

News from and about the teachers, facilitators, and coaches working in CELA's Partnership for Literacy to improve students' achievement across the grades and subjects.

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Good News

Two schools the Partnership is working with have been removed from the state's SINI list. Congratulations to

- Hudson Middle School (Hudson), working with Johanna Shogan
- Lynch Literacy Academy (Amsterdam), whose literacy coach is working with Kathy Nickson



Let's Talk about Talk

Teachers in the Partnership for Literacy (P4L) learn early on the difference between what passes for discussion in many classrooms and true discussion that involves all participants — teacher and students — in a free exchange of ideas.

Such talk is not frivolous; rather, it is essential to helping students grapple with ideas, use higher-order thinking, process and learn content, and build knowledge — knowledge that they can retrieve and use in the future. It is also key to helping teachers know what students are thinking and where they need more support: an excellent means of formative assessment (see p. 3)

The importance of substantive classroom talk is so essential to fostering student thinking, learning, and literacy development that our work with teachers often starts with it. And so it is fitting that this inaugural issue of our *Partnership Community* newsletter begin there as well.

In each issue of this occasional publication we plan to

- focus on a particular aspect of effective instruction,
- provide news about what is happening in the schools where we work,
- offer food for thought with a link to other resources (e.g.,



the discussion transcript introduced on p. 3).

And, please, we'd love to include your thoughts, ideas, and reflections on yours and your students' work. See p. 4 for how to submit them.

JLA, Editor

Fostering High Quality Classroom Talk

Kathy Nickson

Quality talk doesn't just happen. The teacher plays a crucial role in orchestrating substantive classroom conversation. Teachers must be prepared first to ask thought-provoking questions and also to teach students to:

- explain their thinking,
 - listen to one another and build on others' ideas,
 - acknowledge other points of view and express how they agree and disagree with them,
 - go to the text to defend their arguments,
 - question, challenge and interact with peers and teacher.
- On page 3, Johanna offers an opportunity to "listen" to a snippet of a conversation, during which she shares her comments on how the teacher is shaping the conversation to foster some of these skills.

Inviting All Students into the Conversation

Risa Gregory

Since it is classroom talk that provides opportunities for students to share the ideas that will enrich, deepen, and expand their understandings, it is important for teachers to work quickly to create a climate that invites all students into the conversation. This means making the classroom a place where all voices are heard and respected and all students feel comfortable being themselves regardless of their skill level. Only in a supportive climate

can they listen, respond, ask questions, and thus become full participants in their education.

One key element is the physical setup: Flexibly seating students (with or without desks) in circles, clusters, or whatever arrangement best facilitates eye-to-eye, face-to-face conversation, should be the norm.

Another key element is establishing ground rules for respectful conversations. The students along with the teacher should generate these guide-

lines for both listening and speaking; rules should include ways to support and to respectfully disagree with others' views. Teachers need to model and give students the language to effectively do this so that all students can listen to one another and build on ideas they've heard.

With these elements in place, the teacher's role becomes facilitator in a learning community as students listen and connect to and respond and challenge in an effective way.

Photo by Ellen B. Senisi



How Student Talk Fosters Student Learning

Karen Polsinelli

In a social studies classroom, student talk is necessary. But for many years I was frustrated by the typical class discussion that I led as the teacher. I asked open-ended questions, one or two students replied, and we moved on.

Through my work with CELA's Partnership for Literacy, I came to revise my understanding of student talk. Student talk then became rich conversation about the questions and understandings raised by the content. The focus of the conversation became student questions and concerns.

I came to believe that student voices should be more prevalent in the classroom than the teacher's voice. The talk can take place in pairs or small groups, or the whole class can participate.

Conversation is meaningful if it is carefully facilitated by the teacher. Talk is essential for allowing students to grapple with the big ideas of the content. It allows students to make meaning of the facts and then to go further.

A conversation helps students to develop their understanding of the text. As they hear the comments and questions of

their classmates, their own understandings are revised and strengthened.

Participation in conversation gives each student the opportunity to articulate a conclusion and therefore reinforce his or her ability to try out ideas and raise new questions. Multiple perspectives are explored as more students contribute to the discussion. This also deepens everyone's understanding of the topic discussed.

Student talk that is adeptly facilitated by the teacher can serve to push student thinking to higher levels.

JOIN THE WIKI

Iroquois MS's 8:2 team (Niskayuna, see article, p. 4) invite you to visit their wiki on critical thinking. You can find it at:

<http://criticalthinking8thgrade.wikispaces.com/>

About the Authors: All authors in this issue are facilitators in the Partnership for Literacy, and each brings a unique background to the current teachers with whom they work (also see. 3).

Eija Rougle, Ph.D., has taught at many levels in the US and abroad and works primarily with teachers in Niskayuna, Lansingburgh, and Albany.

Johanna Shogan taught English in Bethlehem and works primarily with teachers in Hudson, Lansingburgh, Albany, and Rensselaer.

Karen Polsinelli taught social studies in Niskayuna and works primarily with teachers in Lansingburgh, Rensselaer, and Schenectady.

Kathy Nickson taught English in Amsterdam and works with literacy coaches in Amsterdam and special educators in the HFM BOCES.

Student Talk Informs Teaching

Karen Polsinelli

For many years I relied on homework, quizzes, tests, and the occasional class discussion to assess student learning. Later, dissatisfied with this feedback, I searched for ways to better connect with students in order to assess their understanding *before* the “test.”

As student talk became a bigger part of my classroom, it became a reliable way for me to gauge student understand-

ing. This, in turn, provided the framework to shape instruction. As classroom conversation highlighted students’ understandings and questions, it gave me clear direction for creating instruction that could clear up their misunderstandings and develop their ideas further.

What resulted was a student-centered classroom, and I based instruction on student feedback. This formative as-

essment made it possible for me to scaffold activities to create richer student understanding of the content we were studying.

As a result, more students were successful because instruction took into account where they were as they wrestled with content.

Observing and reflecting on student conversation made it possible for me to provide more effective instruction.

Watching a Teacher Support Thoughtful Discussion

Johanna Shogan

In Hudson Middle School, a critical mass of teachers and administrators are focused on using discussion to foster higher-order thinking skills. I have been privileged to witness teachers there facilitating many good conversations with their students.

Let’s “listen in” on excerpts from a 5th-grade classroom; I’ll share *[in brackets]* my thoughts about what teacher Ralph Burch is doing to feed the conversation and help his students comprehend Jesse Stuart’s “Thanksgiving Hunter.”

Ralph: What have we learned so far? What’s the basic idea? *[checking for understanding, inviting participation]*

MORE RE: AUTHORS

Risa Gregory taught reading in Niskayuna and works with teachers in the Lansingburgh Academy.

Stu 1: There’s a boy, and his uncle takes him hunting with other people. He finds a blind dove. He wants to keep it instead of kill it, and it flew away.

Stu 2: A boy and his uncle.

Stu 3: A boy wants to prove to his uncle that he can hunt.

Stu 4: Uncle Wash liked to hunt—and the boy wanted to prove he could hunt a dove—but the bird was blind and he let it go.

Ralph: . . . What do you have to say about the dove’s eyes? *[reference to text, authentic question, inviting participation]*

Stu 5: Somebody else had shot it.

Ralph: Why? Does the story tell us? *[upping the ante, authentic question]*

Stu 6: Uncle Wash shot the dove’s eyes. It says he likes to shoot doves.

Ralph: So you think Uncle Wash did it? What do the rest of you think? *[upping the ante on student’s thinking]*

Stu 7: It says in the story the boy hears the sounds of gunshots in the distance.

Stu 8: The boy didn’t shoot the bird.

Stu 1: First, it couldn’t have been the boy. He saw the dove and it’s missing an eye...if the boy had shot it,...

Stu 9: I think Uncle Wash might have shot it.

Stu 10: I don’t think the boy shot the dove. It makes sense someone else shot it. I think Uncle Wash could have done it because he’s a great hunter.

Stu 11: It says Uncle Wash breaks the law all the time!

Ralph: That’s good reading! Tell me why he thinks . . .

For a fuller version of the conversation (in which every student in the class took part) and my analysis, go to www.albany.edu/cela/partnership, where you can try your own hand at analyzing the rest of this conversation plus one other. Try to identify what steps each teacher takes to deepen student comprehension and develop thinking.

LOOK FOR:

Laura Carroll (Van Antwerp MS, Niskayuna), April Ordway and Angela Spanakos (Hudson MS), and Nicole Hunt (Knickerbacker MS, Lansingburgh), joined Johanna Shogan and Janet Angelis to author the article that leads off Vol II of NYSUT’s *Educator’s Voice*: “Engaging Special Education Students in Higher Levels of Literacy.”

(www.nysut.org)

CALL FOR ARTICLES

Educator’s Voice:

Expanding Literacy for Adolescents in all Content Areas, Grades 7-12.

150-word proposal due April 30

For details:

www.nysut.org/educatorsvoice

The Partnership Community

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Hudson Middle School is “spouting literacy” with a children’s book festival, Sat. May 16. For details and more information: www.hudsonchildrensbookfestival.com or 518-828-4360, x 1112.

The Partnership for Literacy (P4L) is a promise and an action plan for continuous teacher learning. It is a collaborative model for schools and districts that want to become stronger learning organizations, with more engaged students demonstrating higher thinking and literacy achievement. Experience shows that such changes happen more effectively when someone from outside the district or school fosters discussion and works toward systemic change. Engaging teachers together in the intellectual work of reflecting on and analyzing current practice, raising questions for themselves and colleagues, and negotiating collective goals is key to bringing about the desired outcomes.

The Partnership is based on the Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA) and others’ long history of research and development into effective teaching, learning, and professional development.

For information about CELA, the Partnership, or this newsletter — or to submit an article or suggest a topic — contact Janet Angelis, CELA Associate Director and newsletter editor: 518-442-5023, or jangelis@uamail.albany.edu. We welcome contributions from our partners.

Teacher Talk Is Also Essential

Eija Rougle

Every Thursday is team talk time. Laptops under arms and minds full of questions and ideas Dave, Monica, Randy, and Laurie enter the room, close the door to the busy corridor, and settle down for the highly valued collegial conversation that is about to start. For the third year, I’ve joined these conversations around Monica’s lab table at Iroquois Middle School in Niskayuna.

As a result of these talks, the team has pushed their own learning and gained new insights into what is possible for them and their students in their respective classrooms. They have also launched an action research project on critical thinking across their four subjects (including a wiki, see p. 2).

Such professional talk can be at the heart of teacher learning, powering, energizing and con-

stituting their intellectual growth. Huebner recently identified dialogue and collaboration among teachers as a key factor in teacher learning. But why talk? What kind of talk? How does it work?

Other researchers (e.g., Applebee, Langer, Vygotsky) help us to understand the critical role of language in human learning. Our words work on two levels: Through dialogue and conversation with others we enter into topics and connect with and acquire bodies of knowledge. We are energized and motivated by receiving other people’s ideas, questions, and deliberations. We add our own words in response to theirs. Then we carry what we learn from these interactions with others into our own internal dialogues, thus continuing to build our understanding of

topics that matter to us. Langer’s concept of envisionments or text worlds in the mind capture poignantly the role language plays as a mediator to learning.

References

- Applebee, A. (1996). *Curriculum as conversation: Transforming traditions of teaching and learning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Huebner, T. (2009). What research says about the continuum of teacher learning. *Educational Leadership* (66) 5, 88-91.
- Langer, J.A. (1995). *Envisioning literature: Literary understanding and literature instruction*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

LOOK FOR

An article by Dan King (Hudson MS) on an innovative social studies lesson, to appear in the May-June issue of “Middle Level Learning,” part of *Social Education*.