

RESTORING CONVERSATIONS TO THE CLASSROOM

BY KELLY MATTHEWS



We all know the pandemic has taken a toll on our social interactions. Talking face to face is a crucial part of human connectedness, but over the past two years, imperatives to mask or maintain social distancing, coupled with our increased reliance on technology such as Google Classroom and Chromebooks, have eroded many students' capacity for sustaining meaningful conversations.

And yet the simple skills of speaking and listening are widely recognized as essential to advancing knowledge and preparing for life beyond the classroom. The Common Core standards, for example, state that to “build a foundation for college and career readiness, students must have ample opportunities to take part in a variety of rich, structured conversations — as part of a whole class, in small groups, and with a partner.” While technology such as text-based discussion boards or shared online assignments can supplement spoken interactions, it should not fully supplant speaking and listening opportunities afforded by in-person conversations.

What can teachers do, at every level, kindergarten through college?

Remember that setting limits on the use of electronic devices — including

Chromebooks and other laptops — has long been a part of effective classroom management. Don't be afraid to establish routines or syllabus statements about putting devices away or conduct at least part of each class without them.

Teach active listening as a specific strategy for learning from one another.

Paired activities can foster skills such as maintaining eye contact, leaning alertly toward a person who is speaking, nodding for agreement or emphasis of their key points, and waiting until they have finished speaking before taking a turn in the conversation.

Refer to established models such as Cooperative Learning structures, popularized by Spencer Kagan and others, that require students to talk to one another in low-risk formats. For example, a brief “Turn and Talk” or “Pair-Share” activity based on a focused question in the midst of a longer task such as reading, conducting a lab experiment, or listening to a lecture can help to refocus students' attention, and talking with a partner about classroom learning helps students internalize the material being presented. A “Jigsaw” activity requires planning on the part of the teacher, but it helps

students increase their expertise on a segmented part of the course material and then share what they have learned with their fellow students. A “Four Corners” exercise gives students the opportunity for conversation as well as physical movement when they walk to a designated corner of the classroom to indicate their response (Yes / No / Sometimes / I Don't Know) to a pre-planned instructional question. Depending on their comfort levels, students can then discuss their responses with classmates standing alongside them, or explain their reasoning to the class at large. Holistic approaches such as Socratic Seminars, fishbowl discussions, and Literature Circles can also be adapted for various age groups and subject areas.

Restoring the art of conversation to the classroom will take patience, but it will be worth the effort in the long run.



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