

Building Common Core Skills: Beyond “Turn and Talk”

By Carrie Kamm May 22, 2013

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Recently, I have been spending quality time with the Common Core Standards. My current obsessions are text complexity, close reading, and the speaking and listening standards. Starting at first grade, students are expected to know and be able to do the following during small- and whole-group discussions: follow participation rules, build on others' comments, and ask clarifying questions.

Many teachers rely on Turn and Talks or Think-Pair-Shares. These are great methods, but how can you build on them to prepare students for the demands of more complicated conversations.

Establishing Discussion Norms

Start with what students know. Ask them to identify what an effective Turn and Talk looks like and sounds like. Guide them in naming behaviors that promote effective discussions: making eye contact with the speaker, keeping the discussion focused on the topic, taking turns talking, and so on.

Next, share video footage of other students participating in discussions. Encourage your students to compare the other students' participation to the effective discussion behaviors your class has named.

Can't find the right video examples? Other ideas for modeling discussions include:

- Gather a group of colleagues to discuss a text familiar to your students. Model appropriate and perhaps inappropriate discussion behavior and have your students name the behaviors they observed. You can do this live or via video.
- Have 4-5 students model a discussion with a short script in a Fishbowl setting (go here for a description of the Fishbowl technique). Students in the outside circle can observe the discussion behaviors of the students in the inside circle.

Building Stamina

Once students have established discussion norms, they are ready to participate in a small-group discussion involving 4-5 students. Some ideas for the first time:

- If students are discussing a question related to a text, choose a text that is very familiar, a story or article that students have read multiple times.
- Provide students with a set of sentence starters that can help them with discussion language. For primary students, 4-5 sentence starters will be enough.
- If discussing a text, give each student a copy of text or consider having them bring notes or drawings they created in response to the text (see an example in this TCh video).
- Depending on the age of your students, keep the first discussion relatively short, no longer than 5-10 minutes. Over time and with your coaching, students will develop discussion stamina!
- As discussions take place, provide real-time feedback. How are they meeting (or not meeting) the class discussion norms? A mid-discussion stopping point will enable you to share your observations with the entire class.
- At the end of discussion time, lead students in a whole-group discussion about what went well in their discussions and what they need to improve upon.

Moving Forward

If you want to deepen students' discussion skills, plan to incorporate small group discussions several times a week across content areas. Your observations will help you identify what kind of additional instruction students need. Issues to anticipate include staying on topic, disagreeing respectfully, and equitable participation.

You will also want to become familiar with the Common Core Standards for Speaking and Listening. The standards provide direction about what students need to know and be able to do, which in turn can inform your lesson objectives.

Most of all, be patient. Participating in small-group academic discussions without the direct participation of a teacher will likely be new for your students. Frequent feedback, clear goal-setting, and noting progress will help your students develop the skills they need to collaborate in the classroom and beyond.

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