



Conferring with teachers & coaches requires setting clear learning goals

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Conferring with teachers in advance of observing a lesson is a critical component of the Content-Focused Coaching® (CFC) cycle. These “pre-conferences” are opportunities for the coach and the teacher to reflect together about a teacher’s lesson plan, and thus are a rich opportunity for teacher learning. Lesson planning is specifically important for facilitating rigorous Accountable Talk® classroom discussions. For such discussions to be successful, teachers need to set clear and specific learning goals and plan questions that support students to achieve these goals. Teachers also need to anticipate content that might pose difficulty for students, or might require background information to understand, and have a plan for what to do if students seem lost or are not participating. Absent this advance planning, it is all too easy for class discussions to lose focus and develop in ways that do not further student learning.

Planning for rigorous *Accountable*

Talk discussions, however, can be challenging. Here we describe some specific ways that coaches can help teachers when they are first beginning to develop lessons for rigorous and interactive text discussions that build students’ reading comprehension skills.

Specify the learning goals.

When teachers are first beginning to plan for text discussions, they tend to set very general learning goals for their class discussions. For example, they might set as their learning goal that students comprehend the theme of the book or the topic of a reading. Teachers can also conflate learning activities with goals, for example, that students actively participate in the discussion or complete an assigned task. In all of these cases, when reflecting on a teacher’s lesson plan, a coach can help by working with a teacher to clarify the major understandings or ideas students are to glean from a text or lesson, and ‘right size’ their learning goals so that they are feasible to attain in a lesson.

Minimize front loading

information. Students sometimes need a little background knowledge to grapple productively with complex content. When teachers are first beginning to plan for rigorous discussions, however, there can be a tendency to provide—often at the beginning of a lesson—a great deal of background information in the form of a lecture, pictures, or even videos. This can be problematic in literacy instruction because “too much” information can reduce the rigor of the reading experience for students as they may no longer need to rely on text language to construct an understanding of a text. Or in the case of mathematics instruction, front loading too much information can “give away” the answer or strategy for solving a problem before students have a chance to solve the problem independently. Background information that is tangential to the text or problem also can distract students from key ideas and set discussions on a path that leads them away from intended learning goals. In the pre-conference, a coach can help teachers by supporting them

to clarify the minimum amount of information students need to engage in a discussion, while not reducing the rigor of students’ experience.

Develop queries to address big ideas and possible misunderstandings. Developing open-ended queries that move students toward intended learning, and *Accountable Talk* moves if students appear lost or are not participating, is a critical component of effective lesson planning. When teachers begin to plan for rigorous class discussions, there can be a tendency to develop questions for which there is only one correct answer, or to develop questions that can unwittingly focus students’ attention on tangential information that can distract from the intended learning for a lesson. Planned questions can also contain extra wording that constrains student thinking (e.g., What is happening now that Samar has come home from school and the reporter is asking questions?), or in the case of literacy instruction, direct students to focus on a narrow portion of a text. A coach can help a teacher by working with them to carefully word their planned queries so that they open up avenues for student thinking and opportunities for students to think together to make sense of challenging content.

When students engage in successful *Accountable Talk* discussions, it is important to remember what takes place in order for these discussions to be effective. Providing teachers with opportunities to participate in CFC cycles around *Accountable Talk* discussions allows the coach and the teacher to reflect on the lesson plan, thinking about the learning goals and the specific questions designed by the teacher to move the discussion forward, and achieve the identified learning goals. ■

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