

Supporting the Student Role in Extending Thinking Through Discourse

Introduction

As students work to engage in discourse in formative assessment classrooms, it may seem that it should come naturally, since talking is a part of everyday life. But without support such as modeling discourse moves, explicit teaching, providing opportunities for practice, and well-designed physical spaces, student discourse does not promote student thinking nor provide evidence of student learning. It is not uncommon to walk into a classroom and see small group discussions with only one or two students doing all the talking in their group while others are either not engaged or unable to jump in. Alternately, when more students attempt to engage with one another's ideas but do not have norms for how to take turns and disagree, they may talk over one another, shut each other down, or be unable to create "space" for one another to express their ideas. When teachers explicitly teach and provide guidance on how to engage in discourse, students' experience can be radically transformed.

Discourse at its core can enable people to be heard, understood, and, when listening takes place, allow people to feel safe. With modeling and support, students learn to build on one another's ideas, agree and disagree respectfully, ask questions to gain deeper understanding and extend ideas, give feedback, and share their own thoughts and stores of knowledge. These practices are essential to formative assessment, in that they form the basis for a learning culture, one in which students are safe to explore new learning, try out new ideas, and learn from others. These practices are also critical ways in which students come to understand disciplinary norms, or how scientists, historians, or writers consider and engage with ideas in different ways. The teacher has a critical role in creating the physical structures, instructional routines, feedback practices, and dialogue norms that enable students to become competent at engaging in discourse, and through this social practice, deepen and extend their own and their peer's learning.

Modeling

In formative assessment, teachers shift their role from primarily delivering content, to supporting students to develop their capacity to learn, which includes learning through discourse. Teachers support students' participation in discourse through extensive modeling - of questioning strategies, turn taking, use of wait time, expressive language, and active listening. These practices need to be modeled on multiple occasions and over an extended period of time. Teachers also often draw attention to what they are modeling. Students then require opportunities to practice what they have observed and receive feedback. For example, if students are practicing building on each other's ideas by asking questions and linking their ideas to their peers' during discussions, the teacher may role play what this looks like with a student or colleague before students break into discussion groups. With the Success Criteria known to students, they can use these criteria to give the teacher feedback on what is going well and what might need to be worked on in the role-play scenario. This helps provide a clear picture of practice for students before they engage in discussions themselves. Once students have wrapped up their conversations, it is important to debrief, including for the teacher and students to share their observations and reflections on how well they met the Success Criteria during their discussions.

Rituals and Routines

Rituals and routines for discourse are necessary for students to act on expectations and to be able to get into groups quickly to start discussions. Particularly if the classroom needs to be rearranged for specific conversation configurations (pairs, small groups, etc.), having an established process for this can greatly reduce the amount of confusion and time taken to get started. Some teachers have different sets of small groups already established. For example, if the teacher says the "planet" groups or the "ecosystem" groups will be having discussions that day, students know who to sit with. By having these routines in place, students also require much less direction and can become more self-directed. When students have more than one group to belong to, they have the opportunity to hear the ideas of many more of their peers and make greater connections among themselves.

Roles and Responsibilities

Different classroom discussions have different purposes and related structures. They can range from fairly informal to formal. When students are learning new discourse participation norms, it is helpful to establish clear roles and responsibilities for students to rely on as they engage in these new practices. These can be as simple as students understanding their roles and responsibilities as speakers and listeners. They can also be more complex and include specific roles within the discussion, such as note taker, encourager, spokesperson, reflector, manager, and questioner. These specific roles and responsibilities can provide the scaffolds needed for students who find it challenging to participate by giving them something specific to do. It also provides support for students who tend to take on too much of the conversation burden by clearly delineating what is in their own and other students' spheres of responsibility, helping them develop an awareness of how to narrow the scope of their own participation to create room for others.

Establishing Discourse Norms

Discourse norms may vary depending on the age group of students and the discipline. Specific discourse protocols can provide support to students as they develop skills in how to structure their talk and behavior in discourse contexts.

For younger students, discourse norms can include ideas such as:

- Use an indoor voice
- Look at the person speaking
- Listen carefully
- Share an idea on the topic
- Paraphrase an idea you heard to check for understanding
- Ask a question to learn more

For older students, discourse norms can include ideas such as:

- Focus on understanding the Learning Goal
- Listen actively
- Build off each others' comments
- Bring people into the discussion
- Respect the speaker, even if you disagree
- Give everyone a chance to speak
- Have only one speaker at a time
- Support the learning of the group

These are just examples, and teachers may already have their own norms that they use in their classrooms. A key to whichever norms or protocols are used is that they are well understood by students, and are readily available to students during discussions. These norms could be posted on the wall or displayed on tables, for example. Students should also be held accountable for using them. It is not enough to post them and then not mention them again. To enhance students' developing practice, teachers observe students during discourse, redirect them as needed, debrief with them after the discussion (including getting their input on how the conversations went relative to the protocols), and then provide them with feedback from their own observations. This process helps students improve their discourse practices over time, develop conversational fluency and automaticity, and also makes discourse normative, expected, routine, and deliberate.

Structured Opportunities

Although not comprehensive pictures of practice, the columns below provide some initial ideas of what teachers do to structure discourse opportunities at various levels of effectiveness. These structures include processes such as modeling, establishing discourse norms, rituals and routines, and roles and responsibilities.

Not Observed	Beginning	Developing	Progressing
The teacher models, or has modeled, questioning strategies which elicit only right or wrong answers, and may answer his or her own questions.	<p>The teacher provides, or has provided, students with some supportive models, e.g., asking students questions about their answers.</p> <p>The teacher has not established dialogue norms, e.g., wait time for responses or giving others the opportunity to speak.</p>	<p>The teacher provides, or has provided, students with models, e.g., asking questions about reasoning and perspectives.</p> <p>The teacher has begun to establish adequate discourse norms such as wait time for responses and turn taking.</p> <p>The teacher has established consistent dialogue protocols for discourse participation, e.g., roles and responsibilities.</p>	<p>The teacher models, or has modeled, the type of discourse that extends thinking for students to use independently, e.g., asking questions about their thinking, probing reasoning and wonderings, asking for elaborations.</p> <p>The teacher has established effective normative language, rituals, and routines for discourse procedures and encourages reflection and equal participation.</p>

As you can see, there is a big change from the not observed to the progressing level in the types of questions teachers ask and the rhythm of interaction around them. At the not observed level, teachers often ask only questions with right or wrong answers, provide minimal wait time, and often end up answering their own questions. By contrast, at the progressing level, teachers ask questions that get students to think more deeply, wonder more broadly, and elaborate more clearly. This has the added benefit of making students' thinking visible. In formative assessment, most learning activities are also evidence gathering activities. And, in fact, they often serve to enhance that learning. When normative language is already established in classrooms and rituals and routines are in place, the teacher is free to observe, listen, and ask questions during discourse for the purpose of gathering and responding to evidence, and ultimately, to deepen student learning through that engagement.

Physical Structures*

Tangible structures that provide the context for student talk are very important for student discourse. In terms of room arrangement, it can be very helpful to have flexible seating arrangements to accommodate different size conversation groups. Where students are seated and what they see and hear matters. Some classrooms seem to be designed to promote discourse. They have small moveable tables and chairs, room for a whole group to gather, back tables to organize supplies, noise dampening surfaces, and lots of wall space for hanging anchor charts. Teachers often find that being able to quickly organize chairs around a table where students can share resources and artifacts and engage in work together is productive for discourse.

Significant to the success of student talk is also the noise level of the classroom. Classrooms where students are engaged in conversation are not library quiet, nor should they be. But if the classroom gets so loud that students cannot hear one another or are distracted by conversations from other tables, this can inhibit their thinking and social engagement. Teachers can help students become aware of the noise level of their own voices, that of their peers, and of the classroom as a whole, so that they can begin to monitor and adjust their own volume.

*This section was adapted with permission from WestEd's *Making Sense of Science* program.