Talking the Talk:
Meeting the Standards for Speaking and Listening

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Among the less noticed aspects of the Common Core State Standards is their emphasis on the importance of speaking and listening. As the standards document states "To become college and career ready, students must have ample opportunities to take part in a variety of rich, structured conversations—as part of a whole class, in small groups, and with a partner." (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010)

The Problem

Unfortunately, a wealth of research demonstrates that students seldom have opportunities to take part in rich conversations. Goodlad's (1984) classic study of over a thousand classrooms led him to this conclusion:

> The data from our observation in more than a thousand classrooms support the popular image of a teacher standing or sitting in front of a class imparting knowledge to a group of students. Explaining and lecturing constituted the most frequent teaching activities, according to teachers, students, and our observations. Teachers also spent a substantial amount of time observing students at work or monitoring their seatwork. (p. 105).

More recently, Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran's (2003) analysis of twenty seventh- to twelfth-grade classrooms found that what they call open-discussion, defined as "more than 30 seconds of free exchange of ideas among students or between at least three participants" which "usually begins in response to an open-ended question about which students can legitimately disagree" (p. 707) averaged 1.7 minutes per 60 minutes of class time. As depressing as that finding is, it is even more depressing when you consider that Applebee and his colleagues found that lower-track students, the students we are targeting in *Inside* are much less likely to have the opportunity to participate in such discussions.

The dearth of discussion is especially troubling because when it does occur it has dynamic effects. In Langer's (2001) study of schools that beat the odds, those "whose

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students perform higher [on high-stakes tests] than demographically comparable schools" (p. 837), she found that in the most successful schools, there was always a belief in students' abilities to be able and enthusiastic learners; they believed all students can learn and that they, as teachers, could make a difference. They therefore took on the hard job of providing rich and challenging instructional contexts in which important discussions about English, language, literature, and writing in all its forms could take place." (p. 876). Moreover, Applebee and his colleagues (2003) found that these benefits accrue to all students, regardless of track.

Little wonder. In their study of the literate lives of young men both in and out of school, Smith and Wilhelm (2006) found that their participants "wanted to solve problems, debate, and argue in ways through which they could stake their identity and develop both ideas and functional tools that they could share and use with others in very immediate ways" (p. 57). This finding resonates with research that looked more specifically at struggling readers. Roberts and his colleagues (2008) found that struggling readers' motivation increases when they have the opportunity for interaction, and Faggella-Luby and Deshler (2008) found that collaborative learning tasks increase student ownership of their literacy learning, generate rich thinking, and can be expected to improve reading achievement. These findings apply to English language learners as well, but in their case besides being relevant and meaningful, the interactions must be carefully planned to yield gains in oral language development (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2010; Torgesen et al., 2007).

So What Do We Do?

Why do classroom discussions remain closed in light of such findings? Why is it so hard to break the pattern of discourse that typifies discussions of texts, even for teachers who strive to do so (cf. Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995)? Rabinowitz (Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998) provides one possible explanation when he notes that teachers typically teach texts that they have read many times to kids who are reading them for the first time. As a consequence,

they've settled in their own minds at least many of the potential questions they could ask. And when they have, they understandably want to share their thinking with our students.

In our program, therefore, we do something that necessitates breaking the mold: We embed our reading and instruction in units that focus on Guiding Questions. Our Guiding Questions are designed to foster substantial talk about important issues that really matter. Take a look at the question on which unit 1 of our first book in centered: "What defines home?" The question is deceptively simple, but has a wide range of possible answers: Is home a particular physical place? Or is it the presence of the people around us? Is its most important characteristic familiarity? Or safety? Or history? The point is that the multiple possibilities for responses leads to multiple opportunities for rigorous discussion. Students must take a position and make a claim. They then must use relevant text information as evidence to support their claim. Our units make it clear right from the start that they are designed to foster rich collaborative exchanges.

Posing compelling questions isn't enough, however. It's also important that the academic talk those questions foster takes a variety of forms to meet the expectations of the new standards. Our books offer whole-class discussions, small-group discussions, and paired discussions. Some are spontaneous and others are more formal. But all of them occur only after we have prepared students to engage in them in a meaningful way. For English language learners this is particularly important. First, we help negotiate the dynamics of a class discussion (how to get a turn, how to build on a peer's idea) and second, we provide them with language frames to help them organize and state their ideas or opinions clearly.

Another benefit of building units around Guiding Questions is that students have the opportunity to tap into and develop their background knowledge, something that is important for all students but is especially crucial for English language learners (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). No one perspective is privileged with essential questions; rather, different cultural and personal viewpoints are welcome to inform the dialogue among the students. In short, we offer students important issues to talk about and provide the texts and the contexts they need to make that talk as rewarding as possible.

Graphic organizers help students organize ideas to guide academic discussions about the Guiding Questions.