Clarifying the Confusion about Collaborative Conversations

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Introduction

Thanks to the ubiquitous wireless devices that we carry around to keep in touch, our communication habits are changing to include less face-to- face conversations and more isolated behind-the-screen communications. Digital natives of the iGeneration engage in informal discourse using abbreviated responses, or text-talk, that often are completed as the participants multitask rather than focus on the topic under discussion (Rosen, 2012). These evolving communication habits are not congruent, however, with the expectations for student performance in today's college and career-ready standards.

Standards for Speaking and Listening commonly require that teachers and students in grades K–3 will participate in collaborative conversations about age- appropriate, grade-level topics and texts after listening attentively to texts read aloud in whole class and small groups.

Students are expected to participate and demonstrate understanding as they:

- Continue conversations through multiple exchanges
- Seek help and ask questions to request clarification
- Ask and answer text-dependent questions about key details
- Describe and discuss relevant details by comparing and contrasting, analyzing, and synthesizing information
- Add drawings, visual displays, or audio recordings of stories or poems to clarify ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

In grades 4-5, teachers and students are expected to engage in a range of collaborative discussions whose discourse complexity increases per grade level. The discussions may occur one-to-one, in groups, or during teacher-led conversations about grade-level topics and texts that are read aloud. Student responsibilities and performance expectationsbecome more challenging as they:

- Come prepared for discussions having read or studied required materials
- Use information and media to explore ideas under discussion
- Build on others' ideas and speak clearly at an understandable pace
- Determine the main ideas and supporting details of text that was read aloud or from information presented in diverse media and formats
- Speak in complete sentences, using good grammar to report on topics or texts, or tell a story or recount experienceswith appropriate facts and details
- Paraphrase portions of a text read aloud and identify reasons and evidence a speaker provides to support particular points
- Summarize written text that was read aloud and identify key details and points, then explain how each claim is supported by reasons and evidence
- Include multimedia componentsand visual displays in presentations, and
- Differentiate between contextsthat call for informal or formal English and adapt their speech to a variety of contexts and tasks using formal English when appropriate to task and situation.

While cooperative learning and collaboration are not new in schools, allowing students to work together and openly share information is not a familiar classroom habit. The adjustments required differ from traditional classroom practice where students worked cooperatively on project-based learning activities (Slavin, 1991a; Slavin, 1991b; Stevens & Slavin, 1995).

New speaking and listening standards approach learning language as a matter of craft, implying that students need explicit instruction and guided practice to learn how to communicate purposefully. Students are expected to participate in collaborative discussions that enhance their comprehension and improve their language skills by talking more, sharing more information with their peers, and engaging in collaborative activities.

The expectation level for students' performance is higher, more sophisticated. Students will communicate clearly and persuasively about specific topics or texts under discussion using correct grammar and complete sentences that contain subject-verb agreement. In doing so, students will follow agreed- upon rules for discussions by applying the pragmatics of language and social conversations while engaging in respectful communication. These changes in communication and classroom practice may differ significantly from traditional habits.

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Teachers and students will share equal opportunities to participate during explicit instruction, engage in discussions, and complete productive group work either in whole class or small group activities (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Frey, Fisher & Everlove, 2009). Teachers and students will share talking time and follow agreed upon rules for discussions when they:

- Listen actively to determine speaker's purpose and confirm understanding
- Speak purposefully by organizing information in ways that clearly communicate to a listener
- Wait for a turn to speak and use respectful communication, acceptable word choices, and appropriate voice tones and levels
- Reflect before reacting to others' input
- Share dialogue that follows the topic under discussion and honor a sense of timing to ensure that everyone participates
- Identify expectations for purposeful outcomes and produce a response or product either orally or in a written or digital format.

Clearly the expectations for speaking and listening skills represent more formal communication habits than many teachers and students use during classroom discussions.

Therefore, implementing these standards will likely require teachers adjust classroom teaching and practice as they:

- Incorporate more explicit language instruction, particularly focusing on grammar
- Model and use correct grammar that includes subject-verb agreement and complete sentences
- Share the talking time by allowing students to interact more and express ideas and respond orally to text-dependent questions
- Demonstrate how to respond to text-dependent questions using text evidence to support answers and validate opinions in discussions
- Incorporate more small group, differentiated instruction and collaborative practice
- Organize lesson content in ways that follow topics sequentially through thought-provoking progressions
- Select practice activities that support structured and focused collaborative conversations
- Delay written responses until students have received sufficient teaching and practice that includes collaborative discussions to enhance their comprehension.

Implementing these standards will require several shifts in behavioral expectations and traditional classroom practices. Incorporating collaboration will require teachers to develop efficient classroom managementroutines and procedures that help them manage flexible

- Establish routines for managing whole group and small group discussions and participation in cooperative learning activities
- Read text to and with students to facilitate comprehension, then help them organize and use materials to supportresponses during discussions
- Clearly identify what is acceptable for participating in respectfulcommunication
- Assess students' capabilities for participating in cooperative activities and provide sufficient training to establish habits using multiple practice opportunities
- Practice in whole group by reading and discussing familiar texts, followed by teacher-led discussions and partnering practice
- Model, teach and practice using correctoral grammarthat includes complete sentences, subject-verb agreement, and following a topic under discussion
- Select activities that help students connect the reading-speaking-listening link and support collaborative conversations
- Assign practice activities that include more collaborative discussions and less written work until students can perform successfully by speaking, listening and using language to communicate
- Differentiateassessment by not grading collaborative workor every assignment, thereby reducing the competition and encouraging more risk-taking forparticipation and supportive collaboration
- Assess student performance on independent practice assignments completed after teacher-led instruction and collaborative discussions in small groups.

No one-way fix has been established for incorporating collaborative conversations and implementing standards for speaking and listening in grades K–5. Certainly the requirements for participation differ from the casual text-talk communications and lecture-format presentations used currently by many teachers and students. Adjusting classroom practices will be necessary to successfully incorporate cooperative learning and increase interactivity in small groups that include collaborative discussions. Making adjustments now in teaching and practice, and embracing collaborative activities, is highly recommended so that students can achieve expectations for speaking, listening and using language as a craft to communicate collaboratively.

Resources

Archer, A. & Hughes, C. (2011). *Explicit Instruction: Effective and Efficient Teaching*, The Guilford Press, New York: NY

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