

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF conversation in learning

Research shows that the kind of instruction that leads to the greatest gains in student achievement in reading, writing, and other literacy skills involves talk.* Overall, researchers have found that in the most effective English classes, students engage in *dialogue* with their teacher and with each other as they build ever deeper and broader *understandings*, or *envisionments*. These *conversations* are critical to student learning, but it is also critical that conversations be about *important topics* and *challenging subject matter*.

WHAT IS DIALOGUE?

By dialogue, we mean classroom discussion — real discussion in which students exchange questions and ideas with each other and with the teacher. Dialogue has been shown to improve student achievement in both reading and writing. Teachers can foster this kind of dialogue by

- asking questions that require students to develop interpretation or analysis of a passage, and to defend their conclusions in light of conflicting points of view,
- inviting students to respond to each other's ideas,
- asking follow-up questions that prod students to think more broadly or deeply or to make connections to something else they have read or seen or know about.

WHAT ARE ENVISIONMENTS?

Making sense of new information is a process of asking questions, relating new information to old, forming hypotheses and later revisiting them, and reinterpreting previous understandings. The result of this process of developing understanding is called envisionment-building. An envisionment encompasses all that we understand about a selection (a printed text, movie, lecture, etc.) at a particular point in time, and it will continue to change as we do more reading, writing, listening, and talking. Effective classrooms:

- treat questions as a natural (and essential) part of coming to understand something,
- use class time to help students develop understandings, explore possibilities and build interpretations, and
- invite and welcome many perspectives to provoke analyses and enrich interpretations.

WHY CURRICULAR CONVERSATION?

English teachers teach many things: literature, grammar, spelling and composition, research skills, library usage, letter writing, word processing, and internet searching. The most effective English courses are not just collections of activities or units.



They are year-long conversations about important topics that matter. An effective English course teaches the vocabulary of the discipline, the conventional ways to speak and write within it, and how to argue a point with the kind of evidence that will be effective. In the best English classes, this means that students talk with others about important issues and ideas, read challenging selections, and ask and answer questions about those selections. We can think of all these activities as being part of a “conversation.” To be effective, though, these conversations must:

- **be about a topic worth talking about.** They should draw on and refer to materials that suit the purpose, are up to date, well written, and meaty enough to provoke discussion and debate.
- **help students relate what they are learning in one unit or lesson to other things they have studied or experienced.** It is important for the teacher to make sure that students see the connections to previous learning. Today's discussion should build on earlier work, and become the foundation for tomorrow's, next week's, and next month's work.
- **teach students how to take part in the conversation by teaching them the knowledge and skills they need,** including effective strategies for taking a position, making an argument, and evaluating evidence presented by others.

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HOW CAN PARENTS HELP?

Students at all grade levels can benefit from engaging in conversations that respect their points of view and that encourage them to think more deeply and to make connections to other knowledge and experiences. These conversations help to clarify thinking and ideas, and develop important language skills that are positively related to reading comprehension and writing achievement.

These conversations can begin with a shared experience — a TV program, video, or movie, book, an event, a piece of art or music — anything that invites questions and an exploration of ideas and understandings. It is important to respect the child's point of view and to ask questions that encourage the child to think more deeply and more broadly, and to make connections to other knowledge.

QUESTIONS YOU CAN ASK

- What was your favorite part? Why?
- Did anything surprise you?
- What were you thinking at the end of the book (video, movie, piece of music)?
- I wonder why the writer (director, painter, composer) . . . ?
- What part stood out for you? Why?
- Did anything in this book (painting, musical piece, movie) remind you of other things we have done? Someone we know?