

Conversing to Fortify Literacy, Language, and Learning

*I already know the answer.
Why do I have to talk to a partner?*
—Nora, sixth grade

How would you respond to Nora's (all names are pseudonyms) question? You probably thought about how to convince Nora that she can learn from others and that they can learn from her, and that would be a good start. Yet the appropriate response in this and similar situations is a much deeper one, a transformation of both what and how students are taught.

Nora has been immersed in hundreds of lessons that have focused on short, "right" answers. She has been asked to fill in blanks, fill in boxes, fill in lines, and choose the right letter on tests and several trees' worth of worksheets. She has come to believe that the purpose of talking to others in school, when allowed at all, is to give or get answers.

Interaction, dialogue, conversation, discussion, discourse, collaboration, and talk have all become increasingly popular terms in recent years, particularly with the advent of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). In the 21st century and beyond, students must be able to work together to build complex ideas and solve problems by talking to one another. Yet, as Nora's comment points out, we still must overcome

several challenges related to using and building student talk in school, and those challenges are particularly relevant for language arts teachers in middle grades—academic years when texts and concepts tend to take an extra leap in complexity and abstractness.

Moreover, in schools where there has been constant fear of enduring sanctions for low test scores, large numbers of English learners have suffered the slings and arrows of lessons filled with test preparation, word definition recitation, and grammar rules memorization. As a result, too many students have lost interest in learning, and many others, if they do graduate, lack key communication and thinking skills needed for both college and career.

To better prepare students like Nora for the communication rigors of college and beyond, we have identified several necessary conditions for effective classroom conversations and possible ways to create them. In this article, we use the term *classroom conversation* to refer to paired interactions in which students build on one another's turns in a nonscripted manner.

Condition #1: Valuing Talk

Nora doesn't seem to value talking to learn, but is that her fault? Tests haven't valued it. Curricula, lessons, and teachers, for the most part, haven't valued it. And yet, conversations are highly valuable for many reasons, three of which are described in this section.

Conversing Supports Reading

As students converse with partners, they practice interacting, questioning, clarifying, paraphrasing, critiquing, making inferences, comparing, challenging ideas, building up understandings, and fortifying positions. Some even call this interacting with the text (Rosenblatt, 1995). By extension, interacting with people can strengthen students' reading comprehension skills, especially those struggling readers who view reading as a passive "decode the words without stopping and hope it all sinks in" process.

Conversing Supports Writing Skills

In a conversation, partners must continually clarify ideas for each other. Each gets immediate feedback on how clear his or her idea is and can make adjustments, often adding information or defining key terms. Each also fortifies and supports key ideas with evidence and examples. When, for instance, a student shares with her partner a sentence that proposes the use of symbolism in a story, and then she follows that sentence with examples from the text, she has practiced, orally, the crafting of a logical paragraph—just as teachers want to see in their students' writing.

Conversing Supports Language Development

Producing linguistic output and interacting with others are vital for language development (Swain, 1985; Long, 1981). Paired conversations offer the most "practice opportunities per minute" for forming original and authentic messages. The more chances the brain has to put words together into sentences and connect those sentences to convey and clarify ideas, the better it gets at using language.

Condition #2: Focusing Less on Short Answers and More on Whole Ideas

Let's consider the "I already know the answer" part of Nora's comment. This answer-focused

paradigm of education is deeply rooted in students, teachers, assessments, and curricula. Much of it stems from the "factory" or "banking" view of teaching, which reduces a person's education to an accumulation of facts and "right" answers, most of which are "short," meaning that they can be answered with one word or one sentence or by choosing a single option on a test. Short answers, of course, tend to be more easily taught and tested. For example, teaching the meanings of terms such as *onomatopoeia*, *irony*, *denouement*, and *foreshadowing* tends to be easier than teaching students to use criteria to evaluate and argue the strength of evidence supporting a theme in a novel.

In many classrooms, teachers have students answer questions orally to test their knowledge. Students' responses are often just for "display," to show what they have learned rather than to communicate an idea for a purpose or to put forth an idea so that it can be built upon or challenged. Because of the focus on answering with short answers to earn points, students have learned not to push themselves to clearly communicate their ideas. They say the minimum and tend to depend on prompting by the teacher for elaboration and justification. Yet to reach a wide variety of new standards, and to do well in life, students must be able to orally communicate longer, more complete messages that contain complex ideas. And to do so, they must have numerous opportunities to practice putting thoughts together in oral messages.

We must put into practice an idea John Dewey espoused more than 100 years ago: "Were all instructors to realize that the quality of mental process, not the production of correct answers, is the measure of educative growth, something hardly less than a revolution in teaching would be worked" (Dewey, 1916, p. 183). Thus, we must

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prepare and prompt students to do things that require “long” answers—ideas and understandings that require students to use a) thinking skills often required across the curriculum, such as interpreting text, supporting ideas, and applying principles, and b) original, complete sentences that connect to one another.

An activity that helps students fortify their oral communication skills involves *opinion formation cards* (Zwiers, O'Hara, & Pritchard, 2014). Students are presented with an issue, such as: Should middle school students take more classes online? Then each student receives a copy of one of (usually) six cards detailing a quotation from an argument-based text; three cards contain points supporting one side of this issue, while the other three support the opposing side. Students are then asked to begin to form an opinion. They aren't required to agree with the card's idea, but they should be able to respond to it. The teacher models how to use complex sentences and how to link supporting sentences with appropriate transitions, pronouns, and noun phrases. Each student then shares his or her evolving opinion with three different peers. The crucial feature of the activity is this: with each successive partner, the student must augment what he or she says and how it's said. That is, the student must improve the complexity and quality of all opinions in each conversation by using the language and ideas of previous partners as well as modeling and feedback from the teacher.

Condition #3: Focusing Less on *Talking to* and More on *Conversing With*

Now let's look at the “Why do I have to talk to a partner?” part of Nora's response. First, there is a difference between talking to and talking with another person. *Talking to* is a one-way transmission of information. It is best for short answers, definitions, facts, etc. Talking to often involves activities such as think-pair-shares and jigsaws. Students tell or read information aloud to others. Conversely, *conversing with* means building ideas together. It involves a two-way process in which students co-construct, co-fortify, and negotiate ideas to form new knowledge and understandings. It requires building students' abilities to orally communicate with others in academic ways—to “think together,” as Mercer (2000) put it.

We often call interaction the fifth language domain. Listening and speaking are two of the famous four (reading and writing being the other two), but interaction involves much more than just listening and speaking. It requires those involved to build ideas in collaboration with others in real time, follow conversational norms, clarify and negotiate meanings, and both direct and follow the flow of the conversation.

Constructive Conversations

LISA: I think the theme is being honest.

EDGAR: I think it's don't judge a book cover.

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

Partner Talk

In this strategy guide, you'll learn about Partner Talk—a way to provide students with another opportunity to make learning their own through collaboration and discussion. Partner Talk can be used for assessing classwork, making connections to prior knowledge, discussing vocabulary, or simplifying concepts.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/using-partner-talk-strengthen-30954.html>

Lisa Fink
www.readwritethink.org

LISA: OK.

EDGAR: It could be about friendship.

LISA: Yeah. That one works.

The prevalence of nonconstructive conversations like Lisa and Edgar's in upper grades fuels the urgency of oral language development work through high school. In response to this urgency, we have been working with teachers to help students build four focal skills for what we call *constructive conversations*. The four skills are creating, clarifying, fortifying, and negotiating. These skills work together to help students build ideas within a conversation, as shown in Figure 1. The visual reminds students of the skills they can use as they talk, and the symbol in the center reminds them to build one idea as fully as possible before moving on to the next. Edgar and Lisa might have benefited from this visual tool.

Each conversation skill can be taught with focused activities, scaffolds, and practice opportunities. One helpful scaffold for teaching how to negotiate ideas is an Argument Balance Scale, as detailed in Figure 2 (Zwiers, O'Hara, & Pritchard, 2014). It shows students what happens in our minds as we assign values or "weights" to different reasons and their evidence. In their conversations, those with opposing viewpoints try to agree on how big or small the boxes should be, in proportion with the strength of the evidence provided. They then compare the points on both sides to agree on which side has more weight.

Students in a ninth-grade English class used the scale to decide which theme from *To Kill a Mockingbird* was most apparent in the text. The snippet that follows is from one paired conversation after a class discussion that explored several ideas for themes:

LEONEL: I think like the heaviest is doing the right thing.

DAISY: Why?

LEONEL: Atticus knows he's gonna lose the case with Tom.

DAISY: And it's dangerous for him and his kids. But I think it's don't be racist. It's

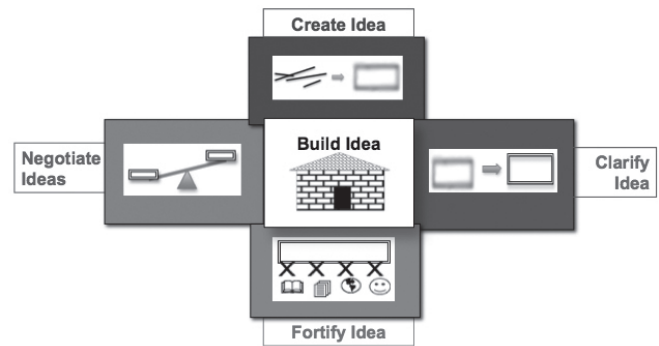


Figure 1. Based on the "Constructive Conversation Skills Poster" from Zwiers, O'Hara, & Pritchard (Stenhouse, 2014, p. 190). Used with permission.

heavy cuz being racist is really wrong. Look at what happened to Tom!

LEONEL: Yeah. And like Ms. Seeley said, Tom was an example of lots of others.

DAISY: So what's heaviest?

LEONEL: I don't know. If you don't be racist, then you don't need people like Atticus to do the right thing. It depends.

DAISY: Do the right thing is not being racist.

Even though Daisy and Leonel didn't quite reach consensus, they were creating and building on important ideas that will help them become

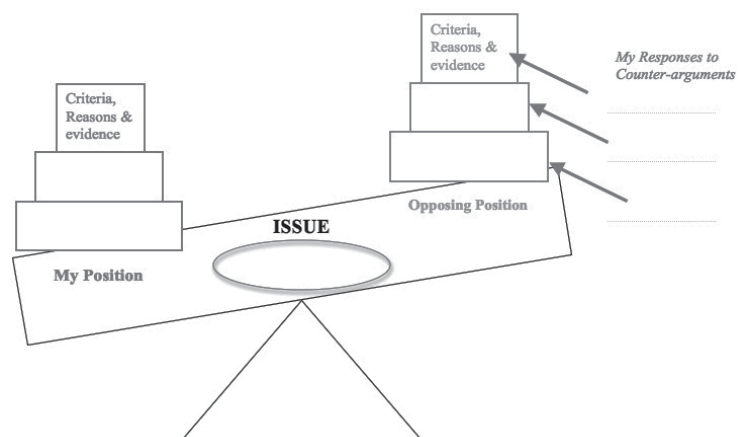


Figure 2. "Argument Balance Scale" from Zwiers, O'Hara, & Pritchard (Stenhouse, 2014, p. 143). Downloadable at ALDNetwork.org. Used with permission.

skillful thinkers and communicators over time. Our work is cut out for us, though, if we want to hear conversations like this among our students. We must move the focus of our teaching and assessments from finding and accumulating answers to co-constructing and strengthening ideas.

Conclusion

Teachers play a key role in supporting and guiding conversations in school. In the early stages, we recommend that they take the time to model and show models (transcripts and video) that demonstrate to students what they can and should do with ideas in a conversation. And as soon as possible, students must be given opportunities to use the tools and skills needed to build ideas with partners without the training wheels provided by a teacher. That means teachers must gradually release to students the responsibility for running their conversations on their own (Fisher & Frey, 2008).

The three conditions for effective classroom conversations overlap and support one another, and all three are vital not only for developing students' literacy skills, but also for strengthening their abilities to communicate with others. It is our hope that Nora and many students like her will benefit from lessons that value conversations with others as ways to learn and build on important ideas within each discipline.

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