

Engage Readers In Powerful Conversations

Comprehension improves when we engage students in rich discussions that allow students to integrate knowledge, experience, strategies, and textual insights.

(P. David Pearson 2008)

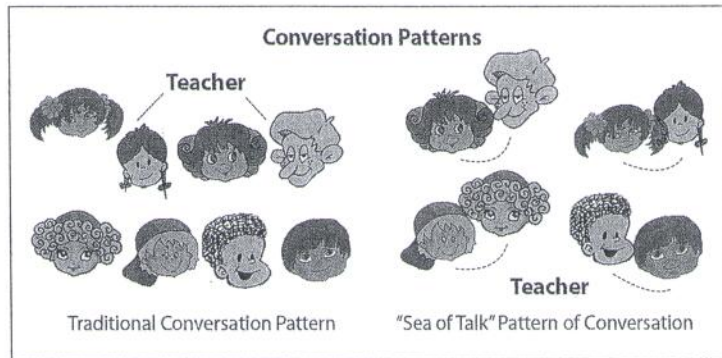


At Kinnaman Elementary in Beaverton, Oregon, Pat Webb guides students in using the text to support and justify reflections and deep thinking.

When we open the door to real dialogue and genuine conversation, we create a sense of celebration around the wide range of responses students have to the same text. We create the expectation that conversations are filled with accountable, relevant considerations of learning, that opinions are encouraged, and that thinking is supported with evidence from the text. Students are encouraged to share their responses but also to justify their thinking. The goal is to learn to interrogate the text, the author, and the issues.

Float Learning on a Sea of Talk

Historically, conversations in classrooms have been teacher controlled. The teacher asks a question. Students' hands are raised. One student responds. This type of interactional pattern results in very few learners getting to speak and produces a sluggish attitude about comprehension: struggling learners quickly learn that if they are quiet long enough, a more verbal peer will speak out and provide a response.



When the pattern of interaction shifts to a *distributed discourse model*, the teacher still poses questions, but students do not raise their hands or try to get the attention of the teacher. Instead, students respond to the question by having a literate conversation with a "thinking partner." Because *all* students must now interact with the question, cognition is distributed and more students engage with the learning (Resnick 1991, Allington 2007).



Accountable talk between partners lifts learning and increases engagement.

Partner conversations support and encourage language use for all students.

Some students benefit from a list of conversation starters to help them launch partner conversations. To support those students, I often make a poster listing stems such as those that follow. This poster changes and grows as students gain proficiency and learn how to lift one another to deeper levels of thinking.

Stems to Start a Discussion

I wonder...	An important point was...
I noticed...	I realized...
I liked...	I think...
I feel...	The selection made me think of...
I can infer...	If I could change something, I would...
My favorite part was...	The author's purpose may be...

Turn, Talk, and Listen

Partner conversations are often referred to as a *Turn and Talk*, but the real emphasis should be on active listening and shared responsibility for committed engagement with the topic. Michael Opitz (2006) reminds us that active listening is too often ignored as a learning tool. We need to teach students that part of their responsibility in a conversation is to be a thoughtful, reflective listener who can connect with, extend, and elaborate on the ideas of another speaker. Partner pairs who are actively listening say things like:

- *Tell me more about your thinking on that...*
- *What led you to that line of thinking?*
- *What did you notice in the text that supports your idea?*
- *I can "link up" to that thought...*
- *Your comment makes me wonder...*
- *Your comment reminds me that...*
- *What did you think about...*

Model Quality Thinking and Listening

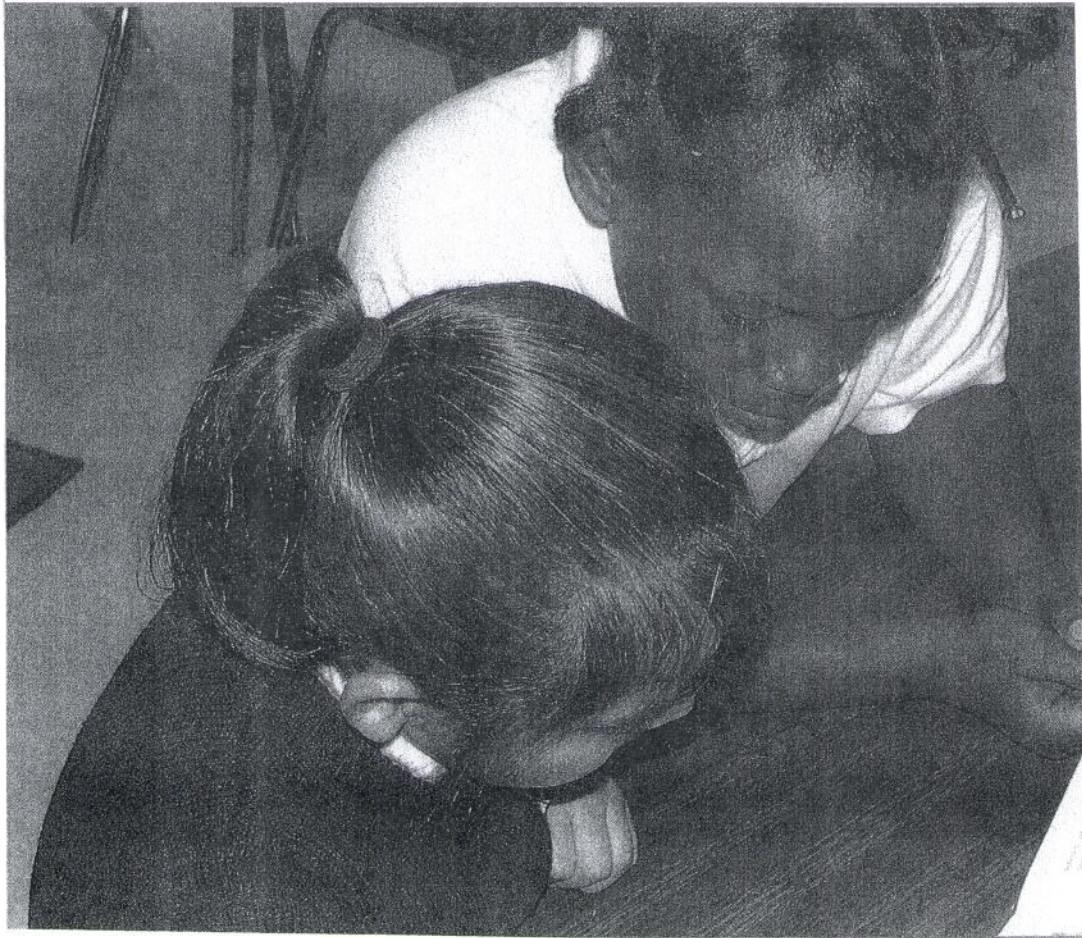
To help learners become knowledgeable speakers and active listeners, we need to model invitational language that stimulates quality conversation and deep thinking (see Figure 1-2). When we use language that invites deeper thinking and display that language on charts so students can refer to it easily, the students become more comfortable with these structures and are more likely to utilize them during their partner conversations.

Conversations About Books

Personal and Social Explorations of Meaning

At one time, quiet classrooms were considered the ideal environment for learning. However, as research has demonstrated the social nature of learning, we must remember that it is essential to provide opportunities for children to talk about what they are learning and the strategies they are using for inquiry (Braunger and Lewis 2006). These questions and dialogue need to be genuine acts of communication and not simply a rote reaction to situations controlled by an adult (Peterson and Eeds 2006). Through in-depth, authentic conversations in which children are encouraged to share their opinions and understandings, we can help children to delve more deeply as thinkers, clarify ideas, and verify information.

There is a strong and important link between oral language and reading comprehension (Clay 1972; Wilson and Cleland 1985). Sharing and comparing through the oral mode of communication demands that the learner activate understanding of a story. Together, through conversation, readers can



consider the potential meaning of a passage, clarifying their thoughts and reflecting on the processes that help them to create meaning while reading (Hoyt 2003). Through dialogue, readers measure their own understandings against the perceptions of others, consider the quality of their understanding, examine diverse perspectives, and make internal adjustments in their reading. In each exchange, oral language proficiency is bolstered and expanded, elaborated upon and stretched.

Through a long history of working with children who are challenged by learning, I find that these children in particular benefit from conversation. Traditional comprehension questions focus attention on the teacher rather than the text and cast the learner in a passive rather than an active role. Cambourne's Conditions of Learning make it clear that we must increase learner responsibility if we are to increase learning. Conversations and genuine dialogue place responsibility directly in the hands of the learner. Challenged learners who engage regularly in rigorous conversations about texts begin to anticipate engagement in meaningful dialogue and engage in more-intensive monitoring of their own comprehension.

The challenge we face is how to create an environment in which conversations stay focused on the text *and* assist children in connecting their world knowledge with the text being discussed.

Questions for Students to Ask Each Other About Books

What did you notice?

What did you like?

What is your opinion?

What did you wonder?

What does this mean?

What did you learn?

How did it make you feel?

What parts of the story seemed especially important to you?

As you read, were there any places where you thought of yourself,
people you know, or experiences you have had?

Were there any parts you especially liked?

What did you read that makes you think that?

What do you know that you didn't know before?

Were there any parts you would have changed if you were the author?

What do you think the author did especially well?

What is the strongest literary element?