TALKING IN CLASS

Remembering What Is Important About Classroom Talk

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Sam, an eighth-grade student in Amy's class, gives a book talk on *In Ecstasy* (McCaffrey, 2009), a book told across the shifting perspectives of two best friends struggling with drugs and relationships. Amy comments, "I found it hard trying to keep [characters] Mia and Sophie apart. Did you have trouble with that? How did you manage that?" After Sam tells about the life of one of the two characters spiraling downward, Amy asks, "If you were her best friend, what would you tell her?"

Amy's comments seem to be trivial parts of ordinary conversations—the mundane stuff of classroom life. But they are neither ordinary nor trivial. They mark, and generate, important threads in classroom talk.

First, by admitting that she herself had difficulty, Amy makes it clear that encountering problems while reading is normal and certainly not an indicator of (in)ability. Her comment reveals to her students that she considers them to be the kind of people who would act strategically in response to problems.

At the same time, she changes the power dynamic by not placing herself above the students. Her comments make it possible for Sam, and anyone else, to admit that he encountered problems, too. When he

does, she asks how he solved the problem. He then offers her his problem-solving story—a narrative in which he acts with agency, strategically solving the problem.

At the same time, Sam, and the other students who contribute their problem-solving narratives, makes available a range of strategies for others to adopt when they encounter problems, along with a model of persistence.

Asking Sam to imagine what Mia might say to Sophie and following up by asking the group why they imagine Mia didn't say those things is equally important. You might think that this simply provides practice making inferences. True, but they are inferences that are at the heart of the fictional narrative, and their discussion will induce much deeper understanding of the book.

However, these questions are more significant than that. They require the students to imagine

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themselves into the heads of the characters, to analyze the characters' feelings and motives, to construct another's mind and imagine the workings of that mind in a context.

Developing students' social imaginations like this affects their social relationships, their self-regulation, and their moral development (Johnston, in press). This is why in classroom discussions we often use mental verbs: "What are you thinking/imagining/feeling?" Amy's questions also require the students to rehearse, collaboratively and in slow motion, decision-making processes they themselves might face.

Notice that the questions Amy asks are open questions: questions to which there is no single answer, or at least not one she already knows. Because of this, students can engage each other without fear of judgment and with a motive of inquiry.

Indeed, while Amy listens closely to what students have to say, she doesn't offer judgment ("right," "good"). She waits to see who else will take up the conversation. She would rather end with uncertainty than agreement on the meaning, because then students will keep wanting to return to the conversation.

In fact, she encourages disagreement and uncertainty so that students will articulate the logic of their thinking to persuade others. For example, when Juan expresses the opinion that girls shouldn't read *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007), she asks another student who has read it, "Do you agree with that, Keysha?"

To ensure that they understand there is no singular meaning, she reminds them, "Here's the hard part. When we talked about theme… sometimes books have more than one theme, and you all have proven that point. When you all have talked about theme… sometimes

we have gotten different meanings from a book."

If the class does arrive at an agreed position or solution, Amy is quick to point out how the multiple perspectives and push back in the conversation helped them get to that point and to enrich their thinking: "We wouldn't have got to this point if Keysha hadn't pushed back on our thinking." She wants them to value difference in those conversations so that when they are thinking together without her, they will continue to learn from each other.

Language Choices Have Implications

Our teaching days are full of decisions, some of which, particularly our language choices, we often don't even notice as decisions, because we make them on the run and in response to novel student behaviors. When a first-grade teacher says, "How did you do that?" instead of "Good boy!" it is a consequential instructional decision. The former will lead to persistence and broader learning, whereas the latter produces the reverse (Johnston, in press).

When we are teaching, the language we use with our students is our most powerful tool. Our words tell students how we think about them, what we notice and value, what we think we are doing, how we think about literacy, how we relate to one another, what are normal ways of talking and interacting, and a host of other information that we should not take lightly (Johnston, 2004).

First, of course, we need to think about what we are trying to do. It's true that we want our students to be able to read and write, for example, but that isn't the same as teaching them to be readers and writers.

We want them to learn strategies for reading and writing, but that isn't quite the same as teaching them to become strategic. We talk differently with different goals. We can teach strategies by telling, but we can't teach students to become strategic by telling.

To become strategic, they have to learn to take the initiative and *generate* strategies. Amy's students *generate* strategies automatically because they are engaged. And when they do, she asks them *how* they did it to make them aware of the strategies and so that they share them with others who are listening.

We might possibly teach writing by telling but we can't teach *writers* without treating them as writers who do things just like other writers, which includes reading other writers and thinking about how and why they do the things they do. So even in kindergarten we say things like, "I notice that in *Up Town*, Bryan Collier (2000) makes some of his words in different colors to draw our attention to those words. Perhaps you could try that in your *Going to the City* book."

Amy also realizes that teaching is not simply about developing individual minds. We have to help students learn to build productive learning communities

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as well. Students spend more time with each other than in interaction with their teachers. They must learn to become independent together as well as alone.

Teaching involves helping learners to create cultures that nurture engaged, persistent, collaborative, responsible, and caring minds. This is what Amy's classroom language reflects. It is why she says things such as, "Sergio, when you shared your uncertainty about [the character], that helped us all think more carefully and understand the book better." It is why a first-grade teacher might say, "Talk to your partner about how you might figure this out." Or a fourth-grade teacher might say, "Puzzled? That book was Maya's favorite. I bet she'd love to talk with you about it."

Some Principles to Guide Us

Amy's classroom talk, like the talk of other thoughtful teachers at all grade levels, reveals a number of principles that can help us think about our own classroom talk. We have cast in italics some principles to help reflect on classroom talk. Additional resources for exploring teachers' talk are listed in the Table.

Start Talking

First, what we say can start lines of talk that become lines of thought. If we regularly ask students what they are noticing when they are reading, discussing books, doing science, and so forth and offer our own noticings, students will soon begin sharing what they notice even before we ask. "I notice these words look a lot alike."

These comments not only help students understand that noticing is what people normally do, but they also help students develop a sense of agency ("I notice that you figured that out by yourselves") and identities as authors ("I notice the way you used speech bubbles is like Mo Willems"). In other words, what we say also shapes how students think about themselves as readers and as people.

As another example, Chantae recalls that at the beginning of the year she was unenthusiastically reading a book she had read in an earlier grade. Amy stopped by and said, "That book doesn't really seem like you" and handed her a more engaging and complex book that had drawn in other girls. "See what you think of this." By the end of the year, Chantae, an experienced reader well versed about her own preferences and strategies, credits this interaction with "when I completely got hooked on all the books that I've read."

In reality, Amy did not yet know enough about Chantae to know which book seemed like her, but the comment sent the message that she was important enough to be noticed, valued, and understood and that becoming an engaged reader was possible given the right book choice. In other words, we can think about our language in terms of the conversations we would like to hear, and how we might start them, and we can talk students into who they might become.

Similarly, what we say or don't say sets the tone and direction for our conversations with students while they are reading. Asking questions to check for comprehension or to make sure students are actually reading can make it difficult for students to raise their own questions, articulate confusions and uncertainty, or to pursue other kinds of productive thinking.

When we ask comprehension questions, we tend to listen for particular answers, either right or wrong, so that we can judge the extent of comprehension. Because they invite the prospect of judgment, these types of questions can easily shift the act of reading from something that the student goes about with intention and curiosity to something required and coerced.

Table	Additional Resources for Exploring Teachers' Talk in Classrooms
Charney, R.S. (2002). *Teaching children to care: Classroom management for ethical and academic growth, K–8* (Rev. ed.). Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.	
Denton, P. (2007). *The power of our words: Teacher language that helps children learn*. Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.	
Johnston, P.H. (2004). *Choice words: How our language affects children's learning*. York, ME: Stenhouse.	
Nichols, M. (2008). *Talking about text: Guiding students to increase comprehension through purposeful talk*. Huntington Beach, CA: Shell Education.	
Northeast Foundation for Children Responsive Classroom. (2011). Retrieved from www.responsiveclassroom.org	

In other words, affective connections to reading can be triggered by what we say, and closed-ended questions and comments can easily reduce the likelihood of engagement.

Amy might instead join a student in the midst of reading with a comment such as, "Catch me up," which opens the door to an array of possibilities and provides students with a clear indication that she is there to have a conversation rather than an interrogation.

This was certainly true of Brady, who was so accustomed to thinking aloud to Amy that, one day while reading *Right Behind You* (Giles, 2007), he looked up before she even sat down next to him and, as if already in the midst of a conversation, conjectured, "I can't figure out why he would set the guy on fire. The only thing I can infer so far is that he's jealous." Amy nodded, recognizing that he was engaged (so he had to be making sense of it), he was monitoring his own understanding, and if he needed assistance, he would be specific about what he needed.

A parallel question in writing would be, "How's it going?" (Anderson, 2000). Just as with "Catch me up," it invites the student to take control of the process and to engage in reflection. These opening lines are prompts that students can anticipate and that open conversations.

Listen Carefully and Genuinely

After that, *the critical conversational act is listening carefully and genuinely.* Nothing you can say is more important than this. Once a conversation is started, there is no room for set questions.

Questions and comments focused on the physical action of the book, such as "What do you think will happen next?" are often "thin" questions that do not lead to rich conversations.

Questions such as "What are you thinking about that?" or "How are you going to figure that out?" keep students in control of their learning and the conversation and you in the listening/learning role. They also convey that you are expecting the kids to think and you're interested in their thoughts.

Turn Students' Attention to Process

There are threads of classroom talk that are particularly important. One of these, as we saw with Amy's talk at the beginning, is to *turn students' attention to the process*—"How did you do that?" It turns up in different forms all over the place. When Amy responds to a student's presentation to the class on a favorite book, she asks, "How did you find such great pictures? Talk about that!"

Recognition of the greatness of the pictures is only the vehicle for turning students' attention to the process that led to them. It is not accuracy feedback that most influences development, but drawing students' attention to causal processes.

Notice, too, that praise would not have the same effect. "Good job," "Great pictures," and "Well done" not only do not allow the student to rehearse an agentive narrative—"I [did X]"—it would also prevent that strategic narrative from being made available to other students as a strategy. Such praise would also shift the student's goal away from engagement with his own goals toward pleasing Amy. It would also invite unproductive student-to-student comparisons.

Conversations Provide Opportunities to Learn

Closely linked to this thread are *conversations showing that problems, including social problems, are expected, and offer an opportunity to learn.* Problems are not simply things to be prevented, for example, with threats. So, when disputes and social problems arise, we ask, "What's the problem?"

Getting the participants to describe the problem rather than what they think of each other allows us to turn their attention to possible processes for solving the problem. Once they've solved the problem, we can turn their attention to how they did it—together.

Develop Independence

Another important thread is that *telling is usually not the best way to develop independence.* If we arrange for students to be engaged and encourage them to act strategically, rather than telling them how to do so, they will develop a stronger sense of agency and be able to more easily go beyond what we teach them.

Because of our long histories in didactic schooling, we often position ourselves as knowledge deliverers. Once we think that's what we're doing, we set about telling the students our knowledge and checking to see whether they got it. We position them as the ones without knowledge or authority, and we confirm it by asking them questions and then responding with "yes," "right," "good."

And when students ask questions, we give them the answer rather than supporting them in figuring out the answer for themselves. This model of teaching leads neither to independence nor to understanding. If we focus on comprehension, we are likely to ask known answer questions, which will not improve the reader's comprehension— the process.

Allow Students to Be Decision Makers

We try to help students see themselves as decision makers in control of their learning. Amy says, "I love the idea that you and Randy have decided to put your heads together to do an I Am poem around *I Heart You, You Haunt Me* (Schroeder, 2008). I think it's just great that you aren't satisfied with the thinking you've done so far, that you want to work harder on it."

In this way, she shows her students that she values intention (trying), self-correction, and persistence. Her talk also shows that she values the students working and thinking together. If students are to take control of their lives, they have to know that actions have consequences, but they also have to see themselves as people who make decisions about how to act.

For example, Amy commented to a student who wanted to present his poem to the class, but was nervous, "You're having a really tough time, and I respect that, but you need to make a decision about whether or not to push yourself."

She consistently reminds students that they, and others, make decisions, and she frames the decisions in ways that nudge toward a productive choice. This is why when Carl talks about his book he considers the decisions that were made, noting that "The word choices were good," and why Charlie says, "I can't believe the author had the character do this."

Make Positive Language Choices

We would like our classrooms to be positive and optimistic as well as successful. It turns out that *language choices that emphasize the positive and possibility* help accomplish that. "I see you were trying to …." "I wonder how you could…." "How else could you…"

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Similarly, turning students' attention to what is going well helps (Seligman et al., 2005).

This is easily said, of course, but enacting it requires actually seeing children and their behavior differently. It particularly means focusing on their positive intentions—that they are trying to spell a word correctly or trying to help another student, even if the behavior doesn't fully reflect the intention.

Sometimes we might offer a positive intention even if the student might not yet have thought of that intention. For example, "I see you were trying to help the group get organized. Can you think of a better way to do it?"

Language influences the development of community and the capacities for social interaction and for learning among members of the community. On the simplest level, a teacher's use of "we" as opposed to "you all" when speaking about the whole class inspires a certain kind of relationship and creates space for possibilities.

For instance, in a show of unity for a schoolwide field day, Amy comments to her class that "We ought to get matching tie-dyed t-shirts." After reading time one day, she comments, "I notice we are stretching ourselves as readers this year."

This thread shows up in students' thinking. For example, after hearing a presentation by classmates on an assigned community service project, Max proposes that "We should organize a class goodness project that's not for a grade, but just something that we want to do."

The notion of community is not simply about such things as joint projects and negotiating class plans and policies, however (though these are all important). What we say can help orchestrate productive collaborations and relationships among our students.

One way we can do that is to get students to notice the strategies and processes used by their classmates. When Tate complimented Josh on his illustrated poem, Amy seized the opportunity to champion Josh's processes and set it up as a model of persistence for others to follow: "That's where I thought Josh did a really good job.… He really struggled with how you find an image that conveys the story, and he came up with this idea of doing speech bubbles."

When DeShawn realized that most of his best book choices were those that Michaela enjoyed and recommended to him, Amy made it a point to say to DeShawn, "share your strategy," and he explained to others that for him, Michaela was a key resource for good books. This also prompted others to point out their sources.

Indeed, Tyra explained how something Amy said as she noticed her struggling during free reading time helped her form an important relationship: "'Tell Tyra about [your book]'—she said that to Charity, and Charity came over and explained the book to me and I was like, 'I really want to read it,' and that's how we became friends, through that book."

If we intend to capitalize on the possibilities that social spaces offer for learning, we can say things to help children attend to each other, see each other as resources, and build relationships.

Language Choices Are Linked to Other Decisions

Finally, we have to realize that *our language choices are linked to other decisions that we make about materials and classroom space.* For example, when a student is reading to us a book that is too difficult, we can easily be sucked into short wait times, taking away control of problem solving and removing the possibility of self-correction. Similarly, when students are required to read books to which they can't relate, they are likely to be easily distracted and engage in behaviors that make generating positive talk much harder.

We can easily become caught up in trying to manage students' behavior, rather than helping them to develop self-regulation. "Catch me up" won't work when a student is not engaged in a book, though it might result in you learning that is the case.

More important than what you say is whether you help students find, and learn how to find, engaging books, which often involves arranging for students to "book talk" the books that engage them. You don't even have to have read them. When they're engaged, students don't actually care whether you know the book or not. They don't want the affirmation, they just want the avenue to talk.

When students are engaged in reading—usually when they have made choices among interesting books—they are likely to generate problem-solving strategies where necessary and initiate questions and conversations, all of which invite positive language from us.

After finishing *Living Dead Girl* (Scott, 2008), a book with an uncertain ending that leaves the reader wondering, a group of students solicited Amy to join them to deliberate over possible interpretations. Engagement, in fact, changes everything. The talk is much more positive, in part because it puts the student in control and gives the teacher time to consider responses.

Language Is Powerful

The language we use with children influences, among other things, who they think they are, what they think they're doing, the relationships they have with others, the strategic information available to them in the classroom, and the possibilities available to them for thinking about literacy and their own lives.

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