

Four Steps to Structured Student Conversations

If you are new to the teaching career, these next few weeks before Thanksgiving might be a tough time. The “honeymoon” period is over. Late nights are filled with school events, endless stacks of work to grade, and projects to plan. The exhaustion is starting to soak in. You’re starting to annoy your friends by always talking about “your kids,” and your family hopes that they’ll get to see you before Thanksgiving.

On the up side, you know your students and communicate with their parents regularly. You maintain structure in your classroom and most of the students understand and follow rules because you are very consistent. Your classroom is a place where students talk when called on, listen, and follow your directions. Still, you as the teacher are the one who is drained at the end of every day, not the students. If you want to survive, then it’s time to let your students do some more of the work for you.

If you are looking for ways to engage all of your learners, while also supporting the needs of diverse learners, then it’s time to get them to start talking. Here’s my four-step method to getting students into the roles of partner, presenter, teammate, and teacher.

1. Start Small and Short.

Many teachers, myself included, fear “letting go” and allowing students to talk. I’ve often heard my peers say, “I just don’t trust my students to work in groups.” The fact is, our directions for discussions matter. Protocols and games that are quick and timed build practice for student accountability during classroom conversations. These strategies work best with vocabulary, prior knowledge, and open-ended questions where students can think and work quickly. Turn and Talks, Dance to Find a Partner, and “Speed Interviews” (think speed dating, where students stand in a line and shift every one or two minutes so they talk with five to 10 others in 10 minutes) all involve two students exchanging information with each other. In the beginning of implementation, posting a timer on the projector or using a big teacher-timer helps students self-regulate. For students who have a tough time listening, offer strategies for keeping quiet for 10 seconds to one minute, depending on the topic. Phrases like, “Partner A: lips zipped!” or “Partner A: silent listener, ready?” remind students of their role. The short amount of time keeps students focused on the task at hand (i.e. What do you think the word “equation” means?), while creating a positive classroom energy. As the teacher, it’s important to have a consistent method for switching speakers and to never lose track of the time. Use [cold calling](#) after the structured talk so that students learn you are holding them accountable for talking on topic. Ask students to share what their partners said to lower the pressure and encourage active listening.

2. Practice and Perfect with Resources, Roles, and Rubrics.

Once students are accustomed to learning from talking with peers for short periods of time, the length of the conversations and number of students should increase along with the structures to support the discussions. Graphic organizers, scripted question stems, GoogleDocs, and note-taking guides encourage students to stay on task and ask the right questions. These tools also reinforce learning when students translate their conversation into writing. When students work

on more complex tasks, like creating an algebraic word problem, or constructing three arguments for and against a social cause, they need guidance for distributing the work. In addition to titles, be sure to include descriptions and responsibilities for each of the roles. Provide students with feedback when you notice they are or are not following their roles. Finally, if their work together is regular or sustained over time for a lab or project, allow them to evaluate each other at the end of their work, and make sure they know this will happen before they begin. If you're freaking out that this sounds like a lot of work—stop now! There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Get on the Internet and search for “group roles” and “group rubrics.” When you find something close to what your students need, modify so that it matches your classroom culture and norms. You can start by checking out some of the resources I've shared on my [website](#).

3. Keep Kids Communicating.

Once your students have learned that you maintain a classroom environment where student voice is the, the variety of strategies that you implement can increase and evolve to meet the needs of your students. I taught block periods in summer programs where classes ranged from 75 to 120 minutes, so integrating movement into instruction was essential to managing my students' behavior and engagement. By integrating protocols like [Gallery Walks](#), “stand up” partners, learning stations, concept sorts, and [Four Corners](#), students participate in timed and focused discussions with controlled movement. Teachers can integrate other instructional technology supports like [Class Dojo](#) or the low-tech version, popsicle sticks with students' names, to assess the quality of discussions at stations or corners. Since these activities often push students to think at higher levels, like a Gallery Walk where multimedia resources are posted around the room for students to gather evidence for a claim related to the novel they are reading or a current or historical event, the time is extended upwards of fifteen minutes. It's important to create a sense of urgency to maintain student focus. Many teachers have found that using odd times, like eight or 11 minutes and posting the time on a large timer works to maintain student productivity.

4. Every Student, Every Day.

As a teacher, I see my role as not just a facilitator of learning, but an assessor of understanding. Over the past nine years, I have learned that the more I broaden my methods for how I collect assessment data from my students, the better they perform and the more I know the needs of individual students. Strategies like verbal exit tickets and one-on-one conferencing reinforce the classroom culture for speaking about learning while allowing me to gauge what my students know beyond what they were able to write on paper or on a computer. The Common Core State Standards are holding students accountable for developing [speaking and listening skills](#). To me, this means it is even more essential that teachers of all content areas provide students with opportunities to ask and answer each other's questions, prepare for conversations, and discuss texts. The third [Standard for Mathematical Practice](#), states that students should be able to critique the reasoning of others, and [math talks](#) require students to listen, paraphrase, and question the thinking of their peers. For some students, these daily safe and structured opportunities to talk and be heard are the only ones in their day. To support their development as learners and [21st century communicators](#) who can collaborate while creating products and thinking critically, teachers must provide daily opportunities for students to talk about what they are learning and practice academic conversations.