

12 Steps to Get Students Talking

Lorraine Jacques

As a beginning math teacher, I thought that student discourse happened when they answered my questions or asked me questions. Then one day I asked my students an interesting question, and it was like a Ping-Pong match erupted in my room. One student answered, another disagreed, and then the rest of the class chose sides and began debating back and forth! The level of engagement and thinking was incredible and wow, did we have fun!

In trying to replicate this kind of student talk, I have learned that the tools, lesson structure, and topic do not matter. What the teacher does to encourage discourse and communicate high expectations for the level of discourse matters. Consider yourself a maker of experiences more than a giver of knowledge, and train students to question authority and expect answers from each other. It sounds complex, but from research and my work with teachers, I offer 12 small steps that will help teachers transform their classrooms into centers of student discourse.

1. Answer questions with a question.

A teacher's instinct is to answer questions, but this action moves the responsibility of understanding from the student to the teacher, and very little learning occurs. Likewise, when teachers answer every student question, it conveys that correctness is more important than reasoning. It's a conversation killer. When the teacher answers a question with another question, however, several things can happen. The teacher's question clarifies or scaffolds the issue for students. Student responses reveal their thinking (Louca, Zacharia, & Tzialli, 2012). The entire exchange serves as a conversation starter for the rest of the class, especially when they are invited to participate ("What do the rest of you think?"). And finally, students learn that they need to actively engage in the lesson, because the teacher will not "save" them by providing all of the answers.

2. Always ask for more.

Two or more answers to a question allow you to initiate a discussion. Natural follow-up questions include asking students to justify their answers or provide evidence, asking students to critique another's reasoning, and asking what conditions would be required for each of the answers to be correct. Students have learned that a correct answer is like a period at the end of a sentence. By keeping the conversation open, students with "correct" answers may feel unsettled (Didn't I resolve this question with my right answer?). Using this strategy lets students know that teachers expect more than correctness and that defending their positions will make the right answer even stronger.

3. Don't fear silence.

When teachers first try to incorporate more student discourse in the classroom, they encounter silence. This silence doesn't indicate that students are unable to answer; rather, they are waiting for the teacher to answer. Don't give into the silence and answer your own question; be brave. Silences make students uncomfortable, too. Waiting for students to speak shows them that you expect and require active engagement.

4. Put on a poker face.

A smile can communicate correctness, a pause in transcribing student responses can signal error. Maintaining a "poker face" is probably the most difficult aspect of encouraging student discourse, but it may be the most essential. If teachers want students to rely on reasoning more than authority for correctness, teachers cannot give any indication of their thoughts.

5. Provide time and tools.

If we want students to be thoughtful about what they are saying, then we need to give think time before expecting them to share their ideas (Staples, 2007). We also need to remember that we are asking students to consider ideas that they probably have not experienced yet (Gee, 2013). So, in addition to time, teachers need to provide students with tools they can use to create the experiences needed to formulate an idea. Allowing students time to create a diagram or to get manipulatives from a common area enables students to explore their ideas, and maybe experiment a little, so that they can have more thought-out ideas to share.

6. Give them something to talk about.

Just like during everyday conversations, students cannot have interesting discussions if they do not have something interesting to consider. Open-ended questions and complex activities encourage multiple approaches to a topic, which in turn encourage students to discuss and reason about their ideas. Such tasks also encourage teachers to ask higher-order questions, because the tasks require higher cognitive demand (Ni, Zhou, Li, & Li, 2014). For example, providing students (working in groups) with depth maps of local lakes and asking them to estimate the volume results in lively discussions about different approaches each group might use.

7. Don't tell me; tell your peers.

When the teacher walks around the room while students work in groups, students often turn to the teacher to share an idea or ask a question. Instead of making yourself the audience for students' ideas and questions, redirect students to ask or share with each other. "Don't tell me; tell him/her" reinforces the importance of collaborative learning. Of course, you can remain nearby to listen to the conversation that ensues!

8. Recognize good reasoning.

Even when the answer is wrong, recognize attempts at good reasoning. Many students shut down when their ideas are immediately critiqued. This can have a ripple effect, discouraging other, less confident students from engaging. Finding something specific to acknowledge about a student's ideas sends the message that you are interested in their thinking and effort, not just right answers. After this recognition, solicit ideas from the class. For example, if a student uses images to think through a question or problem, you might tell them, "Sketching the scenario was a useful approach here. What do the rest of you think of this method?" Other students will likely identify the problems in the student's idea and discuss it in a way that helps everyone understand better.

9. Make participation comfortable and inclusive.

When people are truly engaged in a discussion, they do not want to raise their hands and wait to say what they are thinking. They do not always want to stay quiet, and they prefer to be eye-level with the person they are talking to. The same is true for students. Allowing open discussion, letting students be a little louder than usual, and positioning oneself at their level are simple techniques that teachers can employ to encourage students to think and talk freely. To engage quieter students, teachers can project a discussion forum or chat room on the board and allow students to send responses from their personal devices.

10. Let go of ego.

Students may be reluctant to offer ideas or to disagree with another student because they fear looking foolish in front of their peers. Students may have trouble hearing someone disagree with their ideas because some of their identity may be attached to being "right." Teaching students to discuss ideas in a detached manner removes their egos from their ideas. For example, prefacing an argument with "I think" instead of "it is" or prefacing a counterargument with "I disagree" instead of "that's wrong" lightens the tensions students may feel when discussing a complex idea in class (Horn, 2008). When working in groups, students also need to learn how to ask each other for help. Simply stating, "I don't understand this," often gets ignored by the group. Training students to ask each other specific questions, such as "How did you get this answer?," helps the group members understand what *kind* of help the questioner needs (Webb, 2008).

11. Show students some appreciation.

When students are engaged in discourse, they are engaged in difficult work. Appreciating their hard work encourages the students to do it again. A teacher could end a lesson with a simple statement like, "Today was fun! Thank you!", and the students will leave feeling rewarded. Public recognition also shows appreciation for the students' work, because it tells them that the community values their efforts. Teachers can have students produce items that demonstrate their ideas and display them publicly, like hanging posters in the school hallway, or invite adults who "really do this" to listen to the students and share in the debate. Like many adults, most students will participate more when they feel appreciated.

12. Observe other teachers outside your subject area.

I was a math teacher. I learned how interesting experiences can drive discussion by watching students do inquiry-based science labs. I learned the importance of open-ended questions from a literature class. I saw how a chat room engaged quiet students from a social studies class. The most powerful way to learn how to engage students in meaningful discourse is to watch how other teachers do it. Each subject has its own strengths for promoting student talk; observing those strengths in action lets us consider how to adapt techniques for our own students.

By the time I became a department chair, student discourse occurred regularly in my classroom. Helping the teachers in my department achieve true discourse in their classrooms is how these 12 steps began. I found that teachers were more likely to have small successes when they had small, specific techniques to work on. Simply by answering questions with a question, my teachers were able to solicit meaningful responses from students, and then use those responses to develop fuller conversations. It takes time, but these small steps, practiced persistently, pay off.

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