How to Enable Student-To-Student Talk in Class

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Organizing for Talk: Group Size

We suggest a basic classroom routine that encourages accountable talk and is itself malleable with many variations. The routine structures instruction so that students work in groups of two or three on cognitively challenging tasks before they share their thinking with the whole group.

The number of students who work together makes a difference. Larger groups subdivide, fail to launch, or provide cover for those who’d rather not participate. When two or three students work together by talking with each other, by sharing their reasoning and evidence, by actively listening to each other and taking notes, and by testing each other’s claims and interpretations, they can be accountable to the task and to each other.

Groups of two and three also provide safe haven for those uncomfortable interacting through talk. Pairs and trios offer emotional safety because of their intimacy and because of the norms that we bring to such interactions. Setting norms with a class is critical to establishing talk, but we’re enculturated to have norms for intimate interactions that are easier to establish with small numbers of people than they are for larger groups.

Begin with Writing

Interactions among the students in these small groups jump starts with writing. We like to get students in the habit of using quick writes—that type of writing to learn that is only concerned about getting thoughts on paper—to form their initial thinking before going into pairs and trios. Quick writes serve multiple purposes.

**Quick writes:**

- Enable students to get their initial thinking on paper by using writing to think.
- Assist students to share their initial thinking with others. Students can speak from their quick writes or read them in their entirety.
- Can be emotional supports and comforting to students unaccustomed to speaking even in pairs and trios.
- Can be initial drafts of essays that students rewrite and edit.
- Can become a transferable habit of mind for students who use them regularly.
Ask students to complete their quick write quickly. Don’t belabor the writing. Often three to five minutes is plenty of time.

**Pairs and Trios**

Once students have composed quick writes, then they’re ready to move into pairs and trios to share their thinking. So much of how well these discussions go depends on the quality of the task. Engaging, text-based tasks, for instance, that challenge students' thinking, that ask them to explain their reasoning can generate engaging discussions. If, on the other hand, students talk from quick writes on weak texts with weak tasks that ask for little more than personal connections, recall, or regurgitation, then it’s likely that students won't be very engaged. The task and the degree to which it pushes students into unknown territory to reason and to explain their reasoning has much to do with students' engagement.

Finally, pairs and trios don't usually need tons of time. Too much time is as counterproductive as too little. One of best ways to know how much time students need is to do the task yourself and practice talking to yourself or to someone else as students would in the groups. We also suggest monitoring the groups' work. This helps you determine if students need more time and to figure out what students do and do not understand about the task. Walk around; ask questions; read students' quick writes; and adjust time and follow-up instruction as needed.

**Use Charts**

We use charts extensively and think of them as another tool that enables the sharing of thinking from discussions that would otherwise disappear or be left to individuals to capture with their notes. When students work together in pairs and trios, we suggest that they chart their thinking to present to the class. We encourage the use of large chart paper, so that each group can post its chart for others to read.

Charts and charting have many variations. Students can be asked, for example, to chart their agreements and disagreements. They can be a way to help students take a next step in their work. If, for instance, students have composed quick writes on the big ideas in an essay and they've discussed those ideas in pairs/trios, students can be asked to chart the evidence for each big idea, or they can be asked to chart what they consider the most significant ideas along with their reasoning for their choices.
Charts carry the archives of students' thinking. They are artifacts of instruction. They make thinking visible, so if you think they'll be useful to upcoming work, leave them up, or repost them, and work them into your instruction and planning. With this said, not everything is worth charting. Too many charts can clutter thinking.

Next Steps

The basic sequence of this write-talk-chart routine begins with a cognitively demanding text and task.

Once students have created charts and posted them, there are many variations of next steps.

- Students can take notes on each other’s charts and use the notes to prepare for a whole-class discussion of the original task or they can use what they learned to move on to the next task in the sequence of work that builds on the original. We like to encourage such large discussion by seating students in a circle or in two concentric circles with the teacher leading and managing the discussion.
- Or students can use their charts to rethink their original quick writes and compose a revision that they might share in a similar manner or that they might hand in.
- Or students can skip charting all together and go from pair/trio discussions directly to whole-group discussions. We have learned that students are often ready to do this once they have used the routine regularly for a couple of months.
- Or students can skip the charting and go from pair and trio discussions directly to composing a revision of their original quick writes to hand in.

The variations are numerous, but the basic engine of students' thinking and reasoning, of their using talk to socialize intelligence, is in the cognitive demand of the text and the task. Good, challenging texts and tasks will engage students in their quick writes and in their pair/trio discussions. Challenging work motivates us because it engages our intelligence and our intellectual curiosity while at the same time growing them.