

Increasing high-quality student talk



Courtesy of Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for American Education

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Contextualizing the Work

The Institute for Learning (IFL) and Schenectady City School District have worked collaboratively for several years, and this year, we continued our ongoing partnership with a focus on using improvement science methodology to “get better at getting better.” District-wide, there is a focus on using improvement science to work on persistent problems of practice. In this article, we will share 10th grade teachers’ journeys to improve the quantity and quality of *Accountable Talk*® practices in the classroom and discuss how improvement science informed teacher instruction and learning.

We began this work by studying quantitative, large-scale data (e.g., Regent exam scores), classroom-level data (e.g., ELA tasks and questions), and components of the curriculum to help us think about the problem of practice which focused on the plateau of improvement in secondary ELA, specifically in the area of reading.

During the second semester, the 10th grade PLC decided to focus on students’ use of *Accountable Talk* practices. The

goal of increasing *Accountable Talk* practices aligned with the teachers’ beliefs around the importance of student-centered and engaging classrooms.

Sharing Teachers’ Small Tests of Change

During the third nine weeks, teachers tackled the following problem: Students are not utilizing the high-leverage practice of *Accountable Talk* and holding conversations with each other; instead, students direct their responses to the teacher and often use an Initiate-Respond-Evaluate pattern. Additionally, teachers reported that students have little stamina for student-to-student discourse. Teachers began by creating student-centered lessons using engaging and relevant texts and planned to study how many students talked and how much time students spent talking. Upon reflection, teachers realized the data they were collecting wasn’t actually what they cared about learning—or at least not the whole story of what teachers wanted to learn about and improve regarding *Accountable Talk* practices in the classroom. Teachers were able to say how many students talked and how many minutes per class students talked, but were unable to discuss the quality of student talk.

While the quantitative data met teachers’ goals of increasing the amount of time students spoke to one another during class, teachers questioned their ability to accurately discuss evidence of student learning. They asked questions such as “Was the talk academically productive?” and “How do I know my students understood the text?” Our takeaway was that we need to think carefully about what we want to know (in this case, not only how to increase student-to-student talk but also how to increase high-quality, text-based student-to-student talk) and what practical measures will help us understand the answer.

During the final nine weeks, teachers tweaked their problem statement: Students are not utilizing the high-leverage practice of *Accountable Talk* and holding high-quality, student-driven discussions. Teachers collaboratively designed and implemented complex and engaging texts and created cognitively demanding tasks using student-centered routines (e.g., quick writes, pair share, whole group discussion). They also designed a rubric to help qualify how they define quality talk. During implementation, teachers planned to study the quality of the talk and the talk moves that both teachers and students used to make meaning. During their last professional learning session, teachers shared that students were using moves and functions, but superficially. Teachers hypothesized the belief that in order for discussion to be academically productive, students (and some teachers) think that the language they use must be Standard English. As a group, teachers decided that a next step would be to emphasize the thinking and what students say instead of how they say it. In other words, teachers want to study the student thinking more than the words or talk moves.

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Lauren Resnick, co-author and founder of the Institute for Learning.

Accountable Talk practices

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the learning process. Students freely explore ideas and express their understanding using their own language. “Ultimately, through participating in *Accountable Talk*, students learn to reason their way toward understanding. Reasoning—processing, interpreting, and being able to do something new with information—is the way we solve problems in the adult world. Instead of passively allowing some students to learn these skills by accident, schools can teach them deliberately, by changing the way talk occurs in the classroom.” (Resnick, Asterhan, and Clarke, 2018)

Below are a few brief ideas that can get talk started at the beginning of the year. For a deeper discussion of *Accountable Talk* practices, we encourage all to read “Accountable Talk: Instructional dialogue that builds the mind” by Resnick, Asterhan, and Clarke (2018). Take a look at an [Accountable Talk discussion in action](#).

If you’re interested in producing robust learning in content and in argumentation, don’t leave the students’ potential to grow on your list of things to do when you have time. Spend at least 90 minutes a week growing your practice to orchestrate classroom discussions where every student can maximize potential. It’s their right and necessary to bring equity to the education of every student.

Setting Norms for Talk

Accountable Talk practices are not just about being civil. They are about knowing how to respond when there is disagreement. They require returning to texts repeatedly to find evidence to support claims and the ability to be unsure but willing to talk through uncertainty. Educators foster these skills by asking students to explain how they arrived at conclusions, provide evidence from texts for their responses, and ask one another to defend their responses. Educators need to explicitly set norms that make it not only acceptable but also expected for students to debate one another. Students should expect others to ask them how they arrived at answers and why they came to particular conclusions.

Including Everyone

Some students may struggle in making their explanations, and others may even need to make some of the explanations in a language other than English. It is the quality of the argument that is important, not the form used to express the thinking. This is important to remember if equity is a goal for your teaching. Be prepared to scaffold without diminishing the rigor of the discussion.

Designing Cognitively Demanding Tasks and Selecting Complex Texts

Tasks need to be designed to ask students to reason, explain, and

elaborate on their thinking—the cognitive processes that support knowledge building. If educators want students to grapple with challenging ideas, those ideas have to be present in the text. Texts without them are not worthy of the kinds of robust discussions at the center of *Accountable Talk* practices. Educators need the opportunity to select complex, culturally relevant texts and to analyze and discuss them with colleagues so students have access to materials critical to building new ideas and think through authentic problems.

Writing Questions That Invite Talk

Questions that involve simple recall and have only one right answer don’t lead to deeply engaged discussions. Educators need to develop questions that allow students to explore a variety of ideas and possible solutions. This may take time and can sometimes be frustrating for students and teachers alike. It helps for educators to try to answer their own questions prior to inviting students to respond. If the educator cannot think of more than two or three possible responses to a question, that’s a sign that the question should be adjusted to allow for more ideas and multiple possible correct answers. ■

Improvement science

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Teachers’ next action, which they plan to focus on in the upcoming school year, is to scribe classroom discussions when implementing a high-level task using a rigorous and engaging text. The purpose is two-fold: (1) to collect classroom data in order to analyze the quality of talk based on rigorous questions and (2) to find authentic examples of talk moves that students use regardless of chosen dialect. For example, instead of a student saying, “I’d like to add on to what Andrew said,” a student may say, “I feel Andrew because...” Both statements work to link contributions regardless of the exact words that students say during the discussion. These examples of student talk moves will be used to refine the [Accountable Talk® Moves and Function tool](#) used in Schenectady High School. Our working hypothesis is that authentic examples of rigorous thinking will help illustrate that the talk stems are meant as entry points into conversations, but should not be used in formulaic or generic ways that don’t move the conversation forward in academically productive ways. Our hope is also that it helps students and teachers alike develop an understanding and respect for diversity in language use. ■

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and #3 align with features of *Accountable Talk* discussions, and only #3 illustrates how a student’s contribution can be recognized and leveraged to create opportunities for rigorous thinking about a mathematical relationship for everyone in the community.

When we consider the impact a response to a student contribution has on the discussion, we can gain insight into the complexity of facilitating *Accountable Talk* discussions. When thinking about and reflecting on the “in the moment” decisions during classroom discussions, it is helpful to consider if the move pro-

vides students greater entry into the discussion, holds them to accuracy of their claims and thinking, and/or sets up opportunities to discuss mathematical relationships. Because there is no one way of facilitating an *Accountable Talk* discussion, it is incumbent upon all of us to be critical friends and colleagues. Through collaborative and engaged discussions with colleagues about our pedagogical choices, and with honest self-reflection, we can move toward providing more rigorous and equitable learning environments and instruction for every student. ■

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