

# INTRODUCTION TO THE EXTENDING THINKING THROUGH DISCOURSE CONTINUUM

## INTRODUCTION

Discourse provides an important arena for students to extend their thinking, to make it visible, and to participate in a shared learning experience. A key attribute of discourse is a shift in focus from individual to collective meaning making. Through discussion, students create a shared “third space” where their individual meaning making processes connect to one another, enabling them to learn with and from one another. This discussion space is maintained by all participating students as a shared task. When students are aware of their role in this, they become more attuned to the rhythm of turn taking, the act of listening to their peers, and their responsibility to both contribute to the discussion and to leave space for others to do so.

Discourse is different from other forms of learning in the way it enables students to learn with and from peers and to contribute to the learning of the group. We’ve heard many students say that through discourse, they learn better from one another than from the teacher, and that the opportunity to learn from peers has become important to them. Supporting one’s peers’ learning is an important part of the discourse process, as well as a key outcome.

While discourse practices are inherent in many aspects of formative assessment (after all, getting students to talk about their learning is a core strategy when eliciting evidence and conducting peer feedback), extending thinking during discourse is focused on just that - extending thinking. Students, or students and teachers, support learning by considering known ideas, listening carefully, putting new ideas together, and taking next steps. Supporting one another to think does not come naturally, and like other self-regulation skills, needs to be taught. As students learn to support questioning and dialogue with peers, teachers are able to step back as students do more of the thinking.

Discourse in formative assessment can be thought of as student talk that extends understanding for both the listener and the speaker as they move toward the Learning Goal. It supports collective meaning making as students explore new understandings and press on the edge of what they know, as when collective understanding slowly evolves through students building on other’s ideas. The quality of discourse is measured far more by the extent of thinking than the extent of talking, and it is the case that students’ questions or prompts may, at times, elicit silence rather than talk, as students ponder, wonder, and reflect.

There are many things that happen in classrooms that may fall into the simpler category of “discourse” but are not focused on this specific way that students engage in exploring new content or ways of thinking. Students may converse about tasks or procedures, may talk about some related but not quite on-task topic, or may tell one another if they are “right” or “wrong.” While these are all “discourse” practices, none of these fall into the category of extending thinking during discourse.

## SUPPORTING STUDENTS

Students' ability to extend their thinking through discourse needs to be developed over time through teacher modeling, explicit instruction, teacher questioning, and opportunities for practice. There also needs to be clear structures in place to enable discourse, including discourse norms and participation structures. For example, the physical environment in which students are talking together - the seating arrangement, access to materials, and noise level - all impact students' ability to engage in discourse effectively.

## THE CONTINUUM

**What it is.** The Extending Thinking Through Discourse Continuum is a framework describing the stages students typically go through as they develop their capacity to extend their own and their peers' thinking through discourse. It also highlights the role of teachers in supporting this process. It is organized into the following five dimensions:

- Structured Opportunities for Discourse
- Resource Use
- Attention to Learning Goals
- Discourse Participation
- Evidence Use

**How it is used.** The continuum is meant to support teachers to self-reflect on their own classroom videos, to provide feedback to their peers, and to guide teacher-level discussions. Teachers can use the continuum in conjunction with classroom videos for the purpose of observing and making sense of evidence from students in order to clarify what students need next to grow in each dimension.

Students can also use the continuum individually, or with peers, to reflect on their own discourse participation, evaluate their current practices and set personal Learning Goals for next steps. They can also reflect as a group on their discussion dynamics, using the continuum to determine the group's overall performance level for each dimension, and use it as a source for common language when providing feedback.

**Sources of evidence.** The continuum is primarily focused on what *students* are doing during discussions - the focus of their conversations, how they utilize resources, the patterns of their participation, and the manner in which they engage peers in order to extend thinking. As such, evidence of extending thinking through discourse is primarily centered on the students in all five dimensions of the continuum.

While some of the continuum dimensions, e.g., *Structured Opportunities for Discourse*, directly or indirectly address the teacher's role, evidence for these dimensions may at times also be solely based on student behavior. The teacher's role may not be directly visible when students are engaged in independent conversation with one another, except by what can be inferred from students' patterns of behavior. In discussions where the teacher is participating, their role is more clear, but the degree to which they set up and supported the discussion beforehand can still frequently be inferred only from student actions.

## DIMENSION DESCRIPTORS

### Row 1: Structured opportunities for discourse

*When teachers and students gather evidence of this dimension, an overarching question is: Is discourse structured so that it effectively supports students to engage in learning?*

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This dimension specifically addresses how the teacher structures and models discourse for students to both extend thinking and engage in collective meaning making. This includes, for example, arrangement of the physical space, resource availability, teacher modeling, establishing discourse norms, setting clear expectations, and providing feedback. The teacher's supportive role may be more obvious in the earlier stages of the continuum when students require more guidance for their discussions. As they advance, students are more able to manage and sustain productive conversations on their own, though the structures can still be inferred through their behavior. Throughout the stages of the continuum, the teacher provides students with the time and space for discourse, and as needed, provides structured support, such as anchor charts with example questions to guide students when probing thinking. At the advanced levels, these supports may still be evident during discourse with certain groups of students, such as English learners.

### Row 2. Resource Use

*When teachers and students gather evidence of this dimension, a key question is: Do students use available resources as needed to support their participation in discourse?*

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This dimension attends to the degree to which students use resources that the teacher provides to support discourse. At the beginning level of the continuum, the students do not use the available resources, even though they are necessary for them to participate in productive conversations. At the extending level, students effectively use resources as needed, including content-specific and discourse-supportive resources. The quality of students' use of resources is measured by how well their use of them matches their need for them. In cases where the teacher has not provided appropriate resources to support student discourse, and as such there is nothing for students to use, this dimension would be scored at a lower level.

### Row 3. Attention to Learning Goals

*When teachers and students gather evidence of this dimension, an overarching question is: Is student discourse focused on understanding the intended learning of the lesson?*

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This dimension relates to the focus of students' discussion and to what extent an observer can determine that students are working toward a common goal. At the beginning level, the conversation does not focus on understanding the Learning Goal. At the extending level, students' conversation is deeply focused on understanding the Learning Goal for themselves and their peers. In some cases, there may be evidence that a few students in a group are focused on understanding the goal, while others are participating in side conversations. This would lower the rating, as the spirit of this dimension centers on all students in a discussion working toward understanding the Learning Goal. Additionally, if the Learning Goal is not clear to students, e.g., they seem lost, or are focused on what appear to be quite different things, this also lowers the rating for this dimension.

#### Row 4. Discourse Participation

*When teachers and students gather evidence of this dimension, a key question is: Do patterns of student participation promote everyone's learning in this discussion?*

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This dimension addresses how students are participating in discourse to further their thinking. In this dimension, observers are not only looking for evidence of talking, but evidence of thinking, which can look like attentive listening, asking probing questions, wondering, disagreeing, or clarifying others' contributions. At the beginning level, students often make disconnected comments, dominate the discussion, or remain silent. More advanced discourse is marked by students taking turns speaking and listening, building on other's comments, clarifying their own thinking, giving feedback to peers, and contributing to the learning of the group.

#### Row 5. Evidence Use

*When teachers and students gather evidence of this dimension, a framing question is: Do students use evidence from discourse to reflect on their own and their peers' learning?*

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This dimension addresses students' use of discourse to reflect on their own and their peers' learning progress. Discourse is a unique classroom practice in the degree to which it can make student thinking visible. Yet to become aware of one's own thinking and habits during conversation, as well as one's peers', takes intention, practice, and feedback. At the early stages of the continuum, students rarely take stock of their own learning. As they progress, they often only reflect on their own learning status. At the extending level, students use evidence to reflect on their own and their peers' learning as it advances towards the Learning Goal. In the context of discourse, students can reflect on the development of their content understanding and the development of their discourse practices.

### ORGANIZATION

**Rows.** The rows of the continuum represent a series of five "pictures of practice." They build on each other to give a sense of how a particular dimension of discourse develops from beginning to more sophisticated levels. The continuum provides a common vocabulary with which to observe and reflect on practice, and also a road map of what to expect as each student develops their skills. The continuum is organized as a table. Reading from left to right, it describes a novice or incomplete practice of discourse to a more expert level.

**Columns.** The columns represent the four levels of practice for the continuum and capture how student discourse skills and teacher support for them evolve.

### PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT

When using the continuum to reflect on students' skills and abilities with discourse and the provided context, the evidence may not match exactly with the description of one performance level but rather cut across two. In such instances, use professional judgment to select the level that is most representative of the observed practice.

### COLLABORATIVE LEARNING CULTURE

The collaborative structures provided for students, the expectations established for students to listen carefully and respectfully to each other, and the discourse patterns modeled for students will all contribute to the quality of discourse in classrooms. In this way, there is a very strong relationship between a collaborative learning culture and effective discourse.

# Extending Thinking through Discourse Continuum

	<b>Beginning</b>	<b>Developing</b>	<b>Progressing</b>	<b>Extending</b>
<b>Structured Occasions</b>	It is evident through teacher and student interaction, or student interaction alone, that there is a lack of structure to support extended thinking and collective meaning making.	It is evident through teacher and student interaction, or student interaction alone, that there are some structures to support extended thinking and collective meaning making.	It is evident through teacher and student interaction, or student interaction alone, that there are adequate structures to support extended thinking and collective meaning making.	It is evident through teacher and student interaction, or student interaction alone, that there are well-crafted, appropriate structures in place that support extended thinking and collective meaning making.
<b>Resource Use</b>	Students do not use or access posted/available resources to support discourse.	Students either minimally or awkwardly apply available resources to support discourse, e.g., discussion norms, sentence stems, images, and anchor charts.	Students make adequate use of content-specific resources, e.g., graphs and articles, and discourse-supportive resources, e.g., sentence stems and norms, to engage in discourse.	Students effectively use content-specific and discourse-supportive resources as needed to engage in discourse.
<b>Attention to Learning Goals</b>	Students' engagement in discourse does not focus on understanding the intended learning for the lesson.	Students' engagement in discourse is only at times focused on understanding the intended learning.	Students' engagement in discourse adequately focuses on understanding the intended learning, but mostly centers on their own learning and not that of their peers.	Students' engagement in discourse focuses on deeply understanding the intended learning of the lesson for themselves and their peers.
<b>Discourse Participation</b>	Students do not, or rarely, build on one another's ideas, making the discussion a series of disconnected ideas.  ----- OR ----- Students silently indicate (dis)agreement with others and do not speak unless prompted. One or more students, or the teacher may dominate the discussion.	Students sometimes build on one another's ideas, occasionally asking questions for elaboration and clarification or taking a different position. At times the discussion is connected, though it may generally remain disconnected or halting.  Students seldom elaborate on what their peers say or clarify their own thinking.  Several students take the opportunity to speak, though a few students may dominate the discussion or are silent.	Students build on one another's ideas and provide feedback. They ask one another questions about their thinking and opinions, take various perspectives and make connections between ideas. The discussion is generally connected and flows easily.  Students elaborate on what their peers say and explain their own thinking.  Many students take the opportunity to speak during the discussion which is fairly balanced between students.	Students frequently build on one another's ideas, provide feedback, support various perspectives and make connections to advance ideas. The discussion is well-connected and flows easily.  Students ask probing questions to support elaboration and listen carefully to one another's reasoning, wonderings and opinions. Students demonstrate curiosity about their peers' perspectives.  Students also clarify and explain their own thinking to add to the group's learning.  Most or all students take the opportunity to speak during the discussion which is evenly balanced between students.
<b>Evidence Use</b>	Students do not use evidence from discourse to reflect on their own progress towards the goal.	Students minimally use evidence from discourse to reflect on their own progress towards the goal.	Students use evidence from discourse to reflect on their own progress towards the goal.	Students use evidence from discourse to reflect on their own and their peers' progress towards the goal.