

✂ Teach Constructive Conversation Skills

Interactions in school can have many names: collaborative conversations, academic conversations, discussions, seminars, talk, and so on. What we call constructive conversation is back-and-forth talk that builds ideas and accomplishes a useful learning purpose. Students in many settings have been trained to think about short answers (e.g., choose a, b, or c; find the antonym; use a sentence frame to answer a question). Many students have had less training and practice in building out complex ideas and concepts in a discipline with others.

In many classroom interactions, students tend to “popcorn share” a variety of fledgling ideas. For this reason, we often say, “Don’t leave a building (an idea) half-finished.” When an idea emerges, students need to build it as much as possible before moving on to new ideas. Then, when new ideas are brought up, they need to connect to (a) the most recent idea and (b) the purpose of the conversation. We must teach students to do everything that they can with one idea before moving on. They can use several skills to help them do this building: creating, clarifying, fortifying, and negotiating.

Creating Ideas. Humans value the creation and ownership of ideas. Students need lessons and activities in which their original ideas are valued and fostered. In science and math, for example, students can converse to create ideas about their observations, patterns, problem-solving strategies, hypotheses, etc. In history, students can co-analyze primary sources to create novel perspectives on a famous historical figure. Highly effective content learning often comes from tasks that are designed to foster students’ creation and synthesis of ideas. It could be easier just to tell them, as many “explicit” and “direct” teaching approaches might argue, but just telling them tends to: (a) foster “learning” that doesn’t last; (b) not promote practice and pride in doing and thinking like disciplinary experts; and (c) lack practice and engagement that comes from working with others.

Clarifying Ideas. Most of the time, what we say to a partner is not understood exactly the way we intended. Each response in a conversation usually tells us if the partner understood what we said or not. If two partners don’t clarify what is being discussed, they don’t have enough shared understanding to build an idea. Clarification is a multi-faceted skill. One has to know when to prompt the partner to clarify, when to clarify one’s own ideas, and how to do so to a wide range of different partners. Clarification also involves both partners figuring out ways to represent the idea, such as analogies and metaphors. This skill includes elaboration, explanation, and paraphrasing, all of which make the current ideas clearer for all involved in the discussion.

Academic English learners are very diverse in how they think and talk. They seldom say enough in the right way to clearly articulate their ideas the first time. In other words, the intended message is often way across the ravine from the perceived message. The listener must help the speaker clarify—this skill is as much on the listener as it is on the speaker. The listener must show, in a respectful and interested manner, the need for clarity. The listener might need to ask a focused question, key in on a certain phrase and ask for elaboration, paraphrase, ask to define a word, ask for a drawing on a napkin, and so on in order to clarify the idea.

Fortifying Ideas. Another skill that is strongly emphasized in the Common Core and other standards is supporting ideas with evidence. In conversations, students should be able to identify and evaluate multiple examples of evidence that fortify ideas. In essence, this is training them to see how knowledge in a discipline is structured and valued. See the Evaluating the Evidence activity in Chapter 4 for more information on how to apprentice students in finding and deciding which evidence is best to use in their arguments. Even when students do understand how to find sufficient evidence, they sometimes lack the vital sub-skill of explaining how the evidence supports the idea. Without this explanation, also called a warrant, students cannot show that they have a solid grasp of the effectiveness of an idea and its support.

Negotiating ideas. Often, ideas are put to the test and even strengthened with opposing ideas, in which case partners need to negotiate the ideas. Negotiating ideas means proposing a second or third idea that opposes or competes with the first idea. This might mean combining ideas into a new one. It might mean coming to a compromise, agreeing to disagree, or conceding to the new idea. Students should have the academic attitude that all ideas, even if they are contrasting perspectives, are to be explored and even valued by both partners by the end of the conversation. This is how students come to *own* ideas and the language of them (Refer to AEL Shift 1 in Chapter 1).

We must also think of these skills as “double” skills. This means that students need to (a) learn how and when to use the skill as they talk; and (b) how and when to prompt their partner to use the skill. For example, I need to know to read a quizzical expression on my partner’s face and automatically clarify what I am saying; and I need to know how to ask my partner for clarification when I don’t see how his idea is related to the question asked by the teacher.

These conversation skills can be used in conversations across disciplines and grade levels. Below are several activities for further developing these skills. For more ideas on how to articulate the development of these skills vertically and horizontally in a school, see Chapter 10.