**Discourse patterns**

**Introduction**

The kind of language we use with students communicates how much we value their thinking. Fortunately, there are some concrete ways we can organize discourse that are more likely to communicate to students that we value their thinking, and that can encourage them to further explore and examine the ideas they and their peers raise. No language form is a sure-fire recipe for a dialogue in which students know their thinking is valued, but there are ways of orchestrating talk that considerably raises the odds – if coupled with genuine regard for and curiosity about students’ thinking. By learning to identify these language forms, as well as those discourse patterns that are often more limiting, you position yourself to make informed decisions about the shape of the discourse in your classroom.

For this reason, we ask you to familiarize yourself with these descriptions, and eventually to apply them to your own and other’s instruction. For easy reference, here’s a summary of the terms we will be discussing in this class, and abbreviations:

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***Discourse Patterns Part 1: Test Questions and Authentic Questions***

**Initiation-Response-Evaluation Sequences, Test Questions, and Evaluation**

A range of research has documented that the majority of teacher questioning of students across grade levels and subjects involves something called an Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) sequence.

Each IRE sequence begins with a particular kind of prompt from the teacher: a test question. This test question is the “initiation” move of the IRE sequence. Its purpose is often to assess what students know and to have students display their knowledge to others.

A **test question** (sometimes also called a display question, convergent question or a “what’s-on-my-mind” question) is a question where the speaker already has an idea in mind about what answer or range of answers are acceptable, and is prepared to enforce/reinforce a correct response.

Example:

*Teacher to kindergartner: What number comes after 7?*

After the test question has been posed, one or more students typically respond with an answer.\* The final move in the sequence is evaluation from the teacher that either endorses a student response (“Right!”) or suggests that it is incorrect (“Well, not exactly….” “Good try, anyone else?”). Here’s an example of how such a sequence can look:

*Teacher (Initiation): What does a volcanologist study?*

*Student (Response): Volcanoes!*

*Teacher (Evaluation): That’s right! Volcanoes!*

An **evaluation** is a teacher utterance that confirms, rejects, or otherwise evaluates the response given by the student in a way that communicates rightness or wrongness about the content of the student response. Keep in mind that evaluations can be communicated by tone of voice, not just by the use of a particular signal phrase. If the teacher in the previous example had simply said “Volcanoes” in a confirming tone of voice, this would be an evaluation because it would signal to the student that her answer was seen as correct by the teacher. Indeed, evaluations can even be communicated nonverbally.

IRE sequences have some legitimate purposes in classrooms, but they are generally counterproductive in fostering rich discussions, and there is evidence that their overuse can undermine the confidence and verbal participation of students who don’t see themselves as the ones with the right answers.

\*N.B. It is most common for test questions and evaluations to occur within IRE exchanges, but sometimes they will occur outside of such sequences.

**The Kindling of Rich Discussion: Authentic Questions**

How, then, does a teacher light the fire for rich discussion about text? We see authentic questions as a critical kind of kindling.

An **authentic question** (sometimes also called an open-ended or divergent question) is a question or prompt that is posed in order to gain access to other people’s thinking or perspective. Such a question is posed out of a need to know and/or deep curiosity without the intention to enforce or reinforce any particular response.

An authentic question must be based on one the following:

-the need to know something the asker does not know or understand, e.g., “When does the last train leave the station?”

-the genuine desire to understand how another human being might perceive something, e.g., “Tell me what strikes you so far about hummingbirds.”

It is not the form of the question, but the intention behind it and how students interpret that intention, that matters. In order for a question to function as an authentic question, the person to whom the question is directed has to perceive that the speaker is genuinely interested in/curious about the response s/he will receive, and that s/he is not fishing for an answer. The following question sounds authentic:

*Why did the littlest billy goat try to cross the bridge first?*

And it might be! But, if the teacher is essentially expecting that students will tell her a particular reason, or if she treats some answers as better than others, then the question may really be a test question. (Even “What strikes you so far about hummingbirds?” could be a test question if the teacher is fishing for particular hummingbird facts.)

A special note on authentic questions for nonfiction text

Some of you may be asking yourselves how you will generate authentic questions since you already “know the answer” or have a pretty clear interpretation of the text for yourself. How can you ask an authentic question under those circumstances, you might ask?

Consider a couple in a relationship having a serious disagreement. Even if one partner thinks s/he is “right”, it can still be helpful in the course of talk about the problem for her/him to pose a question to better understand where the other partner is coming from – and it may even be that this will allow a reframing of her/his own thinking. The point is that it is possible to genuinely want to understand, respect, and engage with positions with which one may disagree. It is in this spirit, then, that you might ask a question such as: “How do you think an earthquake happens?” If you genuinely hope to understand the student’s perspective (and are not asking in order to evaluate and correct that perspective), then the question can function as an authentic one. You still need to carefully watch your phrasing, and will need to be especially alert to the possibility that students who are used to test questions will interpret your question as a test question.

Are authentic questions better than test questions?

There is certainly a time and a place for each, but a range of research supports the finding that authentic questions can be more powerful in fostering discussion, elaborated reasoning, substantive engagement and deeper thinking (versus simple recall or quizzing). Test questions generally communicate a power relationship – that the teacher is the one who knows, and the student is the one who needs the teacher’s validation in order to be right. Over the long term, a steady diet of test questions may foster passivity and over-reliance on the teacher, and may shut students who don’t believe they have the teacher’s “right answers” out of the conversation entirely.

That said, all authentic questions are not created equal, as Nystrand found. The more that one’s authentic questions are tied to the substance of the text/intellectual ideas being explored, the more they are likely to foster lasting learning. Later, we will look more closely at different kinds of authentic questions.

Who decides if a question is authentic or not?

Does the student believe the teacher is asking the question because the teacher is curious about how the student thinks about the matter, or because the teacher wants to know if the student can give the “right” answer? Even when a teacher intends a question to be authentic, it is possible that the students nonetheless might believe it is a test question.

When teachers *primarily* ask questions that are test questions, students may learn to anticipate that all teacher questions will be test questions – even if they later encounter questions that are not intended that way. And if a teacher consistently asks authentic questions without evaluating student responses, even what might look like a test question (“Who’s Piglet talking to when he says that?”) might be interpreted by students as an authentic question.

You can often tell how students are interpreting a question by whether their response is stated with a questioning intonation, e.g., “Tom Sawyer?” versus “Tom Sawyer” to the question, “Who do you think is the most important character?” A questioning intonation from a student is a frequent indicator that the student is expecting the response will be evaluated.

Is it possible to show interest and enthusiasm for a child’s response without evaluating it?

Absolutely! Consider the following responses:

*That’s an interesting idea!*

*I hadn’t thought of that. I’m gonna write that down.*

*Oh!*

The key thing is that, if you choose to do validating of this sort, you have to be willing to provide that kind of validation *whether or not* you feel like the student is interpreting the text in a standard way. Otherwise, such validations will quickly become seen by students as evaluations.

Equally important, and perhaps more validating in the long run, is to follow up student comments with contingent questioning that signals that it’s important to you that the idea be explored further.

***Discourse Patterns Part 2: Uptake***

**Sustaining the Dialogue through Contingent Authentic Questions: Uptake**

Although authentic questions can get the conversation going, what sustains conversations and helps them go into deeper exploration of particular themes (rather than jumping from one line of questioning to the next) is contingent questioning. *Contingent questioning* refers to teacher questioning that is contingent on the student thinking that has been expressed. For this reason, it is impossible to pre-script such questions before a discussion. And for this reason, such questions are often the most important in communicating that student ideas are valued and respected.

*Uptake* is often the most powerful form of questioning in a discussion, because it allows both the teacher and other students deeper insight into what students are thinking and why.

**Uptake** involves following up on something a student has said by asking the student to elaborate and explore an idea that the student has brought up, or to elaborate on how the student arrived at that understanding.

Example:

*S: It’s called the San Francisco Earthquake, but right here it says the earthquake*

*was twice the size of California. And San Francisco is in* *California.*

*T: Hmm…. What does that make you think? [U]*

Uptake can be an excellent alternative to evaluation because it allows teachers to engage with student thinking without communicating whether that thinking is right or wrong. Note that uptakes can be either test questions (if the teacher is fishing for a particular response) or authentic questions – though we have observed that classrooms that are rich in uptake tend to use authentic forms of it.

Uptake is often characterized by the use of pronouns that refer back to something the student has just said, for example:

*\* It’s smoother than before, you say. What might have it made get so smooth?*

*\* Why do you think Tom Sawyer might have done that?*

Uptake can be very broad:

\* *Say more.*

*\* And so…? [pregnant pause.]*

Or quite specific:

*\* What plot against his life?*

*\* It’s steeper, you’re telling us. Help us understand what you mean by that.*

*\* When you say “he,” who do you mean?*

Try to use a broad range of different forms of uptake and be attentive to how these function for different students.

Requests for evidence are a specific form of uptake.

*\* Can you show us the part of the text where you got that idea from?*

*\* Is there something in the picture that gave you that idea?*

We urge you to use requests for evidence with caution and watch how students respond. While they can be very helpful, such uptake can sometimes be taken as an evaluation, challenge, or even impossible request. If you sense that students feel on the spot with requests for evidence, we encourage you try a different form of uptake such as, “Explain” (which does not require evidence but allows for it), or to back off entirely.

Even if you find your students are responsive to requests for evidence your conversation will often be richer if you use a broad range of different forms of uptake that help you unpack the child’s actual idea, not just the reasons the child has for that idea. When requests for evidence are overused to the exclusion of other forms of uptake, the conversation can take on the character of “Prove it!” that communicates skepticism rather than regard for student ideas. (Imagine if you were discussing a character from a movie with a friend, and every time you said anything, your friend just said, “Prove it!” That might get old fast for a lot of people!)

How do I know if a follow-up question I pose is really uptake?

\* Uptake has to probe and follow *the student’s* thinking. So these would NOT be examples of uptake:

*S: Little Red Riding Hood thought the big bad wolf was her grandmother!*

*T: What else did the big bad wolf do?*

*---*

*S: They end up with 3 cups of water.*

*T: What part of the problem does that answer?*

Even though there is continuity of subject matter, and the questions may be authentic, the teacher is not really requesting that the student further explore the idea that the student put out on the table. (Instead, genuine uptake for the above examples might be, “Why might she have thought that?” in the first instance, or “So how does that help us?” in the second.)

It is also not uptake if the teacher does the elaborating for the student in the question, e.g.,

*S: They are going to go on vacation.*

*T: So they might go to Cancún, you think?*

*S: Yeah.*

In this case, the idea is elaborated by the teacher, not by the student, and the student’s only real options are to confirm or reject the teacher’s elaboration. While the line here can be a little bit fuzzy, the key question is whether a student is invited to share new information that further explains her/his already-expressed thinking.

Is it still uptake if a different student responds?

Yes! Here’s an example:

*S1: I think he’s the one who killed him.*

*T: Who killed whom? [U]*

*S2: Mr. Parker was the one who killed the butler.*

*T: You think it was Mr. Parker? Say more! [U]*

*S3: Well, he is the only one we know for sure was already at the castle.*

*S4: Uh-huh, he was there like right away when Meg showed up. Besides, he’s a creep.*

*T: When you say he’s a creep, what do you mean by that? [U]*

*S5: He’s always insulting people. And then there’s that creepy part where he was peeking in the window at her.*

*S4: That was, like, so wrong.*

*T: So what was the deal with that peeking? [U]*

*S3: When she was still at her aunt’s villa. I think he was trying to see if she was onto him.*

*T: How could Mr. Parker have figured that out from peeking? [U]*

*S1: Like, he was probably looking for a clue.*

*S2: Her notebook! Her notebook!*

*T: Okay, so you think the notebook has something to do with it.*

*S3: Yeah. Because he knows she is writing stuff down about him.*

*T: I want to go back to what S5 said before, though, about Mr. Parker always insulting people. Was there anything in particular that gave you that impression? [U]*

*S4: Look what he says on page 24: “I have nothing but contempt for that ill-tempered servant.”*

*T: So when you read that part, what did it make you think? [U]*

*S5: A motive, see?*

*T: What do you mean, a motive? [U]*

Most of the teacher utterances are uptake, even though the student whose idea is being taken up isn’t the one who responds. Indeed, uptake often elicits response not just from the student whose idea was taken up, but from other students in the conversation. As such, it can be a powerful way to get students engaged with each other’s ideas – frequently more powerful than explicit requests for students to comment on each other’s thinking.

Also note that, in the above sequence, the teacher does NOT ask for evidence until well into the conversation. A lot of student thinking about Mr. Parker would have been lost if the teacher had jumped right away to a request evidence.

What about asking other students to respond to an idea that has been raised by a student? Is this uptake?

No. Asking other students what they think is not uptake. I call these moves *invitations*; these are described in another section of this document. Stay tuned!

***Discourse Patterns Part 3: Specific Kinds of Authentic Questions***

**All Authentic Questions are not created Equal**

One of the more intriguing findings from Nystrand and Gamoran’s study of discourse is that authentic questions were not all equally successful in fostering student learning. As you generate questions you might use with your students, and as you ponder options for uptake and other authentic questions on the fly, we invite you to consider the following questions about each question.

* 1. How likely are the students to consider the question to be authentic?
     1. For students who have been fed a steady diet of test questions, even a heartfelt authentic question may not be interpreted as such by the students. Slight wording changes can help communicate authenticity. “What’s going on so far?” might be genuinely meant as an authentic question, but it may be more likely to be perceived as authentic if phrased like this: “What do you think might be going on so far?”
  2. Is the question more text-expansive or more text-intensive?
     1. Text-expansive questions direct students to talk about things outside the text:

*\* “Have you ever measured something to bake a cake?”*

*\* “Tell me about a time when you were on the beach!”*

*\* “What would you do if you were in Hamlet’s shoes?”*

* + - * 1. Such questions can elicit interesting responses, but they can also take the conversation far afield from the text. They are also less likely to foster student-student talk in which students grapple with each other’s textual ideas. (Milo can’t really do a lot of substantive discussion about Marybeth’s experiences baking a cake!)
        2. Nystrand & Gamoran found that students did not learn as much in classrooms with a preponderance of such questions.
        3. Such questions can serve a function before reading (e.g., to elicit prior experience and build enthusiasm) and occasionally to wrap up a conversation (e.g., to ponder the text’s relationship to life), but we do not recommend their use during the bulk of the reading discussion, particularly during the reading itself.
    1. Text-intensive questions invite readers into the text. We encourage you to try to make most of your authentic questions – including uptake – text-intensive.

*\* “What does this problem seem to be asking us to do?”*

*\* “Tell me a little about slip-strike faults.*

*\* “Can you show us where you got that idea from?” (U)*

* 1. If the question is text-intensive then also consider: To what extent does the question allow for *multiple points of entry*?
     1. Some questions, even if they are authentic, require students to have done a certain kind of reading or thinking in order to be able to produce a response. Students who are not doing that kind of thinking may not be able to formulate a response. For this reason, it is especially important at first (and whenever you want to broaden participation) to allow for multiple points of entry.
     2. Few points of entry:

\* Why do you think the fire didn’t ignite under those circumstances?

\* What do you think were the most important effects of the Marshall Plan in Europe?

\* What could be a reason why the mouse decided to help the lion?

* + 1. Multiple points of entry:

\* Tell me a little about what was going on with the fire.

\* Say a little bit about the Marshall Plan. What was that all about, do you think?

\* It says, “The mouse came back!” Wow! (pregnant pause!)

* + 1. Note that questions with fewer points of entry may work for some students; you might use uptake with fewer points of entry to follow up on comments of students where you think they will be able to formulate a response anyway.
  1. Does the question *telegraph* your own interpretation of the text?
     1. Consider whether your phrasing of a question gives away or privileges certain assumed shared understandings instead of actually probing students for how they might be seeing those aspects of the text that are in question. Take this question: “How do you think the stock market collapse made life harder for farmers?” It assumes that all students know from the text that a stock market collapse happened (and have some concept of what that means), and it also assumes that students share your interpretation that life was indeed harder for farmers. Consider changing such questions in a way that opens things up: “What do you think might be going on for the farmers here?”
     2. Here are some alternatives to telegraphing that can help you still get at the kinds of issues you are interested in exploring with your students:

USE A QUOTE instead of telegraphing.

Telegraphing: “What’s the difference between ‘elevated acidity’ in this sentence and what we meant when we talked about acid before?”

Not telegraphing: [reread passage about elevated acidity.] “Can you all help me understand what’s going on here?”

REFER TO A STUDENT COMMENT instead of telegraphing.

Telegraphing: “Why do you think the mother was so angry with the boy?”

Not telegraphing: “Sarah, you were telling us that the mother seemed angry. Can you say a little bit more about what you think might have been going on there?”

PREFACE WITH AN AUTHENTIC QUESTION AND USE UPTAKE instead of telegraphing.

Telegraphing: “So the problem tells us that a third of the blocks are going to be black. What do we know about the other 2/3rds?

Not telegraphing: “What are you thinking so far about what color blocks there are in the bag?” [then use uptake! But be prepared for differences in interpretation to surface.]

SOLICIT A PERSPECTIVE, SUMMARY, OR RECAP instead of telegraphing.

Telegraphing: “How did Martin Luther’s moves questioning the Catholic Church stem from the prevailing intellectual currents of that time?”

Not telegraphing: “What comes across as important to you about what was going on back then?”

* 1. To what extent is the question likely to help you and the group identify different student interpretations of specific wording in the text?

One aspect of discussing text that can be particularly fruitful is when the discussion uncovers different interpretations for the same words on the page, since it is often through understanding how other individuals understand the same words that students come to a deeper grasp of how words function. We encourage you to include some questions that help uncover such differences. Here is one example:

*“ ‘But the emperor did not have enough of the long tables to seat all of his guests, so he ordered his courtiers to seat a third of the guests at smaller round tables. At each of the round tables there was enough space for 8 place settings.’ When you read that part, how does that make you picture what’s happening in the banquet hall?”*

***Discourse Patterns Part 4: Other Prompts and Patterns***

**Some additional (but often *weaker*) forms of follow-up to student comments: Repetition, Clarification Questions, and Invitations**

While uptake is frequently the most powerful form of questioning, some others are worth mentioning. Each of these forms *can* serve the function of encouraging students to speak up, elaborate and engage with each other’s ideas, but they do not necessarily do so. For this reason, we encourage you to monitor how your students respond to such questions and to treat them as the “supporting cast,” with uptake in a more frequent, prominent, and leading position. If you notice that your students really respond to particular kinds of follow-ups described here with elaborated talk, then you can draw on them more, but if you notice that students do not respond to them much, you may want to limit your reliance on them.

**Nonevaluative Repetition** takes place when a teacher repeats, verbatim or nearly verbatim, something a student has said without evaluating it. This can either be a statement or a repetition uttered with a questioning tone of voice at the end, e.g.:

*S: No one could have saved the Union.*

*T: No one could have saved the Union? [NREP]*

Nonevaluative repetition, especially when uttered with a questioning tone of voice, can signal that you are paying attention and seeking to understand. It can be helpful in amplifying the statements of quieter voices. It can also help slow down a fast-paced conversation a little by drawing students attention to something that has been said.

Note that the tone of repetition must be non-evaluative (typically – though not always – expressed through a questioning intonation). It does not count as nonevaluative repetition if your repetition conveys confirmation/evaluation of what the student has said, through tone of voice or phrasing, e.g.:

*S: The big bad wolf was pretty mean.*

*T: The big bad wolf was pretty mean, wasn’t he? [E]*

A **clarification question** is one where the teacher checks her/his own understanding of a student idea by rephrasing it, synthesizing it, or summarizing it and checking back with the student(s) to confirm/reject her/his interpretation of what the student has been saying.

*\*Let me see if I have this right. You’re saying that the witch looks like a woman,*

*but is really a man?*

*\*So I think what you’ve been arguing, if I hear you right, is that you don’t think the old man is really the boy’s grandfather, but that he might be pretending to be? (CL)*

Clarification questions can play an important role in helping other students (as well as the teacher) better understand where a particular student is coming from. Thus, though they do not necessarily always encourage further elaboration of student thinking, they can serve to illuminate student thinking in ways that help others understand and engage with it.

While interrogatory repetition and clarification questions may well prompt elaboration (S: “Yeah, ’cause, see, she wasn’t thinking about what the monster was going to do when she….”), a student might also see such a question simply as a request for confirmation and reply “Yeah” – not elaborating at all. Thus, you need to watch your students particularly carefully when you use interrogatory repetition and clarification questions, to see whether it functions to expand conversation or to truncate it.

An **idea-centered invitation** takes place when the teacher asks students to specifically engage with an idea another student has shared.

*John: So the rocks turn into sand when they crunch together. Like, they break*

*into little pieces.*

*Teacher: “What do the rest of you think about John’s idea? Do you think*

*rocks crunch together to turn into sand?” [INV-I]*

Idea-centered invitations seem like they should really get students talking. Yet, counterintuitively, we have found in some research that invitations are a relatively *weak* form of encouraging dialogically organized discussion.In many cases, invitations get a perfunctory response or no response at all. The key seems to be that students need feel they have something they can sink their teeth into for an invitation to work. It can be hard to respond to someone else’s idea if that other person’s idea is not fully fleshed out yet, so I often try to avoid using invitations until more information is on the table. Thus, if I use idea-centered invitations, it’s almost always after I have used uptake with at least one student first, unless other students give me clear signals that they are bursting to respond already.

A common form of idea-centered invitation that often does not help the conversation along much (unless there are clear signals that disagreement is brewing) is:

\**Do you agree?*

We often observe that students will simply say “Yes,” and the conversation stops cold (as many yes/no questions do). A potentially richer formulation might be: “Miguel was saying \_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Comments about that?”

Be mindful not to use idea-centered invitations primarily to get students to “proxy” your own beliefs when a student says an idea you think is wrong. Students will quickly catch on, and you lose a valuable opportunity to understand the reasoning of a student who sees things differently. For example:

S1: Lincoln was racist.  
T: What do the rest of you think of Stu’s idea? Was he racist? (INV-I)

S2: No.

T: Why do you say no? (U)

By only using uptake on S2, S1’s idea never has the chance to be elaborated.

A **turn-taking invitation** simply invites one or more students to comment; students may respond to an idea that is already on the table or talk about something else entirely, as s/he chooses. These kinds of invitations include all comments that designate speakers, including instances where the next speaker is simply named.

*Jackie.*

*What do the rest of you think?*

*Josie, did you want to share anything?*

*We haven’t heard yet from Sophie, Priscilla, or Mike. [pause, expectant look]*

Turn-taking invitations can be helpful in getting additional voices to be heard, and some quiet students appreciate turn-taking invitations and respond to them. That said, others may feel uncomfortable with them if they haven’t signaled that they want to speak. Keep your eyes open, and if you sense that particular students are very uncomfortable with turn-taking invitations, you may want to back off.

Special note on participation patterns and the distribution of talk

Be cautious about trying to fully equalize talk time among the students. Very few conversations, even among two adults, involve identical amounts of talk on the part of all participants, and conversational participation is signaled by more than just what gets said. Try to avoid the conclusion that the student “is not participating” – her/his participation may take a different form.

Similarly, if a student is talking a lot, try to avoid judgments about this. (e.g., “dominates”). Consider what is important to the student about talking; if I want the student to speak less, what are ways of doing this that maintain the child’s purposes and sense that s/he is valued in the conversation? Without understanding what is behind a student’s decision to talk more or less in a conversation, it is hard to know what kind of adjustments (if any) are in order. Think about what you can do in your discussion (or one-on-one) to try to this tease out.

**Open discussion vs. Conversational Ping Pong**

Most teaching looks like conversational “ping pong”, where the teacher is on one side of the table and ALL of the students on the other. In conversational ping pong, the conversational turn-taking looks like this:

T S1 T S1 T S2 etc.

My former colleague at Penn, Dr. Lawrence Sipe, called this “serial monogamy” in conversations. I’ll let you figure that one out.

While this is often called discussion, because there is more than one person talking, it is NOT what Nystrand means by *open* discussion.

**Open discussion** takes place when there is a “free exchange of information” among students (or among the teacher and several students). This means more that the turntaking looks different, i.e.:

T S1 S2 S1 T S2 S3 S4 S1 T etc.

But this is just one piece of it. For it to really be open discussion, the students have to be exchanging ideas with each other, responding to each other. *If you have 3 students speaking in a row, but all of them are only responding to a question the teacher asked (and not really to each other), this is not open discussion.* So this example would NOT be open discussion (although it could lead into an open discussion):

*T: What are some things you associate with volcanoes? [AQ]*

*S 1: Lava bombs.*

*S 2: Earthquakes.*

*S 3: Melted cars.*

It can be *very* hard to get away from conversational ping pong, because students tend to be used to it in academic settings. *Note that we are not suggesting that all conversational ping pong is “bad”; you can have conversational ping pong that is more or less dialogic, depending on how much the teacher really shows an interest in student thinking.* Open discussion is not something we can engineer; but we can try to create contexts where it can flourish. Disagreement often sparks open discussion.

In order for open discussion to happen, the teacher has to get out of the way—thus, it is worth thinking about whether an uptake or invitation is really needed after a student utterance, or whether the students will engage with each other if you simply don’t say anything and wait to see what happens.

***Discourse Patterns Part 5: Coding***

What is coding and how do I do it?

Coding is a process of assigning labels to talk segments. In this class, we will sometimes ask you to code a transcript. This simply means that we want you to use the discourse terms and apply them to each statement. We usually use an abbreviation, like “U” for uptake, and write it in the margin somewhere. It is a wonderful way to become deeply familiar with terminology we have introduced so that you can begin to think about your own language in terms of patterns. This can be extremely useful in identifying patterns in your own talk, but also in identifying whether different students are more responsive to different kinds of questions and prompts. Coding can sometimes be a messy process, and the point as we see it is to use coding as a way to understand language and how it is functioning rather than getting bogged down with which code is “right” when there’s a complex or ambiguous instance.

Do all statements need to be coded?

No. Some teacher statements (e.g., rhetorical questions) won’t fall under any of the above categories. That’s okay. These codes do not indicate the full range of possible conversational moves in a conversation, and there are many other moves that can have rich dialogic affordances, depending on the context. You are, of course, welcome to invent additional codes to add to those in this packet, if you find that helpful.

Do students ask questions that fall into these question categories? Should they be coded?

Yes. When such instances happen, they should be coded. Most student questions are authentic questions (unless students are pretending to be the teacher). It’s also possible to find students who use invitations (“Who agrees with Juan?”) and uptake to elicit further information from each other – often when they are challenging each other:

*S1: He’s probably really angry, and that’s why he’s saying that.*

*S2: Huh? Why would he be angry? [U] She just gave him all that money!*

Can statements that are not in the form of a question be coded?

If teacher (or student) statements function as prompts (e.g., “Tell us more”), then they will likely fall into one of the coding categories, and should be coded.

Parting thought

Keep in mind that teaching dialogically depends not just on what you say, but also on what you choose not to say – for example, when you choose to wait and see what another student might say in response if you don’t say anything at all. The individual moves are not the point – an orientation toward the value of student thinking, and the value of sharing ideas, needs to be at the heart of the instructional decisions you make.