

## 3.4 Develop expert learners: Promote dialogue as a means of learning



### Essence >

The teacher provides opportunities for students to learn through interaction and learning conversation with others.

### Ordered sharing—bringing out the learning

My Year 10 group was dominated by strong cliques. There was no active listening or acknowledgment of others' ideas, and a lack of mutual respect. They related well to me as the teacher, but the same did not apply to interactions between class members. Individual learning tasks were my main mode of teaching, and I focused on written work and teacher-directed assessment. I was so consumed by the intensity of the day that we didn't step back and reflect on the learning, the teaching or the class dynamic. Looking back, I realised that the lack of dialogue was stopping students from making the most of their learning.

Involvement in the school's professional learning program made me confront my assumptions with questions such as, 'What do I know about teen social connections and how do teenagers learn most effectively?' and then, 'How do all children learn best?'.

My students' learning outcomes were being compromised because they weren't being taught the language of learning with real space for this to happen through learning conversations. I decided that we needed a new approach to take learning to a new level.

To build relationships and familiarity with dialogue, I introduced 'ordered sharing' so that every voice would be heard. Initially, I displayed poster collages of contemporary arts images and gave

the students 30 seconds to develop a personal response. We then took turns speaking for 20–30 seconds without affirming or negating others' responses. We repeated the process at least once each week, using different pictures, phrases and questions. The feedback from students was, 'We have never expressed how we felt about issues before and we now know how people in the class feel about other things'.

Our next step was to identify and then challenge, not criticise, each other's assumptions through carefully worded statements and images. This was one small step in opening up dialogue. Students started to break out of their cliques and interact openly and meaningfully with peers. Over time, rich questioning became part of our class culture and it deepened the learning significantly.

Students now work with critical friends to discuss the core questions within the curriculum. I teach strategies for developing an argument and sharing constructive feedback. There is real conversation, real listening, and students have made new meanings that didn't exist before.

*Secondary teacher*

### Key actions: Teachers

- Develop a culture of mutual respect by modelling nonjudgmental listening and actively seeking divergent views
- Establish agreed routines for think/wait time, to enhance the class dialogue (eg pause to reflect on what has been said before asking questions or responding)
- Teach and model strategies for dialogue and paraphrasing, and encourage students to articulate what they heard, 'piggyback' on others' comments and ask clarifying questions
- Pose thought-provoking questions that challenge students' analytical thinking and encourage them to develop and substantiate a point of view
- Support students to gain clarity by thinking out loud
- Encourage students to engage in rich questioning through the use of sentence stems (eg 'When ... happened, why did ...?')
- Build students' confidence by explicitly teaching skills for public speaking, and encourage them to rehearse with others before the event
- Incorporate dialogue and discussion about my learning, as integral to all stages of all learning tasks

### Key actions: Students

- Talk with others—in pairs, small groups, large groups and with the whole class
- Use strategies to improve my participation in learning conversations
- Think 'out loud' to organise my thoughts
- Ask questions to clarify topics and hear others' explanations
- Give feedback to others and suggest ideas for improvement
- Check if I've understood what others meant



Free human  
dialogue ... lies  
at the heart  
of education.

Neil Postman

### Justice alert

Do all students experience genuine dialogue and learning conversation to develop their thinking and understandings?

### Ways to promote dialogue as a means of learning

**Appointments:** An appointment system is helpful for students getting to know each other, discussing issues and so on. Students have a diary page with eight common 'appointment times'. Give the class ten minutes to mingle and make one-on-one appointments, filling the eight timeslots with no double-ups. State a topic and an appointment time. Students find their partner for that appointment time in their diary, and chat for two minutes on that topic. Then, give another time and topic and the process continues.

**Focused learning conversations:** These conversations about a specific topic generate rich questions that are:

- open and may have several answers
- challenge assumptions and require critical thinking
- complex and necessitate grappling with big ideas
- relevant to learners
- electric with emotional or social implications
- practical and can be researched within available resources.

**Buzz groups:** Students discuss a given topic in groups of three, then share their ideas/responses with the class to create new understandings.

**Concentric circles:** Students form two concentric circles. The inner circle has a discussion and the outer circle listens. When someone in the outer group wishes to contribute to the discussion, he/she taps the shoulder of someone in the inner circle and swaps places.

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**Walk and talk:** Students of opposing views work in pairs. One person speaks for an agreed time and the other person listens; then they swap roles.

**Three cards for shared airtime:** Give every student three cards: two labelled 'comment' and one labelled 'question'. During class discussion, when a student wishes to contribute, he/she raises one card to make either a comment or pose a question, speaks, then hands in that card. This encourages them to think before jumping in. When a person has used all his/her cards, he/she cannot participate again until all students have used their own three cards.

**Circular response:** This activity is similar to 'Hearing all voices' on page 28 with the exception that the speaker must summarise the comments of the previous speaker, checking with that person about the accuracy of the summation, before giving an opinion. The speaker must build on the idea of the previous speaker. After everyone has had his/her set time (two to three minutes) to speak about the topic, a general discussion may occur. (This activity is adapted with permission from Preskill, Vermilya & Otero 2000.)

*Dialogue ...  
to create a situation  
where we suspend our  
opinions and judgments  
in order to be able to listen  
to each other.*

David Bohm



## Language that teachers can use to promote dialogue as a means of learning

- Find a space where you can talk it through.
- Have you talked this through with your partner? Maybe he/she has further ideas.
- So, what you're saying is ... Have I got it right?
- What do you think about this point of view: ...? What's another point of view?
- I'm not sure I understand fully. Tell me more.
- Why is ... challenging for you?
- If you choose to solve it that way, what might be some of the advantages and disadvantages?
- Now that you're talking through the issue, are new ideas emerging?
- Are we ready to discuss our ideas as a class? Have a quick chat with the person next to you and we'll start.
- Remember our learning supports. For example, when you're stuck try three other people to help you think it through before coming to me.

## This element is not demonstrated if:

- The teacher's voice is the dominant one
- The usual form of classroom interaction is 'teacher question, student response, teacher evaluation comment'
- Classroom procedure lacks 'wait time' before responses
- Students feel unsafe about questioning why or how
- Dialogue skills are assumed and there is little opportunity for students to be actively involved and develop expertise
- Silence is enforced in the classroom and written work is valued over verbal contribution
- Dialogue is seen as a strategy for only eliciting answers

## Practice check

- Do I provide explicit time for dialogue?
- What is the ratio of teacher questions to student questions in any given learning session?
- Do I teach the students how to share their opinions effectively?
- How do I promote active listening and speaking?
- Are there students who do not contribute to discussions? How can I structure situations to encourage and support their involvement?
- Do I give students 'thinking time' before a discussion?
- Do I provide explicit time for classroom dialogue so that students can clarify ideas and concepts?

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## Notes:

*Dialogue is about what we value and how we define it. It is about discovering what our true values are, about looking beyond the superficial and automatic answers to our questions. Dialogue is about expanding our capacity for attention, awareness and learning with and from each other. It is about exploring the frontiers of what it means to be human, in relationship to each other and our world.*

Glenna Gerard

talking our way into understanding