

3.4 Develop expert learners: Promote dialogue as a means of learning



Essence >
The teacher provides opportunities for students to learn through interaction and learning conversation with others.

Key actions: Teachers

- Develop a culture of mutual respect by modelling nonjudgmental listening and actively seeking divergent views
- Establish agreed routines for think/wait time, to enhance the class dialogue (eg pause to reflect on what has been said before asking questions or responding)
- Teach and model strategies for dialogue and paraphrasing, and encourage students to articulate what they heard, 'piggyback' on others' comments and ask clarifying questions
- Pose thought-provoking questions that challenge students' analytical thinking and encourage them to develop and substantiate a point of view
- Support students to gain clarity by thinking out loud
- Encourage students to engage in rich questioning through the use of sentence stems (eg 'When ... happened, why did ...?')
- Build students' confidence by explicitly teaching skills for public speaking, and encourage them to rehearse with others before the event
- Incorporate dialogue and discussion about my learning, as integral to all stages of all learning tasks

Key actions: Students

- Talk with others—in pairs, small groups, large groups and with the whole class
- Use strategies to improve my participation in learning conversations
- Think 'out loud' to organise my thoughts
- Ask questions to clarify topics and hear others' explanations
- Give feedback to others and suggest ideas for improvement
- Check if I've understood what others meant



Free human dialogue ... lies at the heart of education.
Neil Postman

Justice alert

Do all students experience genuine dialogue and learning conversation to develop their thinking and understandings?

Ways to promote dialogue as a means of learning

Appointments: An appointment system is helpful for students getting to know each other, discussing issues and so on. Students have a diary page with eight common 'appointment times'. Give the class ten minutes to mingle and make one-on-one appointments, filling the eight timeslots with no double-ups. State a topic and an appointment time. Students find their partner for that appointment time in their diary, and chat for two minutes on that topic. Then, give another time and topic and the process continues.

Focused learning conversations: These conversations about a specific topic generate rich questions that are:

- open and may have several answers
- challenge assumptions and require critical thinking
- complex and necessitate grappling with big ideas
- relevant to learners
- electric with emotional or social implications
- practical and can be researched within available resources.

Buzz groups: Students discuss a given topic in groups of three, then share their ideas/responses with the class to create new understandings.

Concentric circles: Students form two concentric circles. The inner circle has a discussion and the outer circle listens. When someone in the outer group wishes to contribute to the discussion, he/she taps the shoulder of someone in the inner circle and swaps places.

Continued page 60

Ordered sharing—bringing out the learning

My Year 10 group was dominated by strong cliques. There was no active listening or acknowledgment of others' ideas, and a lack of mutual respect. They related well to me as the teacher, but the same did not apply to interactions between class members. Individual learning tasks were my main mode of teaching, and I focused on written work and teacher-directed assessment. I was so consumed by the intensity of the day that we didn't step back and reflect on the learning, the teaching or the class dynamic. Looking back, I realised that the lack of dialogue was stopping students from making the most of their learning.

Involvement in the school's professional learning program made me confront my assumptions with questions such as, 'What do I know about teen social connections and how do teenagers learn most effectively?' and then, 'How do all children learn best?'

My students' learning outcomes were being compromised because they weren't being taught the language of learning with real space for this to happen through learning conversations. I decided that we needed a new approach to take learning to a new level.

To build relationships and familiarity with dialogue, I introduced 'ordered sharing' so that every voice would be heard. Initially, I displayed poster collages of contemporary arts images and gave

the students 30 seconds to develop a personal response. We then took turns speaking for 20–30 seconds without affirming or negating others' responses. We repeated the process at least once each week, using different pictures, phrases and questions. The feedback from students was, 'We have never expressed how we felt about issues before and we now know how people in the class feel about other things'.

Our next step was to identify and then challenge, not criticise, each other's assumptions through carefully worded statements and images. This was one small step in opening up dialogue. Students started to break out of their cliques and interact openly and meaningfully with peers. Over time, rich questioning became part of our class culture and it deepened the learning significantly.

Students now work with critical friends to discuss the core questions within the curriculum. I teach strategies for developing an argument and sharing constructive feedback. There is real conversation, real listening, and students have made new meanings that didn't exist before.

Secondary teacher

promote dialogue as a means of learning

3.4

