

Tell Me About . . .

A Discussion Challenge You Overcame

Pennies and Threads

One way to get every voice included in a whole-class discussion is literally to give “a penny for your thoughts.” On discussion day, I provide each student with two pennies at the beginning of the class period. I keep a cookie tin on a stool in the middle of the room and expect each student to “chip in” twice during the discussion. All coins must be in by the final bell. If the opportunity to voice a comment isn’t enough incentive, getting to toss a coin into the tin when you speak is. Ka-ching!

A second way to encourage students to keep a conversation going is to maintain a tangible “discussion thread.” I give each student a 6-inch piece of thread or thin yarn. The first speaker begins the topic with his or her thread, and each subsequent speaker, whether agreeing or disagreeing, ties his or her thread to the end of the previous segment while speaking. Have something to add to the conversation? Tie your comment to the end of the thread. Post these strands in your room to display how lengthy conversations have successfully developed in your class.

—John Hayward, English teacher,
Central High School, Naperville, Illinois

Making Connections

Instead of actively listening to one another and considering what has already been said, my students often rush to answer or offer input that is not as connected to the current discussion as it could be. To help them, I require them to refer to what the previous speaker said. For example, “I heard John say that the current reason for fighting in Syria is religion-based, but our reading also mentioned some political issues.” This technique helps them self-monitor their level of attention to the conversation and make a connection.

—Tracey Nangle, teacher, ELA and Geography,
North Smithfield Middle School,
North Smithfield, Rhode Island



Weaving Talk and Activity

There’s never enough time for discussion. As an art teacher, I only see my elementary school students once a week for 60 minutes. There’s a lot to accomplish, and the kids are eager to get to the fun part—creating art. Too often, just as our opening discussion or review is taking on life and we’re really starting to climb the hill of higher-level thinking, a student will ask, “Can we get started now?” and I feel the momentum in the room drop.

I’ve found two ways to combat this buzz-kill comment. First, I explain to the students why this background knowledge is essential for success in the project. Second, I break up the hour and come back to the discussion after the students have been working for a while. That way, they get their creativity fix, and we have a fresh perspective on the learning at hand.

—Laura Calderisi, K–5 art teacher,
Elmhurst District 205, Illinois

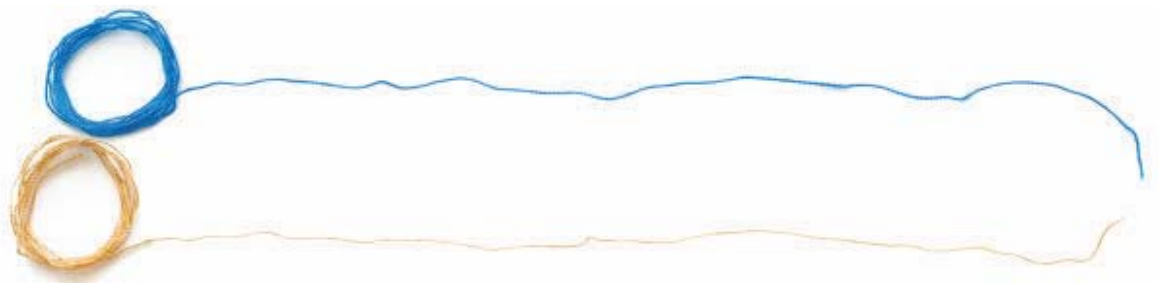
Time to Gather Your Thoughts

Classroom discussions stall when students say, “I don’t know” or “I can’t think of anything.” I address this problem by giving students time to jot down some thoughts before the discussions to ensure that they have something to contribute. It works from kindergarten to college. Allowing the students to talk for a few minutes in small groups before the whole-class discussion also helps. I make sure to offer some praise to students who overcome their reticence to share. It’s one way to get all of the voices in the classroom heard.

—Eileen Dial,
associate professor/director of student teaching,
Holy Cross College, Notre Dame, Indiana

Accepting Silence

The biggest challenge in classroom discussions is learning how to be OK with silence. Silence is truly golden—but it requires patience and strength to allow it to permeate the room



when we've presented a thought-provoking question. To keep myself from jumping in, I think of the wait time as an opportunity to get in the leisurely walk around the classroom that I never have time for. At first, the students used to stare at me, thinking that I must surely be heading somewhere to examine a leak in the ceiling or to take away a distracting magazine. But I never arrived at that destination; instead, I would turn, look at them, and say, "Take your time to think about it. It's an important question, and I really want to know what you think." Slowly, a hand would be raised and discussion would begin.

—Janice Klink-Mueller, RTI/PBIS teacher, Academy School District 20, Colorado Springs, Colorado

Think-Pair-Share

One year I had a group of students who wanted to talk all the time; the following year I had a group who did not want to talk at all! I address these challenges with the think-pair-share model—students take time to think independently about a topic, then discuss with a partner, and then share with the class. I've found that this model can calm the nerves of students who are not as vocal in the classroom and is also a great opportunity to spark student-lead discussions.

—Melissa Migala, 5th grade teacher, Lyons School District 102, Illinois

Supporting Second-Language Conversation

For second-language instructors, the goal is to promote communication in the target language. To make students more comfortable with speaking, I distribute an entrance ticket at the start of class and have students jot down three things that are personal to them—for

Silence is truly golden—but it requires patience and strength to allow it to permeate the room.

example, three things you did last night, three things you love to eat, three things you do for fun, and so on. High school students generally enjoy talking about themselves and appreciate a forum to do so. With paper in hand, they circulate the classroom and share their ideas with classmates. The list allows them the safety of an ice-breaker. My students appreciate having this support in place at the beginning, and as time goes on they are able to contribute more fully to the target language conversation.

—Kristie Scriba, Spanish teacher, Lyons Township High School, La Grange, Illinois

Letting Go

When I worked with teachers to explore how to promote rich mathematical discussions, I found that the biggest hurdle for teachers was to give up control over the dialogue of the classroom. One teacher said she wanted students to hear the words from her mouth because she knew she would explain the concept correctly, whereas the students may not. I helped teachers understand that discussion among peers promotes learning and that explaining a concept to someone else helps students understand it better themselves. Once the teachers let go, they were able to implement better mathematics discussions.

—Kelly Georgius, instructional facilitator, Papillion-LaVista School District, Papillion, Nebraska

Talking About Books

When I first began to facilitate book clubs with students, I was disappointed in our discussions. Students had difficulty talking about the texts we had read. I realized that they had never had this experience before and it would require some work. So I took on the student's role by modeling how to talk about the characters, the narrative, personal connections with the text, and the writer's craft. It made a huge difference. Before long, the students were all involved in the discussions and learning from one another.

—Angie Bandy, literacy specialist, Crowley's Ridge Educational Cooperative, Harrisburg, Arkansas

Priming Students to Speak

My students are English language learners, and some are shy about speaking to the whole class. I plan debates in which I divide the class into two teams and assign each team a position. Each student writes down two justifications for his or her assigned position on a whiteboard. I then pair up students from opposite teams to argue their positions. Next, we hold a whole-class discussion in which I call on students to share the justifications for their argument. They are willing to share at that point because they've already expressed their justifications to at least one other person. We conclude with a final discussion in which the students get to share their real opinions.

—Mary Ann Zehr, ELL/history teacher, Wilson High School, District of Columbia

Learning How to Disagree

To have rich, substantive discussions, we must first teach our students how to have disagreements. In the open

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exchange of ideas, there are bound to be differences in opinions and understandings. I help students learn how to effectively respond to one another, not only when they agree but even more when they disagree. Getting students to acknowledge what they understand or agree with, and then to state what they do not agree with and provide counterarguments, is essential to moving the conversation away from the status quo.

—Erin Ives,
high school English teacher,
Hershey High School,
Hershey, Pennsylvania

Widening Students’ Perspectives

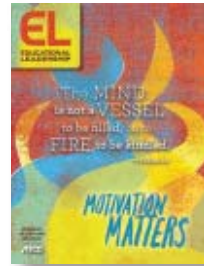
To have a rich discussion, students need to think and address questions from multiple angles. If they are not pushed to look outside the safe bubble they live in, they will not be able to explore alternative options or develop new ideas about the world around them. As a woman who has lived in a developing country and seen the horrors of poverty and lack of education, I realize that my perspective was limited until my mind was opened through new experiences. Therefore, I promote richer discussions by introducing new and rarely heard of events and stories from around the world to my students.

—Mary Davis, student,
La Salle University,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Read more stories of discussion challenges at www.ascd.org/el1114 tellmeabout. See upcoming questions and share your story at www.ascd.org/tellmeabout.

**EL, Engagement—
And a New Form of PD**

In its upcoming Professional Development Institute titled “Engaged and Inspired: High-Impact Strategies to Motivate and Challenge Each Learner,”



ASCD offers a new three-part model for professional development. (See the ASCD Calendar of Events for dates and locations.) Parts 1 and 3 will feature virtual learning; Part 2 will take place face-to-face. The institute will be led by ASCD faculty member Stefani Hite.

Three weeks before the on-site institute day, participants will discuss, online, student motivation using articles from the September 2014 issue of *Educational Leadership* on “Motivation Matters.” Participants will then meet in person to delve into a wide variety of student engagement and participation strategies. Finally, the virtual learning community will reconvene online for coaching and to collaborate with other participants as they embed their new tools into their instructional practices.

For more information on this and other Professional Development Institutes, go to www.ascd.org/institutes.

ASCD to Cohost EdSpace

In partnership with North Carolina ASCD, ASCD is cohosting an ASCD EdSpace professional development event titled “Culture, Purpose, and Structured Teaching” from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. eastern time on November 7, 2014, at the Greensboro Marriott Downtown, Greensboro, North Carolina.



Much like EdCamp and unconference approaches, ASCD EdSpace provides dynamic and personalized learning for educators. The ideas that attendees will bring back to the classroom are based on the Framework for Intentional and Targeted Teaching (FIT), which emphasizes school and classroom culture, establishing purpose, gradual release of responsibility, and formative and summative assessments. FIT teaching cadre member Deb Cale will lead the face-to-face portion of the day; ASCD authors and FIT teaching co-creators Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey will attend virtually to share their knowledge of how culture, purpose, and structured teaching lead to student achievement.

Registration for the ASCD EdSpace is \$155. For more information or to register, go to www.ascd.org/professional-development/ncascd-culture-purpose-structured-teaching-pd-experience.aspx.

Upcoming ASCD Webinars

■ **November 11, 2014:** “Feel Well, Teach Well: Ways to Gain and Sustain Wellness In and Out of the Classroom.” Presenters M. Nora Mazzone and Barbara Miglionico are coauthors of *Stress-Busting Strategies for Teachers: How Do I Manage the Pressures of Teaching?* (ASCD, 2014).

■ **December 9, 2014:** “Close Reading: Teaching the Comprehension Skills of Text Analysis and Evaluation.” Presenters Diane Lapp, Barbara Moss, Maria Grant, and Kelly Johnson are coauthors of *A Close Look at Close Reading, Grades K–5: Teaching Students to Analyze Complex Texts* (ASCD, forthcoming).

For more information or to register, go to www.ascd.org/professional-development/webinars.aspx.