Types of Discourse

Across disciplines, discourse basically falls into two categories: explanatory and exploratory. One is about narrowing the focus of the discussion while the other is about broadening it. The cognitive skills used in these conversations have some overlap, but also some marked differences.

Explanatory discourse is used when people argue for and against ideas, apply a skeptical lens to evaluate theories, make claims supported by evidence, and generate data. In these conversations, students use and build their analytic thinking skills, abilities of logical deduction, and capacity to draw on details of disciplinary knowledge.

Exploratory discourse, conversely, is used when people are brainstorming ideas, conducting investigations, generating data, wondering about what they observe/read/hear, and generally making sense of history, art, natural phenomena, literature, etc. This draws on and supports students' ability to think in terms of systems and patterns, to think creatively, make connections, and draw on their existing knowledge schemas to imagine and make sense of new ideas and information.

Supporting Explanatory Discourse

When supporting explanatory discourse, it is helpful to encourage students to think about how their explanations are similar and different, analyze the strengths and weaknesses of ideas, and examine how they might refine their thinking. Teachers supporting discussions might say things such as:

- Using words may not be the most effective way to explain that idea. Maybe drawing a diagram would improve your communication.
- Sounds like you're a little unsure of your data/source. What other information do you wish you had access to? Where could you find such information?
- Does anyone know of any other evidence (theory, example, principle) that would support that explanation? If so, can you talk about those?
- Can you say more about what feels precise and accurate about that idea (and what feels less solid)?
- Does everyone agree with every aspect of that explanation? If not, can you spend some time talking about where you have differing ideas?
- I'm hearing you think that idea might not be quite right. Talk about the logic behind the idea and any assumptions that were made when developing it.
- It sounds like you think that idea is promising. How might your group suggest making it more complete, accurate, and precise?
- I'm hearing you disagree with that idea. Who can share a specific argument against it?
- Sounds like your group is having trouble following an organized train of thought. Try thinking of a way to organize your ideas and evidence.

Supporting Exploratory Discourse

If the discourse students are having involves exploring ideas, it's often helpful to call attention to areas that have not yet been noticed, offer reassurance when they are on the right track and provide additional assistance (e.g., data, images, hands-on supplies) when they stall out or request additional resources. You can also encourage students to think about other interpretations and to attend to patterns and anomalies in the data. You can support exploratory discourse by saying things like:

- I see you've talked about X. Have you had a chance to talk about Y yet?
- When I first saw this image, I totally missed X. Did you all see that?
- Looks like you've done a thorough job exploring part A. What was one interesting thing you talked about?
- I hear you all wishing you had a picture to go along with the text. Let's look online for that information.
- I hear you've identified one pattern. Are there any others?
- It sounds like you think that one event (character, data point) is an anomaly. What do you make of it?

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