most of them haven't experienced meaningful talk in their classrooms.

But Jeff is determined to change students' expectations of how they might engage in discussion. He frames each unit with an essential question, the first of which is, "How are we connected to our environment?" The unit begins with an exploration of and partner discussions about a variety of photographs, graphs, and political cartoons concerning environmental issues, such as the great Pacific garbage patch, space junk, and oil spills. Students travel in pairs from one station to the next and compose joint statements about their impressions and questions.

Jeff knows that students may not be equipped to have these conversations, so he talks with each dyad during this activity. "They see me coming, and they want to ask me the questions," he said. "My goal is to get them to develop questions we'll use in our whole-class discussion."

For example, two students were examining a chart that graphed increased carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere. One of them said, "It's going up, but this doesn't tell us why. I heard it was because of too many cars." The other student responded, "Some years have big jumps up, and some don't. So maybe it's not because of cars. Maybe there's something else making carbon dioxide." When the teacher arrived at their station, they asked, "What causes carbon dioxide levels to increase?" They were ready to ask this question because of their investigation and interaction. Talking helps students clarify their understanding, and it helps teachers identify when to intervene.

**Sometimes thinking goes astray, and teachers have to take action.**

Student talk is to teachers like water is to fish—it's the climate in which we thrive. Without meaningful student talk, teachers have far more difficulty checking for understanding and monitoring learning. Formative questioning (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003) enables teachers to assess student thinking to unearth misconceptions or partial understandings.

This monitoring is more than just gauging whether a student is correct. Skilled teachers listen closely to student talk and rapidly perform a gap analysis, thinking, "What does the student know and not know that would lead to that reply?"

For example, when a student suggested that the United States joined World War II because of the Holocaust, the teacher had to quickly assess why the student might have come to this conclusion. He theorized that the student might have been thinking about the opening line of a speech she'd read by Franklin D. Roosevelt: "Innocent peoples are being cruelly sacrificed to a greed for power and supremacy" (1937).

The teacher had the students look at the timeline for World War II; they noted that the bombing of Pearl Harbor took place in 1941 and that Roosevelt had delivered his speech four years earlier. The teacher then invited students to discuss this issue again, asking, "Why did the United States join the war in 1941 and not earlier?" This invitation to thinking is far different from the action of a teacher who simply supplies missing information or corrects the error. Expert teachers scaffold, using additional questions, prompts, or cues to guide the learner. They provide direct explanations only when the scaffolds are insufficient (Frey & Fisher, 2010).

Robust teacher questioning generates student talk, but it can't, on its own, foster more sustained dialogue among students. Setting the stage for meaningful student talk requires well-designed tasks that provide authentic purposes for students to engage in discussion as they resolve challenging problems.

Years ago, as novice teachers, we didn't understand this. We thought that the best small-group tasks were those that held a high probability of success. It took us a while to realize that what was really occurring was more of a "divide and conquer" approach as students apportioned the assignment and then assembled the parts at the last minute. In the meantime, there wasn't a lot of interesting student talk happening; it was mostly just procedural stuff, and we didn't have much to listen for.

Now we know that productive failure is an essential part of learning (Kapur, 2008). When students have the opportunity to confront a problem with others, even when they initially fail at the task, they learn something from the experience—provided, of course, that it's interleaved with well-timed instruction that enables them to learn from their mistakes and try again. By monitoring collaborative conversations and by staying attuned to the student talk that's occurring, teachers figure out when to provide further instruction.

Second grade teacher Melissa Collier actively looks for opportunities to create productive failure in her classroom. Her students have been discussing Ed Young's _Lon Po Po: A Red-Riding Hood Story from China_ (Puffin, 1990). Up until now, they've adopted a conventional perspective, cheering for the children who outwitted a wolf disguised as their grandmother. Then Melissa asks, "So the children are saved, which is a good thing. But they killed the wolf. In your opinion, is this a happy story or a sad one?" There's a momentary silence, as her students had not considered this. "Talk with your table partners," she instructs. "I'd like to hear your reasons."

In one group, a student says it's a sad story because the wolf was killed for "just pretending." Another student notes, "I
didn't think that before. It is kind of sad. But maybe the wolf was going to eat the children, and that would be sad, too."

As her students wrestle with this moral dilemma, Melissa points out, "They won't arrive at a simple answer, which is OK. I'm interested in them wrestling with questions that aren't so simple. It means they have to listen to one another more closely."

**Talking facilitates reading and writing development.**

"Reading and writing float on a sea of talk" (Britton, 1970, p. 164). James Britton, who wrote this amazing sentence, recognized that focusing on students' oral language development facilitated their ability to read and write. Those of us who attended school before Britton's work revolutionized writing instruction experienced composing as an isolating activity. You composed silently at a desk, and only the teacher read what you wrote. Within a decade, reading and writing workshops were the order of the day; conversation, collaboration, and audience took center stage.

Fast-forward a few more decades. Language arts instruction now focuses on text types. The Common Core State Standards have made three text types well known: narrative, informational, and argumentative. But drill down deeper to understand their purposes: to convey an experience, to explain, and to persuade (National Assessment Governing Board, 2010). Our purposes for talking run parallel to our purposes for writing, and both talking and writing require similar processes of construction and composition. In other words, we speak in these text types as we convey an experience, inform, and persuade.

Sixth grade teacher Amy Miles uses all three modalities to inform her students' thinking. To address the schoolwide essential question, "What's social about social media?" her students read opinion articles about cyberbullying, Internet safety, and 21st century skills. Each lesson includes whole-group and partner discussions, as well as writing for students to do before and after reading. Amy's goal is to shape a more nuanced understanding of the potential benefits and negative effects of social media use and misuse.

The fact is, we support the talking and writing we do through reading. We learn about the experiences of others through reading, which, in turn, casts a light on our own lives. We rely on reading to increase the accuracy and thoroughness of our explanations, and we employ reasoning to persuade others. Perhaps most of all, reading enriches our spoken and written language. Through the poetic turn of a phrase, the technical term used accurately, or the word that perfectly captures the temperament of the crowd, a well-read speaker or writer shines. Is it any wonder that teachers use routines like literature circles and reciprocal teaching so students can talk about reading and assimilate textual knowledge through verbal channels?

**Fostering Productive Talk**

In the classroom of a distinguished teacher, "Students assume considerable responsibility for the success of the discussion, initiating topics, and making unsolicited contributions" (Danielson, 2007, p. 82). That's easier said than done. Creating a classroom driven by discussion, rather than distraction, requires planning and well-honed procedures. To create classrooms that talk, we suggest the following.

**Offer meaningful and complex tasks.**

Students need to understand the purpose of the task. If they don't, they'll talk about other things. The purpose isn't for students to complete an assignment or activity, but rather for students to learn something. And that something has to be relevant.

In classrooms in which student discourse dominates, students know why they're completing tasks and how those tasks relate to their learning goals. For example, a 3rd grade teacher talked with his students about the use of similes in writing. As students engaged in collaborative writing, one noted that "similes can make your writing more interesting so readers want to read what you wrote."

In addition, the task has to be sufficiently complex to garner students' collaborative attention and effort. When tasks are less complex, and there's little chance of productive failure, students divide and conquer them. When tasks are more complex, students tend to talk with one another more, trying to figure out how to solve the challenge.

In Jeff Bonine's biology class, students work with a partner to complete a word sort; they must identify the relationships among a number of different terms, such as autotroph and heterotroph. Jeff could make this task easier by providing students with the categories in advance, but he wants them to struggle to figure out how the terms are related to one other and to defend the categories they create.

**Model behavioral cues.**

Nonverbal communication is as important as verbal communication. When students work collaboratively, we focus on their interactions. We observe the ways in which they point, lean in, hold their bodies, and stick together. These behavioral cues tell us that students are interacting well. When these behaviors are absent, the group is probably not engaged in productive discourse and may need some teacher guidance.

Teachers can teach this aspect of communication by using video clips of students from previous years, other classrooms,
or the Internet to model the expected behaviors. Over time and with practice, students will begin to incorporate these behaviors.

Alternatively, teachers can use a fishbowl technique in which students observe classmates engaging in a collaborative conversation. Using a checklist that signals various behaviors to look for—such as maintaining eye contact with the speaker; remaining focused on the materials; regularly leaning into the group; and using expressions that suggest interest, questions, or agreement—students can record the moves they observe for later discussion and use. They can also use such a checklist to monitor their own use of these behaviors.

**Encourage argumentation, not arguing.**

In highly productive group conversations, members make claims, offer evidence for those claims, seek clarification, offer counterclaims, and reach consensus or identify points of disagreement. In other words, members of the group can disagree without being disagreeable, and they can interact in sophisticated ways as they solve problems. This type of language has to be taught, and some teachers use language frames to do so. For example, a 4th grade teacher used a series of frames related to supplying evidence during science so her students would practice using academic language. Here are some of the frames she offered (Ross, Fisher, & Frey, 2009):

- The evidence I use to support ________ is ________.
- I believe ________ (statement) because ________ (justification).
- I know that ________ is ________ because ________.
- Based on ________, I think ________.
- Based on ________, my hypothesis is ________.

Other teachers use accountable talk to teach students about the habits of classroom talk (Michaels, O’Connor, Hall, & Resnick, 2010). Three "accountabilities" frame the approach: Students are accountable for being fully engaged participants; using the most accurate information available; and using reasoning, logic, and evidence in discussions. The teacher’s role involves more than simply posing questions and collecting answers. Instead, he or she acts as facilitator, using conversational moves that keep the dialogue going (see "A Teacher’s Conversational Moves"). For example, the teacher might say, "Did everyone hear that comment? Would you mind repeating it so we can talk more about your idea?"

Amy Miles has spent the year fostering argumentation in her classroom. She often has students arrange their chairs in a large circle to ensure that full attention is on each speaker and that everyone gets a turn. Her students discuss their ideas about social media and provide evidence and reasons, in keeping with the principles of accountable talk.

**Provide language support.**

In the disability community, there’s a saying, "Not being able to speak is not the same as not having something to say." Students often have ideas that they aren’t sure how to frame linguistically—and when they don’t know how to frame their ideas, they stay silent. That’s why language support is so important in the classroom. It can come in the form of sentence frames, teacher modeling, word walls, audio devices, or peer supports.

In her 2nd grade classroom, Melissa Collier uses language charts that contain target vocabulary as well as helpful sentence frames to support students’ vocabulary development. In addition, she honors students’ responses as they interact with her and with one another by showing interest, using positive nonverbal signals, and speaking in a respectful tone. These environmental and nonverbal factors are an important aspect of language support because students need to feel safe to talk.

**Find the right group size.**

Effective teachers can facilitate whole-class discussions, which is often appropriate. But whole-class discussions enable relatively few students to participate, which is why expert teachers use a combination of whole-class and small-group configurations.

Small groups should consist of two to five students. All of the groups don’t need to be the same size. Some students who need to develop their social or language skills perform better with a partner. Others enjoy a diversity of opinions and work well in a larger group. However, in groups of more than five, some students typically won’t talk or the students may self-divide into smaller groups. It’s important to match the group size to the task at hand as well as to student needs.

One way to form groups is through alternative ranking. Using scores from a recent assessment, teachers rank students in a single column in order of performance, from the highest- to the lowest-performing student. Then the teacher cuts the list at the mid-point, placing the two lists side by side.

Groups are formed across the two lists. For example, the first group might include students 1 and 2 from the first half of the list, and students 18 and 19 from the second. The next group might include students 3 and 4 from the first half, and 20 and 21 from the second. The rest of the class can be grouped this way to create a balance of academic ability in each
group. Groups can be reformed every four to six weeks on the basis of new assessment information.

Amy Miles has her 6th graders work in groups of various sizes. There are partnerships, triads, and groups of four. Some students need to be in a smaller group because they have more difficulty maintaining all the social relationships in a discussion, whereas others are more skilled at doing so and can be in larger groups. Amy has purposefully organized the students into groups to maximize their interactions and ensure there’s support for them to accomplish their tasks.

**Listen, question, prompt, and cue.**

Listening to students carefully gives the teacher an opportunity to guide future understanding. Rather than simply giving students information, teachers should question, prompt, and cue their thinking. In addition, teachers should be aware that their comments can build students' sense of self—their self-esteem, agency, and identity—or damage it.

Melissa Collier is thoughtful in her interactions with her 2nd graders because she wants to encourage them to keep talking and to take pride in their deepening understanding. She validates their questions and rephrases their responses by saying, "What I hear you saying is ________." She also asks students questions, especially as they work in small groups, providing additional prompts and cues to guide their thinking.

**An Invitation to Speak**

Students need to be fully engaged in speaking and listening in the classroom, beyond the need to just perform well on an evaluation or meet standards. Inviting students to talk in class improves the education experience and ensures that students learn at high levels.

Let's change the balance of talk in the classroom so that students speak more and teachers speak less. And when we do, there will be lots to talk about.

**A Teacher's Conversational Moves**

- 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?

**References**


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KEYWORDS

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