

THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

FACILITATING DISCOURSE

In the most productive discourse experiences that include a facilitator (generally the teacher), it can seem that the facilitator does not do much to support the conversation. However, this is likely far from the truth. A skilled facilitator makes strategic moves in response to the way in which the discourse unfolds. The most valuable facilitator moves do not drive or hijack the discourse. Rather, they make it possible for speakers and listeners to have the conversations they need to have. Additionally, these facilitator moves model for students the ways they themselves can support their peers during future conversations.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Keep conversations evidence-based. When talking about ideas in the classroom, it is helpful to talk from evidence. This may mean asking students to refer to data they have collected, something they have read, or steps of a problem they have worked through. When drawing from text, an evidence-based conversation may mean pointing out a specific page number, definition, or image that makes someone think something is so. Other types of evidence may come from someone's personal experience or from sharing a specific example of a strategy used to solve a particular challenge.

Making thinking visible. To talk about ideas, it is essential to have a clear understanding of what someone is thinking. Once an idea is understood, it can be compared with another idea, evaluated in terms of benefits and limitations, or revised if the evidence shows it to be inaccurate, incomplete, or imprecise. As a facilitator, you can help make thinking visible in a number of ways, for example, when a student shares an idea that may not be fully understood by you or the group, you might ask, "Can you say more about that idea?" Alternatively, you might invite the student to elaborate by saying, "Please help us understand what you are thinking." You can also help make thinking visible through representations such as drawings or diagrams by asking, "Can you draw a picture or show us what you mean in another way?"

Don't stop at one. Every group of learners brings a wealth of ideas, experiences, and knowledge that contributes to the learning of others. To tap into this resource, a skilled facilitator helps make space for people to share a variety of viewpoints, mental models, representations, and ways of thinking. As a facilitator, this means reminding yourself not to stop at one. For example, if you move on after someone shares a right answer, the group won't benefit from exploring common misconceptions. If only one person shares an opinion, others may think differences aren't respected or appreciated.

Separate ideas from individuals. Given that disciplines involve changing bodies of knowledge and that disciplinary knowledge often involves trying on ideas and discarding theories that aren't supported by evidence, learners are very likely to discover their own misconceptions and find their mental models need refinement. This part of the process of learning is to be expected. One way to help with the uncomfortable feelings that may

accompany these discoveries is to let everyone know it is okay to be wrong. Remind everyone that learning is about exploring ideas. When students take risks to share their tentative thinking and incorrect ideas, thank them. Another strategy for separating ideas from individuals is to use charts for writing/illustrating an idea. Then the group can talk about what is on the chart, one step removed from the person who contributed the idea.

Explore ideas with words, actions, images, and symbols. It is likely you have experienced how powerful it is for people to explain their thinking in a variety of ways. Because different aspects of a concept are conveyed through words, actions, images, and symbols, it is helpful to invite and push learners to express their thinking in all of these ways. As a facilitator, you can help deepen and cement a group's understanding by asking people to revisit ideas from these various angles. For example, you might say:

- Can someone draw us a picture of what that might look like?
- How would you say in words what those numbers mean?
- Can you show it to us?
- You used a symbol to express your idea. Can you translate what it means?

WHEN TO INTERVENE (OR NOT!)

A critical part of facilitating discourse is deciding when to intervene and when to let students proceed independently in their discussion. A well-placed question can push students' thinking deeper or in a slightly different direction. Providing a timely summary of a group's thinking can help its members document what has been discussed and encourage the group to move on. Sharing an observation can let students know what is happening in their discourse. They can evaluate their discussion and redirect themselves if needed. A cue (e.g., a gesture, signal, or glance) can remind students to refocus on the topic, encourage them to use their time wisely, or suggest they continue their good work and move on.

The underlying message of all interventions should be, "You are capable. What you are talking about is important. I am listening. I can assist you if you get stuck." These messages give value to people's thoughts and ideas and telegraph the value of the discourse experience itself.

Often the best facilitator move is not to intervene at all and to let students work together and have the discussions they want to have. If facilitators intervene too much, for too long, or at the wrong time, the discourse process is negatively impacted.

All of these guiding principles support a greater number of students to share what they've come to know, what they are beginning to know, and what they are still confused about. It gets them to make their thinking visible through any means available, and gives equal respect to every mode and method. These practices also create rich evidence of the status of students' learning during discourse. Teachers and students alike can and should be taking stock of this learning as it is occurring, as well as reflect on it afterwards to both improve the practice of discourse in the classroom and to chart next steps in support of students' content understanding.

PARTICIPANT STRUCTURES FOR DISCOURSE

Discourse on the smallest scale can be an internal discussion an individual student has with her/him/themself. Discourse can be a discussion between pairs of students and among small groups. It can also include the whole class. Different participation structures lend themselves to different activities and outcomes, and all have trade-offs. In a classroom setting, small groups promote lots of individual air time, low-risk interactions, and the expression of a variety of viewpoints. Teachers can choose participation structures that are well matched to the Learning Goals. For example, if the goal is to deepen students' understanding of a new topic, it makes sense to begin with individual time to read and write, move to sharing ideas and questions in collaborative small groups, and then end with a facilitated whole-group discussion so learners can expand and refine their ideas.

Internal discussions. Giving students time for internal discussions helps them develop their own understandings, and strengthen metacognition and prepares them to participate in productive discourse with others. One drawback to internal discussions is that an individual has only their own viewpoint and the viewpoint of the author (if they are reading) contributing to the “conversation.” Students and teachers benefit from having students externalize their thinking afterwards through writing, diagramming, and sharing with peers to both extend their thinking and to get feedback. Internal discussions are critical to the process of self-assessment.

Paired discussions. Paired discussions are helpful for all students, and may particularly assist those who may not be skilled in having internal discussions or who benefit from the input of a peer. They are an excellent follow-up to internal discussions and allow students to try out their ideas in a low-risk setting before sharing them in a larger group. Paired discussions are the most common configuration for peer feedback.

Small group discussions. Small group discussions usually have three to five students in each group. This slightly larger group size is good for brainstorming and sensemaking. Having several people in the mix means there are enough speakers and listeners to offer a variety of ideas to share, compare, and refine. In groups of this size, everyone has the opportunity to talk. If someone chooses not to participate, it is noticeable. In small group discussions, it can be easier for individuals to opt out, and sometimes group members end up subdividing (e.g., four participants form two pairs). Establishing discussion norms helps to ensure these discussions remain productive and inclusive. Afterwards, students can conduct a group self-assessment on their learning together, including on how successful their discourse dynamics were in supporting them to achieve the Learning Goals.

Whole group discussions. The most productive whole group discussions involve a lot of speakers. A whole group discussion in which only the teacher and a few students participate is really a small group discussion with many observers. Skilled facilitation moves, group norms for participation, and opportunities to practice are all strategies to help increase the effectiveness of whole group discussions. Without group norms, students are often hesitant to publicly share their ideas and ways of thinking unless they are sure they are correct. This means the discussions are not opportunities for people to advance their understanding, because neither speaker nor listeners are able to chew on ideas, make connections among ideas, think about evidence that might contradict

the ideas, or try to fit those new ideas into what they already understand or theorize. In whole group discussions, as in other participant structures, it is beneficial for students to reflect on their own as well as the larger group's learning at the end of the discussion.

Adapted with permission from WestEd's *Making Sense of Science* program.