Care to Elaborate: Encouraging Students to Build on Others’ Ideas

Facilitating discussions of texts is at the heart of teaching English. Research has shown, however, that discussion is rare in American high school classrooms and virtually absent from low-track classes (Nystrand et al.). Most opportunities for student talk in secondary classrooms take the form of recitation. In recitation, or I-R-E talk formats, a teacher initiates a question (“What do we know about Lady Macbeth?”), a student responds (“She’s ambitious.”), and the teacher evaluates the contribution (“Good.”) (Cazden; Mehan). While recitation can be useful for imparting information or assessing understanding, it does not allow students to practice the kinds of argumentation they are expected to demonstrate in college-level discussions and as active citizens in a democratic society. For example, in recitation, the teacher typically speaks every other turn, which does not allow students to practice elaborating upon previous remarks—a key feature of discussion.

Elaboration is when a speaker picks up on and extends another speaker’s contribution. Imagine Alejandra, a sophomore English student who is part of a whole-class discussion centered on a moral dilemma in A Raisin in the Sun (Hansberry). The teacher asks students whether the family’s patriarch should accept a monetary bribe in exchange for not moving his African American family into a predominantly white neighborhood. When Alejandra says, “Money doesn’t buy everything,” her peers could elaborate by:

- Offering more information or evidence: “That reminds me of what Mama said to her son: ‘Once upon a time freedom used to be life—now it’s money.”
- Interpreting what the speaker is saying: “I think Alejandra is saying that Walter shouldn’t accept the bribe because ‘money doesn’t buy’ things like family and happiness.”
- (Dis)agreeing with a comment and attempting to explain why: “I agree with Alejandra’s idea about ‘money’ not being ‘everything’ because, in the play, the characters care more about pride.”; “I disagree that ‘money doesn’t buy everything’ because money means power.”

In these examples of elaboration, students are picking up on part of Alejandra’s contribution and extending it with additional information, evidence, or explanation.

What can teachers do to encourage students to build upon previous speakers’ ideas?

Elaboration is an important aspect of discussion as students work to make sense of others’ ideas, interpretations, and experiences in light of their own. The Common Core State Standards refer to elaboration as “building on others’ ideas” and “[building] on others’ talk in conversations by responding to the comments of others” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices). Given that discussion is rare and students may, therefore, be accustomed to elaborating on others’ ideas during classroom discussion, what can teachers do to encourage students to build upon previous speakers’ ideas?

Observing Teachers in Action

To answer this question, I observed discussions in four high school classrooms. Each teacher selected...
a specific class of students they wanted to focus on, and I videotaped each teacher facilitating discussion with their focal class four times during the autumn semester of the 2011–12 school year. After these 16 observations, I transcribed episodes of extended whole-class talk. Extended means lasting at least two minutes, and whole-class talk means any talk format that included—the entire class (e.g., teacher-led recitation or discussion; half-class fishbowl discussions that all students can see and hear). I focused on whole-class talk—rather than other talk formats such as partner or small-group talk—in the interest of investigating formats that resemble those found in college and career settings (e.g., the seminar discussion facilitated by an English professor, the team meeting facilitated by a manager). Within transcripts, individual turns were coded for whether the teacher or student was the speaker. Each turn was divided into units—one or more words that function as a sentence—and each unit was coded for whether or not it exhibited elaboration on a previous speaker’s utterance.

To explore what teacher moves might have supported student elaboration, I examined four transcripts (one per teacher) that exhibited the greatest frequencies of student elaboration. Within these transcripts, I identified at least one episode of student elaboration, a series of turns in which multiple students built upon previous speakers’ contributions. For each episode, I analyzed the teacher’s practices with attention to moves that seemed to support student elaboration and that the teacher did not use at all, or used to a much lesser extent, during other observed discussions. Table 1 summarizes the features of whole-class discussion during these episodes of student elaboration.

The Use of Text
All four discussions were based on written texts that students had encountered and included students making textual references. Extended means lasting at least two minutes, and whole-class talk means any talk format that included—through listening or speaking—the entire class (e.g., teacher-led recitation or discussion; half-class fishbowl discussions that all students can see and hear). I focused on whole-class talk—rather than other talk formats such as partner or small-group talk—in the interest of investigating formats that resemble those found in college and career settings (e.g., the seminar discussion facilitated by an English professor, the team meeting facilitated by a manager). Within transcripts, individual turns were coded for whether the teacher or student was the speaker. Each turn was divided into units—one or more words that function as a sentence—and each unit was coded for whether or not it exhibited elaboration on a previous speaker’s utterance.

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### Table 1. Features of Discussion during Episodes of Student Elaboration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher and Class</th>
<th>Talk Format</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Tools</th>
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| Irene, English, tenth grade | Teacher-led, whole-class | Play: A Raisin in the Sun (Hansberry) | Should Walter accept the bribe from Lindner? | • written text  
|                   |                   |                                           |                                                                         | • partner talk  
|                   |                   |                                           |                                                                         | • handout of sentence frames  
|                   |                   |                                           |                                                                         | • talk move (Post)  
| Clare, American Literature, eleventh grade | Student-led, half-class | Novel: Fools Crow (Welch) | How does the course theme of community vs. individualism unfold in the novel? | • written text  
|                   |                   |                                           |                                                                         | • independent writing  
|                   |                   |                                           |                                                                         | • handout of sentence frames alongside explicit norms and vocal warm-ups  
| Sam, AP US History, eleventh grade | Teacher-led, whole-class | Secondary source: A People’s History of the United States (Zinn), which excerpted a primary source, a speech (Lincoln) | Why did the Mexican American War happen? | • written text  
|                   |                   |                                           |                                                                         | • partner talk  
|                   |                   |                                           |                                                                         | • handout of sentence frames alongside explicit norms  
|                   |                   |                                           |                                                                         | • talk move (Post)  
| Zach, Honors US History, eleventh grade | Teacher-led, whole-class | Primary source: Letter published in the Boston-Gazette Supplement, 1766 | How might English people have felt toward the colonists’ resistance to The Stamp Act? | • written text  
|                   |                   |                                           |                                                                         | • partner talk  
|                   |                   |                                           |                                                                         | • talk move (Post)  

Across classrooms, the teachers used four tools that seemed to encourage student elaboration: the use of written text to anchor talk, structured opportunities for students to practice thinking and speaking in smaller groups while simultaneously grappling with the texts and questions that would guide discussion, explicit expectations for student elaboration alongside models for what these moves look and sound like, and active teacher facilitation including talk moves that encourage students to respond directly to one another.
to a common text included student argumentation in the form of claims, evidence, and reasoning, they did not feature high frequencies of student elaboration. Without a shared text, students provided evidence from personal experiences and other knowledge sources (e.g., other classes), which at times made for rich contributions but may have limited peers’ abilities to build on their ideas because they had not necessarily shared these experiences and therefore could not fully understand the connection between the evidence and the larger discussion. These results suggest that explicitly grounding discussion in one or more texts that all students can access may be a powerful tool for leveraging the kind of elaborative moves that demonstrate careful listening.

Practice Opportunities
All four teachers preceded the discussions with opportunities for students to practice speaking and engaging with the content that would anchor the discussion. Irene, Sam, and Zach asked students to use guiding questions to discuss the text with a partner. Clare asked students to create notes in response to questions that would launch the discussion. These activities were designed to provide students with opportunities to prepare for the content of the discussion as well as to scaffold student talk from smaller to larger groups so that students would feel more comfortable contributing.

Explicit Norms and Examples
Prior to Clare and Sam’s discussions, they established explicit norms for elaboration. They articulated expectations for student listening and elaboration and distributed a handout of sentence frames that modeled ways to make connections to others’ ideas (e.g., “To build upon what X said, ___”; “I’m hearing you say ___”; “I disagree with X’s idea about ___ because ___”). Clare asked students to repeat after her several sentence frames to get students accustomed to hearing the academic language aloud. While Clare, Sam, and Irene used such handouts during other observed lessons, they had not made their expectations this explicit prior to discussion.

Teacher Talk Moves
Three of the episodes of student elaboration were situated within teacher-facilitated talk formats that included a relatively high frequency of the talk move I call Post. Post is a move in which the teacher explicitly invites students to respond to one another. Some observed examples of this move included, “Does anyone disagree?”; “Would anyone like to expand on X’s point?”; and “Could someone help X out?” When teachers used the move of Post alongside ample wait time, students responded by making connections among their ideas.

Conclusion
This study illuminates several tools—common across multiple teachers—that seemed to support student elaboration. Although the research design—a small, in-depth case study of four willing teachers—cannot yield a causal link between a particular teaching tool and student elaboration, it does help us unpack the complexity of just four words from the Common Core: “building on others’ ideas.” Moreover, these teachers’ approaches to operationalizing this standard offer us a set of questions we can ask ourselves as we target other discussion moves:

1. What does the move look and sound like in the real world? Why is it powerful?
2. How can I demystify this move for students, and communicate how and why speakers and listeners enact it?
3. What texts and activities can I use before the discussion to support students as they build familiarity and facility with this skill?
4. What talk moves can I use during the discussion to leverage this skill?

As teachers, we cannot underestimate the power and purpose of our roles as discussion leaders. While the end goal may be for students to be able to enact independently and flexibly a set of discussion moves, we must be strategic about our role in scaffolding their mastery along the way.

Works Cited
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