

# Show & Tell: A Video Column / Conversational Moves

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Educators are a pretty gregarious bunch; most of us have no trouble talking in pairs or small groups. But even for the most enthusiastic talkers, holding our own in large-group discussions can present challenges. Now add another layer of complexity—an incomplete command of the topic under discussion.

The two of us ran into this situation when we took a doctoral course on neuroimaging. We enrolled because we thought it would be a great way to learn more about the brain (we were right), but the discussions were pretty intimidating because all the other students were in a neuropsychology program and had different professional experiences than we had.

In the end, our discussion skills helped. We knew when to bring in our knowledge about teaching and when to listen and learn from others. When we didn't understand a point a classmate made, we asked questions and got him or her to elaborate further. Most of all, we profited from having a skilled and caring professor who kept the conversation going. Using a repertoire of conversational moves, he steered the discussions in ways that enabled all participants to share their knowledge and to expand everyone's understanding.

We teachers face the same challenges in K–12 classrooms that our professor faced in this doctoral course. Like him, we work with learners who have diverse experiences and varying levels of knowledge. We strive to engage these learners in classroom discussions that are not merely conversations, but also the co-construction of knowledge. We know when this kind of classroom discussion gives birth to critical thinking. A student makes a profound observation, and we see the others rise to a new level of understanding. Or perhaps a spirited debate breaks out as students challenge one another and some even change their minds in the face of new evidence. On days when this occurs, we leave our classrooms humbled by the learning we have witnessed.

## See It in Action

Such critical-thinking events happen more frequently in the classrooms of teachers who know how to move from posing questions to facilitating extended discussion through dialogic teaching.<sup>1</sup> This kind of teaching requires that the teacher use a variety of conversational moves, as illustrated in the [video clip](#) that accompanies this column.

Fourth grade teacher Melissa Noble's students have been engaged in close reading of the book *Toys! Amazing Stories Behind Some Great Inventions* by Don Wulffson (Henry Holt, 2000). Just before the video segment begins, one student has drawn an incorrect conclusion from the text about who should receive credit for the invention of Magic Rocks. Instead of simply correcting him and moving on, Ms. Noble turns the discussion back to the students while remaining neutral. She keeps the discussion going and encourages them to think critically by summarizing and clarifying; offering restatements ("What I hear you saying is ...") "So are you suggesting that ...?"); and redirecting the question to other members of the class ("What do you think about what Skyler just said?"). The overall effect is that the teacher's dialogic moves support her students' ability to apply logic and reasoning to resolve a point of disagreement.

From the students' comments, it's clear that Ms. Noble has thoroughly prepared students for the evidence-based discussion. We hear them consistently using conversational structures that respectfully express agreement or disagreement and referring to specific evidence from the text to support their points ("I disagree because on page 86 ..." or "I see how that makes sense, but ...").

Such discussions don't just happen; they are the product of intentional teaching and practice. It's important to systematically introduce such discussion skills as summarizing points made by others, building on others' ideas, disagreeing without being disagreeable, listening, and posing questions. In addition, we need to pay particular attention to skills specific to large-group discussions, such as modulating volume so that everyone can hear, tracking the conversation, and yielding or gaining the floor.

## Your Turn

To introduce discussion behaviors and skills, start with content that is already familiar to students. In other words, don't simultaneously teach new content *and* a new discussion skill; it's too much for most students to attend to.

In the first week of school, host discussion circles with the class, posing interesting, stimulating questions. For example, ask elementary students whether junk food should be sold in school or what household chores families should expect their children to do. Ask middle school students about the benefits and dangers of social media or whether zoos are harmful or helpful. Ask high school students whether a state law imposing fines for driving while distracted (eating food or putting on makeup, for instance) is a good idea.

These discussion circles will begin to build the habits of talking to one another, posing questions, and maintaining attention. At the end of each discussion, describe your observations of students' conversational behaviors. Keep a running list of expectations for class discussions; use it to frame subsequent discussions of curriculum content. Leave time at the end for students to reflect as a group about their successes and challenges in the conversation.

Although leading rigorous classroom discussions requires practice and finesse, the rewards are great. Our goal as teachers during these discussions is not to convey knowledge to our students, but to guide them in co-constructing knowledge for themselves, linking concepts in ways that build their skills and understanding.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Reznitskaya, A. (2012). Dialogic teaching: Rethinking language use during literature discussions. *Reading Teacher*, 65(7), 446–456.