

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Small Shifts to Limit ‘Teacher Talk’ and Increase Engagement

Guiding students to regularly direct their own discussions brings academic rewards as they gain confidence working independently on challenging tasks.

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Teachers want students to reach high goals in the classroom, but Tori Filler, an elementary school literacy teacher in Brooklyn, believes that teachers often undermine themselves by taking the reins of the most important “doing” in the classroom. They might walk students through challenging parts of a lesson, or over-explain concepts that students should, ideally, grapple with on their own.

“As we all do our best to help students meet the high bars we set,” Filler writes in [Achieve the Core](#), “could it be that we’re missing out on opportunities for

kids to do the very work that will help get them there?” Putting the work in students’ hands, Filler writes, “flexes the muscle” they’ll need to tackle more challenging work on their own in the future and reap academic rewards.

When it comes to teaching literacy skills, for example, Filler notes that [research shows](#) students benefit the most from frequent, direct engagement with [challenging texts](#). Younger learners, whose oral language generally outpaces their ability to read and write, also need time and space to [connect the rigorous reading and writing they do to speaking and listening](#), ideally with their peers.

While teachers cannot cede all control to students in a classroom, Filler advocates for a mindset shift that strikes a balance between teacher-led and student-led learning by reducing the amount of “teacher talk.”

According to Filler, when teachers first try to integrate more student talk into the classroom, the discourse often resembles a Ping-Pong game between the teacher and one student at a time: “Teacher initiates question, student responds, teacher evaluates the response.” Instead, she writes, teachers should integrate activities into their daily routines that create more of a “volleyball discussion” by “asking students to listen to one another and respond to each other’s ideas before tapping the ball back to your side of the court.”

Teaching What Good Discussions Look Like

Before implementing these activities, it’s important for teachers to lay some groundwork for students by helping them better grasp what conversations among themselves should look like.

Discussion mapping is a useful tool that can help students ensure that everyone contributes—as [Stephanie Toro explains](#), “In order to get students to respond to each other, it’s not enough for individual students to feel empowered in their own voice; they must see other students as valuable

contributors and listen to their voices as much as they would the teacher.” A map of who speaks during a discussion should look like a spiderweb by the end, one that touches every student’s name on a diagram of the room.

Tools to help students understand and practice productive classroom conversations are also useful. A “[Progression of Talk](#)” chart, for example, provides students with a series of steps they can take during a conversation to ensure that comments are relevant, build on what was previously said, and provide room for clarifying arguments, disagreements, and elaboration.

Once you have this scaffolding in place, you’ll be ready to implement strategies to ensure that students are doing more of the talking—and heavy lifting—in your classroom.

Let Students Come Up With Ideas First

If you’re asking students for their interpretations of a challenging text, or an answer to a thorny question, ditch the hand-raising, writes Filler.

Think-Pair-Share is a simple alternative that gets students dwelling on a particular topic or question and independently coming up with as many ideas or insights as they can. When working with a read-aloud text, for example, try posing specific questions related to the reading for students to think through.

Once they have an answer, or answers, have them pair up with a partner to compare notes and help each other identify gaps in understanding. “This gives all students the time they need to process their thoughts before opening it up to the whole group,” Filler writes.

If you’re short on time, [Turn and Talk](#) is a condensed version of this strategy that can accomplish many of the same goals. Write-Pair-Share is another useful adaptation.

Focus on Getting All Students to Participate

Rosie Reid, a former California State Teacher of the Year and English teacher at Northgate High School in Walnut Creek, California, [writes for Edutopia](#) that without careful planning, even activities that give students more opportunities to speak can result in just a few students taking advantage of it.

A simple adjustment to try during activities like Think-Pair-Share is to decide who speaks first. The deciding fact can be something as arbitrary as “the student whose birthday is coming soonest.” Without this direction, Reid writes, some students will dominate partner talk time.

When it’s time for students to share out to the classroom, Reid recommends using a “talking piece” to ensure the discussions aren’t being dominated by certain students. In her classroom, she uses a ball that students pass around. Only the person holding the ball can speak, and every student gets the ball once before anyone gets it a second time. Mapping can also help, as it allows students to see who has and has not shared an idea or question yet.

Don’t Rush to Clarify the Hard Parts

When students are working through tasks for themselves, particularly hard tasks, Filler writes, a big shift teachers should make is not jumping in to preemptively evaluate how difficult the work is. “How many times have I told students, “Watch out, this part is going to be tricky!” and modeled or prompted them to use a specific strategy?” Filler asks.

Instead, she advises that if students report that a task is tough, ask them to evaluate what is tough about it and how they might sort it out on their own before stepping in to help.

If most of the class is struggling, ask more questions and turn the struggle into a productive discussion for everyone. Ask questions like “What makes this hard?” or “What have we tried?” or ask them to reread a passage and circle

specific places tripping them up, which gets students to push through challenging work.

When students are sharing out responses to the rest of the classroom, Filler writes, teachers should challenge themselves not to rephrase or validate what they say with phrases like, “Good, but maybe what you mean to say is…” or “What I think you’re saying is…” Instead, try responses like, “Can anyone build on that?” or “Do we agree? Disagree?”

Use Video To Ensure Your Strategy Is Working

An easy way to know if your efforts to reduce teacher talk are working is to periodically [record your instruction](#). Watching a playback of a lesson allows teachers to review their delivery and improve their use of class time.

For example, you might identify key areas of material where you feel that you tend to spend too much time talking and seek to incorporate more student-led activities and discussions. You can also track the effectiveness of activities and make tweaks as necessary.

It’s important that before you review your recorded lessons, you have [established clear goals](#) for what you’re looking for and even a list of specific elements in the video—such as moments when you take the reins from students prematurely—that you can track and improve on over time.