Text-based Writing and Talk for the CCSS

by Anthony Petrosky

Writing and Talk

James Britton (1983) once wrote that "reading and writing float on a sea of talk." Talk, in other words, is the social media of the classroom and students can benefit enormously from thoughtfully designed and sequenced talk among themselves about texts.

Here's why. We learn to shape explanations about texts when we share our thinking about them with others. We learn to use sources when we work to convince others that we know what we’re talking about when we’re talking about texts. And we create arguments in talk that closely resemble arguments that we write. Anyone who has spent time around children knows how quickly their arguments take on the cast of ironclad reasoning when they want something.

Speaking and Listening for Learning

In the excitement and distress over the CCSS, we might remember that the speaking and listening standards suggest work that apprentices teachers and students to academic talk and writing with that tightly knit set of cognitive skills we’ve come to refer to as text-based studies.

Here’s an example. The CCSS Speaking and Listening standards suggest that students gather in small groups to discuss their ideas about texts. In such discussions, they work from tasks that invite them to explain, document, critique, argue, comment on, and challenge their understandings. These are the same skills that students need when composing academic writing. In these discussions, students also learn to ask for clarifications, further explanations, make comparisons, and they generate ideas—often ideas that no one person brought to the discussion. In these ways, talk and writing can work independently and together as thinking machines.

A Simple Write-Talk-Reflect Routine

At the Institute for Learning, we teach a simple routine that situates students to both write and talk about text-based tasks in groups of two or three. We refer to this as a routine for socializing intelligence. It works like this. First, students are asked to compose a quick write for a cognitively challenging text and task. That is, they receive an assignment in writing and they are asked to produce a quick write off the tops of
their heads without much attention to the conventions of writing. It’s a think piece designed for getting initial thoughts down on paper.

Once they write, they gather for 5 to 10 minutes in pairs or trios to read, ask questions about, comment on, and critique the ideas in each other’s quick writes. They test their ideas against textual references. They talk to resolve differences, to clarify, and to elaborate. Next, they take a sheet of chart paper and chart their ideas—those on which they agree and disagree. Then they post their charts around the room. The teacher might then ask students to get up in groups to read the charts and take notes on each one. After this gallery walk, the teacher poses the same question she asked for the quick write back to the whole group for a whole group discussion. She takes notes, perhaps charts agreements, and creates another chart on which she parks disagreements or unresolved issues. The students talk in the whole group among themselves while the teacher asks a range of questions for participants to clarify, elaborate, compare, and document their comments.

When students speak to and question each other, a discussion takes on a life of its own and works in one of the best ways that it can as a thinking engine.

In a next step, after the discussion, a teacher might give students another assignment that invites them to take their initial quick writes and what they’ve learned in the discussion to write a more formal essay on the question at hand. In this way, the talk prepares them for this writing.

**Step-Back for Reflection**

A key aspect of this routine is asking participants to step-back from the whole class discussion to reflect on what they’ve learned and how they learned. The goal for the step-back is to socialize participants, the way their talk does, into thinking about what they learned—the content—and how they learned. When they engage in such step-backs, they will need to use academic language to point to and label the cognitive work they’ve done. They’ll need to learn to explain sentences and chunks of language that carry such things as explanations, references, arguments, comparisons, points-of-view, and arguments.

A teacher might also ask them to reflect on the ways in which their talk supports their writing. She might share examples of students’ spoken and written explanations, for instance, of a text’s central ideas to prompt their thinking about the ways in which academic talk and writing support each other. She could chart participants’ responses so that they’re not lost and remain visible throughout the text studies.
Socializing Talk: Keys to Success

A steady diet of just this simple write-talk-reflect routine can have far reaching results. The small group allows students to socialize their talk with each other in a non-threatening meeting before expressing their ideas in a whole class discussion. It prepares them for the whole class discussion. The work of the small groups, when driven by cognitively challenging texts and task generates thinking with others. New ideas emerge. Other perspectives come into play. This all feeds into students’ writing.

To be successful, such work has to focus on cognitively challenging texts and talk. It has to be evidence-based. It has to engage students to talk with each other. And it has to situate them through step-backs to overtly study what they learned and how they learned. The step-backs need to explicitly draw students’ attention to the ways in which their evidence-based talk and writing resemble and support each other.