

For Real Conversations Get All Your Kids Talking

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It's easy to get caught up in a lively discussion in English class; after all, that's what we want to happen. But amid the buzz, it's also too easy to lose track of whose voice has been sidelined.

If you've ever tracked student participation, perhaps you've noticed it: a tendency for some students to speak, while others quietly

observe.

For many of our students – especially those who are quieter, in struggle, or who whose voices have been historically marginalized – the situation has dramatic consequences. It denies our kids their rightful place in the humanities.

To see a better way, let's visit Vy Graham's 7th grade English class in Newark, NJ. In her room, every student has a seat at the table.



Stephen

Bringing Every Student to the Table

Vy's seventh graders are reading Frederick Douglass's famous speech "What to the Slave is the 4th of July?" A prompt at the top of the page asks them to consider, "What does Douglass want his audience to feel (and how is he creating that feeling)?"



To watch video, [follow this link to Vimeo](#) & use password: *uncommon1*

First, watch the scene unfold (above). As you do, consider: *what do you notice about how her students prepare for discourse?*

Students write silently as Vy walks between the desks. She peeks over their shoulders to review their annotations and written responses, offering both affirmation and growth feedback. The timer chimes, and Vy signals students to turn to a partner and share their responses. Soft chatter fills the room. After a few minutes of conversation, Vy brings the class together to start whole-class discussion.

In the first moments of conversation, every single student has already had a chance to write, think, and likely even get some feedback. Better yet: every single student has had a chance to talk to a peer – a critical moment to rehearse their thinking before sharing it with the class.

By the end of the conversation that follows, students have pushed and prodded each other's ideas, allowing the teacher to maximize student talk while minimizing her own. And she made it possible with a few fast moves that any of us can add to our repertoire:

Play-by-Play:

How Vy Graham Launches Discourse

1. Individually Write—Students answer an open-ended prompt that invites multiple views.
2. Turn & Talk—Students share their ideas with a peer.
3. Cold Call—The teacher cold calls a student to begin sharing. (This can also be done as a “warm call,” giving a student a heads-up that you’d like to hear them share.)
4. Volley—Students share and build on each other’s responses with minimal intervention from the teacher.

Consider the implications of this practice for student voice. Vy's steps go beyond involving all students or even signaling to the class that everyone's ideas have a place in her room. By allowing students to write and think first, Vy invites her students to begin forming their ideas before they get swayed by their peers. The subtext? Everyone's views are sought, valued, and needed.

By the time discussion starts, every student has had time to engage with the text, making it far more likely they'll share. And Vy's had time to read what students are thinking, so she already knows where the class is struggling and which of her students might be ready to push the conversation forward. No wonder her students are so eager to speak.

Centering Students in Discourse

Vy's instruction reminds us that great teachers don't dominate the conversation; they facilitate it.

If students get bogged down in one area or miss a big idea, Vy knows she can push in. But, in large measure, Vy's students – like so many of our kids – are far more engaged by talking to each other than they are to any teacher.

The graphic is titled "Teach Intellectual Habits of Discourse" and is subtitled "Reading and writing that is a lot of talk. Learn how to navigate an intellectual exchange of ideas." It features a table with the heading "THE HABITS - CREATE CONVERSATION". The table lists various habits and their key discussion moves.

CORE HABIT	KEY DISCUSSION MOVES
Project	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Speak audibly and make eye contact with classmates, not just the teacher.
Share my work	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Speak to peers.• Invite others in. "If I have't had time to respond, if I had more who has? (ask for the class)"
Speak as an intellectual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use classroom routines.• Use complete sentences.• Address questions carefully.
Listen as an intellectual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make eye contact with the speaker.• Nod or affirm non-verbally.• Turn to page of speaker reference it (space to give time to turn to page).
Take notes as an intellectual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Write down/notebooks key information.• Produce the arguments.• Annotate diagrams.• Show examples, evidence notes for students to see a model.
Agree with all or parts of ideas and elaborate:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "I agree that... and I could add..."• "While I agree it's right, but and I think there is here/ additional evidence for it..."
Build & Critique	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Disagree<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "I really don't consider it the best that explains that idea."• "I probably, I have a different view."• Examine evidence in a different way<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "I actually viewed that two differently."

Click to download 2-page PDF.

How did they reach that point? Vy's students have adopted some "habits of discourse" – sentence starters and predictable moves that help them manage an academic conversation.

Above right is [their list](#). It's one shared by all the English teachers at her school (as well as the high school they'll enter upon graduation).

Writing about this approach, our colleague Doug Lemov [notes](#) that "in most cases, good discussion skills... are not 'naturally occurring.'" Intellectual discourse requires a different skillset than chatting in the lunchroom or after school.

So Vy teaches the habits her students need – often directly. As you'll see in the next video clip, the process need not be laborious. In this case, Vy wants her students to shift the way they speak about poetry (her students have been using “the speaker” and “the author” interchangeably).

As you watch, consider what moves she makes to help this new habit form and stick.



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Let's map the steps: Vy models the skill, provides a fast practice and then keeps an ear out as students try these skills in discourse. Using this approach for the hardest new skills, it's not long before her class has built up everything they need to self-moderate 90% of their conversations.

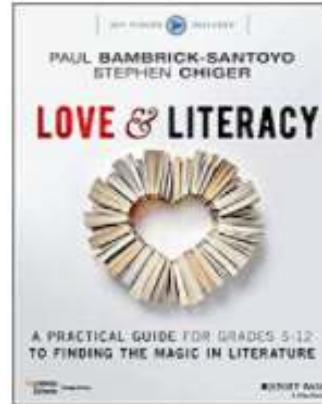
If you want to roll out the habits of discourse we've described above in your own classroom, all you'd need is Vy's framework and a calendar. We can help with the first part: here's [the framework Vy used](#) to help you plan.

Toward Equitable Class Discussion

Classroom discourse is an opportunity to develop one's voice, advocate a position, and build collective understanding. Structuring discourse so all of our students experience it in full makes it equitable.

After all, it's not really a class conversation until all your students are talking.

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