Under Discussion: Teaching Speaking and Listening

Defining “Participation”: A Rubric for Assessing Discussion Skills

I frequently reflect on my beginning-English-teacher self: inexperienced, energetic, inept. Despite my best intentions, I was unconsciously incompetent at leading whole-class discussion. Don’t get me wrong—we had discussions, and sometimes they even felt productive. I used discussion to informally assess students’ understanding of content (How are they making sense of this piece of literature?), but I did not teach and assess speaking and listening skills themselves (To what extent are students building on previous speakers’ ideas?). Walter C. Parker and Diana Hess termed these two pedagogical purposes “teaching with discussion,” or using discussion as a forum for learning important content, and “teaching for discussion,” “where the subject matter is discussion itself—its worth, purposes, types, and procedures” (273). As a novice educator, I taught with, but not for, discussion; I did not provide explicit instruction on discussion skills, nor did I even see this omission.

I taught and assessed the other domains of English language arts—reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary—so why did it not strike me to approach speaking and listening with the same intentionality? Perhaps it did not occur to me that discussion skills need to be taught. I was never explicitly taught how to participate during whole-class discussion, and remember few opportunities to engage in text-based discussion as a student—omissions consistent with the lack of discussion in American high school classrooms (Cazden; Nystrand and Gamoran; Nystrand et al.). Excuses aside, my oversight was a disservice to my students. To hold discussions in a linguistically heterogeneous classroom without explicit instruction on the “rules of the game” was to keep hidden from students “the forms and norms of discourse that support and promote equity and access to rigorous academic learning” (Michaels, O’Connor, and Resnick 285). In not demystifying the moves that make for effective discussion, I shortchanged my students, especially those whose home language varieties did not neatly map onto the codes of academic discourse.

Now that I teach prospective and practicing teachers, I explicitly teach and assess their skills as both participants in and facilitators of discussion. A tool I developed to support this work is an analytic rubric for assessing students’ speaking and listening skills during teacher-facilitated whole-class discussion. In this piece, I share the current draft of this rubric (see Figure 1), reflect on the theories that informed its design, and invite readers to adapt this tool for their own purposes and contexts.

The Rubric

The first column of the rubric displays the criteria categories: Community, to listen actively, speak clearly, and respond thoughtfully; Argumentation, to support claims with warranted evidence; and Knowledge, to use discipline-specific vocabulary and syntax and explicit textual references (CAKe). Each row aims to demystify these criteria by arraying bulleted descriptors across four levels of competency: (4) Exemplary, (3) Accomplished, (2) Developing, and (1) Emerging. An assessor highlights the descriptors that most closely capture the quality of a student’s contributions over multiple observations, since it is rarely possible for all students in a single discussion to have ample opportunities to exhibit the full range of CAKe skills. The Comments box provides space for the
**FIGURE 1. Rubric for Assessing Students’ Speaking and Listening Skills during Teacher-Facilitated Whole-Class Discussion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERIA</th>
<th>(4) EXEMPLARY</th>
<th>(3) ACCOMPLISHED</th>
<th>(2) DEVELOPING</th>
<th>(1) EMERGING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community:</strong></td>
<td>Listens carefully with alert posture, tracking each speaker. Monitors participation so that he or she listens more than speaks.</td>
<td>Listens with alert posture and tracks speakers. Listens more than speaks.</td>
<td>Attempts to (or, with prompting, can) listen with focused posture and track speakers. Sometimes needs prompting to speak, or often speaks a disproportionate number of turns.</td>
<td>With prompting, attempts to listen with focused posture and track speakers. Speaks only when prompted, or dominates by speaking more often than listening.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speaks loudly and slowly enough for all participants to understand. Makes effective use of eye contact with participants while speaking.</td>
<td>Speaks loudly enough for all participants to hear. Makes eye contact with participants.</td>
<td>Speaks loudly enough for most participants to hear. Looks in the general direction of others while speaking.</td>
<td>Speaks loudly enough for peers nearby to hear. Speaks in the direction of the discussion leader or down at desk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responds to specific contributions by restating and building on others' ideas—providing reasons for (dis)agreeing with an idea, asking follow-up questions, synthesizing speakers' comments.</td>
<td>Responds to contributions by building on others' ideas—providing reasons for (dis)agreeing with an idea, asking follow-up questions, synthesizing speakers' comments.</td>
<td>Attempts to (or, with prompting, can) respond to contributions by restating and building on others' ideas—providing reasons for (dis)agreeing with an idea, asking follow-up questions, synthesizing speakers' comments.</td>
<td>With prompting, attempts to respond to contributions by restating and building on others' ideas—providing reasons for (dis)agreeing with an idea, asking follow-up questions, synthesizing speakers' comments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Argumentation:</strong></td>
<td>Offers clear, relevant claims that fuel the discussion. Supports and challenges claims using multiple pieces of evidence. Uses warrants to explain the connection between claims and evidence.</td>
<td>Offers clear, relevant claims. Supports claims using multiple pieces of evidence. Uses warrants to explain the connection between claims and evidence.</td>
<td>Attempts to (or, with prompting, can): Offer claims that are clear and relevant. Support claims using evidence. Use warrants to explain the connection between claims and evidence.</td>
<td>With prompting, attempts to: Offer claims, which may be vague, confusing, or irrelevant. Support claims using evidence. Use warrants to explain the connection between claims and evidence. Explanation may be vague, confusing, or irrelevant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uses academic language (discipline-specific vocabulary and syntax) to communicate ideas. When necessary, defines abstract concepts (e.g., love, justice) by establishing clear criteria and offering concrete (counter)examples. Explicitly references relevant facts, written texts, or other publicly accessible information. Orient listeners to the location and context of specific textual excerpts or features, and waits for listeners to find location. Makes relevant, logical connections between text under discussion and multiple other knowledge sources (e.g., other texts, the historical context of a text, personal experience, general knowledge, a previous class).</td>
<td>Uses academic language (discipline-specific vocabulary and syntax) to communicate ideas. When necessary, defines abstract concepts (e.g., love, justice) by establishing criteria and offering (counter)examples. References relevant facts, written texts, or other publicly accessible information. Orient listeners to the location and context of specific textual excerpts or features. Makes connections between the text under discussion and other knowledge sources (e.g., other texts, the historical context of a text, personal experience, general knowledge, a previous class).</td>
<td>Attempts to (or, with prompting, can): Use academic language (discipline-specific vocabulary and syntax) to communicate ideas. When necessary, define abstract concepts (e.g., love, justice) by establishing criteria and offering (counter)examples. Reference relevant facts, written texts, or other publicly accessible information. Orient listeners to the location and context of specific textual excerpts or features. Make connections between the text under discussion and other knowledge sources (e.g., other texts, the historical context of a text, personal experience, general knowledge, a previous class).</td>
<td>With prompting, attempts to: Use academic language (discipline-specific vocabulary and syntax) to communicate ideas. When necessary, define abstract concepts (e.g., love, justice) by establishing criteria and offering (counter)examples. Reference relevant facts, written texts, or other publicly accessible information. Orient listeners to the location and context of specific textual excerpts or features, alternatively, may paraphrase text excerpts or features from memory. Make connections between the text under discussion and other knowledge sources (e.g., other texts, the historical context of a text, personal experience, general knowledge, a previous class); connection may be unclear or irrelevant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge:</strong> Uses discipline-specific vocabulary and syntax and explicit textual references so that others can understand and critique the arguments under discussion.</td>
<td>Uses academic language (discipline-specific vocabulary and syntax) to clearly communicate ideas. When necessary, defines abstract concepts (e.g., love, justice) by establishing criteria and offering concrete (counter)examples. Explicitly references relevant facts, written texts, or other publicly accessible information. Orient listeners to the location and context of specific textual excerpts or features, and waits for listeners to find location. Makes relevant, logical connections between text under discussion and multiple other knowledge sources (e.g., other texts, the historical context of a text, personal experience, general knowledge, a previous class).</td>
<td>Uses academic language (discipline-specific vocabulary and syntax) to communicate ideas. When necessary, defines abstract concepts (e.g., love, justice) by establishing criteria and offering (counter)examples. References relevant facts, written texts, or other publicly accessible information. Orient listeners to the location and context of specific textual excerpts or features. Makes connections between the text under discussion and other knowledge sources (e.g., other texts, the historical context of a text, personal experience, general knowledge, a previous class).</td>
<td>Attempts to (or, with prompting, can): Use academic language (discipline-specific vocabulary and syntax) to communicate ideas. When necessary, define abstract concepts (e.g., love, justice) by establishing criteria and offering (counter)examples. Reference relevant facts, written texts, or other publicly accessible information. Orient listeners to the location and context of specific textual excerpts or features. Make connections between the text under discussion and other knowledge sources (e.g., other texts, the historical context of a text, personal experience, general knowledge, a previous class).</td>
<td>With prompting, attempts to: Use academic language (discipline-specific vocabulary and syntax) to communicate ideas. When necessary, define abstract concepts (e.g., love, justice) by establishing criteria and offering (counter)examples. Reference relevant facts, written texts, or other publicly accessible information. Orient listeners to the location and context of specific textual excerpts or features, alternatively, may paraphrase text excerpts or features from memory. Make connections between the text under discussion and other knowledge sources (e.g., other texts, the historical context of a text, personal experience, general knowledge, a previous class); connection may be unclear or irrelevant.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments:
assessor to elaborate on highlighted descriptors (e.g., provide specific examples of when the student exhibited a particular skill, suggest a strategy for future discussions).

The Design Process

Sarah Michaels, Catherine O’Connor, and Lauren B. Resnick’s research on Accountable Talk particularly informed the rubric criteria. The authors’ characterization of discussion as encompassing three interdependent dimensions—“accountability to the learning community,” “accountability to accepted standards of reasoning,” and “accountability to knowledge” (283)—inspired me to organize descriptors into the CAKe categories.

The rubric’s design is also informed by my beliefs about both discussion and the components of an effective rubric. I conceptualize whole-class discussion as a teacher-mediated, recurring activity—a yearlong commitment to working toward mastery. The rubric assumes that, along the way, there is active teacher facilitation—the strategic use of “talk moves” to probe student thinking and encourage students to respond directly to one another (Michaels and O’Connor, “Talk” 11). The rubric also assumes student preparation. If students have not read and considered the material at the foundation of the conversation, they are not equipped to participate (How can I build on others’ ideas about a poem I haven’t read?). Teachers play a critical role in scaffolding this preparation by engaging in such activities as setting expectations, assigning textual annotation tasks, and structuring opportunities for partner or small-group talk.

As I drafted the rubric’s descriptors, I aimed to be precise and clear about what listening and speaking look and sound like, thereby avoiding the pitfall of assessing students based on the quantity—rather than the quality—of their participation. I try to draft descriptors that are explicit; exhibit “clear distinctions among performance levels”; “focus on significant aspects of performance . . . , not on trivia”; are generalizable across discussions; and use positive, student-friendly language so that the rubric is “easy to teach from” (Spandel 18).

Once I had an initial draft of the rubric, I considered the extent to which the descriptors aligned with the Common Core State Standards for Speaking and Listening (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY. SL). Though my review of these standards did not lead to new criteria, I found some of the standards’ wording useful for clarifying the language of descriptors (“building on others’ ideas” from SL.1 replaced “using uptake”) and articulating the purpose of the CAKe categories (I borrowed “respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives” from SL.11-12.1.D and “to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas” from SL.11-12.1.A).

Next Steps

Spandel argued that good rubrics “[a]re forever changing as we refine our thinking” (18). Over the years, I have shared iterations of the rubric with prospective and practicing teachers, who have helped me see its promise and limitations. A rubric, like any tool—a hammer, an interactive whiteboard—is not inherently obvious or useful. Tools require learning, an understanding of the context in and materials with which the tool is used, and a transformation of the user (Michaels and O’Connor, “Conceptualizing”). In other words, the rubric’s value leans on why and how it is used. If simply distributed to students without explanation or instruction, the rubric may become a tool for punishment. If descriptors are introduced gradually and partnered with examples (video clips, transcripts, teacher modeling, sentence frames), the rubric has potential to facilitate learning.

I invite readers to consider why and how they adapt this tool for their own purposes and contexts. How might the rubric be used for self-assessment? What might it look like to use this assessment tool as a tool for evaluation (i.e., grading)? In what sequence should teachers introduce these descriptors to students? How might the rubric need to be modified for particular talk formats (partner talk, Socratic seminars),
disciplines (history, science), or grade levels? I encourage readers to email me with ideas or submissions, and I applaud your commitment to teaching with and for discussion.

Works Cited

Lisa M. Barker, a former high school English and drama teacher, is an assistant professor of secondary and middle school education at Towson University, Maryland. She teaches courses on English education and young adult literature, and has been a member of NCTE since 2014. Email: lbarker@towson.edu.
National Council of Teachers of English—Your Partner in Professional Learning

Are you responsible for planning professional learning experiences to address Common Core implementation challenges?

While many know NCTE as the home of award-winning professional journals, national conferences, and the ReadWriteThink website, you might not know we have also been quietly supporting K–12 schools in building effective professional learning plans.

We can:
• **Design professional learning plans** that fit any budget and timeline
• **Select research-based literacy resources** applicable across the disciplines
• **Identify opportunities to evaluate your professional learning efforts** and build long-term capacity

Why partner with NCTE?
For over 100 years, NCTE has been at the forefront of fostering effective literacy practices. As the professional home of the literacy community, NCTE is uniquely qualified to provide professional learning that enhances teaching while raising student achievement.

Get started with a free consultation.
Contact the NCTE Professional Learning Division at profdev@ncte.org, or call 1-800-369-6283.

In schools everywhere, educators are getting together to remodel literacy learning.

**Share Your Story of Remodeling Literacy Learning!**
www.literacyinlearning.org/map

Sign your team up for free on the Literacy in Learning Exchange and join the movement of educators who are making change happen in their schools.

Save the date!

2015 NCTE Annual Convention

Responsibility, Creativity, and the Arts of Language

November 19–22
Minneapolis, MN
Workshops: November 19, 22–24

For more information, visit www.ncte.org/annual