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Deepening Learning with Discourse:

A Guide to Bringing Inquiry Into the Classroom

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Academic Discourse and Accountable Talk

One of the most common interview questions for teachers goes something like this: If I stopped by your classroom, what would I see and hear? In more traditional classrooms, the answer would probably be: *The teacher is speaking the majority of the time. Students listen to the teacher speak and depend on the teacher for most, if not all, of the information.*

Many terms are thrown around to describe this approach to instruction: Sage on the stage. Sit and get. Chalk and talk. No matter the term, this style of classroom instruction focuses on the teacher speaking and the students passively ingesting information.

While this approach to teaching and learning may have been widely accepted in the past, one thing has become abundantly clear: in a world of TikTok and ChatGPT, the old way of teaching isn't cutting it anymore.

Igniting the curiosity of a classroom comprised of students from varying backgrounds, with varying abilities, interests, and attention spans requires a new approach entirely. How can we recapture the attention, energy, and excitement of a new generation of students? How can we take their focus off of their phones and onto our lessons? How can we help meet the needs of every learner to build career-ready students that thrive in a social media, artificial intelligence-filled world?

Enter academic discourse.

In classrooms where teachers take a discourse-driven approach to instruction rather than a teacher-centered approach, a classroom observation may look more like this: *The students are taking turns speaking, building upon one another's ideas and questions. They are having an academic discussion that is actively documented by the students themselves. The teacher is present and is making sure that the conversation stays collegial, on topic, and on task*.

Yes, the teacher is the person in the classroom who has the credentials to teach the material; however, our students come to us with rich backgrounds, histories, cultures, languages, and personal interests that offer the perfect opportunity to spark engagement and interest. In a discourse-based classroom, we actively seek to use that existing knowledge to help students make personalized connections to new ideas and concepts. By fitting new knowledge into existing schemas, students can engage in deeper, more meaningful learning.

According to **recent research published by NWEA**, "Getting students talking to one another is one of the most important things that can happen in any classroom... In talking to one another, students confront the limits of what they currently understand, build on one another's knowledge bases, and consider how learning in one context applies to work in another," (Nordengren, 2019, p.19).

Within this book, we'll share tools, techniques, and approaches you can use to bring discourse to your classrooms. Through this pedagogical approach, you can help students become effective communicators that excel in critical thinking and reasoning - skills that will benefit them across academic disciplines and prepare them for future careers. No matter your level of familiarity with discourse-driven instruction, we've designed our guide to offer helpful, actionable steps that you can use to bring academic discourse into your school or district.

Happy reading!

The Propello Crew

The Relationship between Accountable Talk and Discourse

While we've talked a bit about what discourse looks like in practice, we'd also like to briefly discuss another related concept: Accountable Talk®.

Accountable Talk® is an educational concept developed to support more meaningful discussions within the classroom. It often uses open-ended questions to encourage students to think deeply about their responses before they share them with their peers or teacher.

This approach was developed by educational psychologist Lauren B. Resnick and her peers at the University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Learning (IFL). According to **the IFL's definition**,

> **"Accountable Talk practices seriously respond to and further develop what others in the group have said. It puts forth and demands knowledge that is accurate and relevant to the issue under discussion." (IFL, n.d.)**

By requiring students to provide evidence for their answers, you ensure that all participants are held accountable for their statements. This encourages critical thinking and metacognition, which is the awareness and understanding of students' own thought processes. Challenging students to investigate **why** they believe what they believe pushes them to deeply examine their thoughts — including what they know and, possibly more importantly, identifying what they don't know.

Another definition describes the concept as

> **"A manner of conversing in the classroom setting that is respectful and meaningful for both the listener and speaker… Accountable Talk has become an essential part of classroom management that is not only a useful way for students to express their opinions, thoughts, and ideas but also as they move outside of the classroom,"** (**Resilient Educator, 2020**).

By leveraging Accountable Talk via discourse, you can promote meaningful conversations among participants. This allows you to cultivate an open exchange of ideas without judgment or criticism, allowing everyone involved to express themselves without fear of repercussions or ridicule. It also allows for further understanding in situations where it seems like a student is giving a wild answer, but in reality, they are making a connection that you may not have noticed or experienced.

Using Accountable Talk to facilitate discourse helps create an open learning environment where everyone feels comfortable sharing their thoughts without feeling intimidated or embarrassed by their peers' responses. And by fostering collaboration between students, you can create more opportunities for students to learn from each other while also developing social skills that will benefit them inside and outside the classroom.

> **"Discourse and Accountable Talk go hand-in-hand. In the classroom, one facilitates the other, allowing the teacher to monitor student understanding and application of the topic in real-time, while also building student collaborative and critical thinking skills."**
>
> **— Julie Waid, Ed.D.**
> Product Marketing Manager, Propello
> Former Educator

Understanding the Importance of Discourse in Education

Learning to compose, deliver, and defend a well-formed argument is vital for many reasons — especially because it requires students to consider a position from multiple angles.

In an article for the **Huffington Post** on the importance of developing cognitive competence, Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz, an educator and activist, points out that engaging in an argument helps students develop a "two-sided" approach.

"A two-sided argument addresses the opposing argument, rather than just arguing for one's own position," he writes. "It is crucial for more nuanced argument skills that students learn to engage in evidence-based argumentation where they can provide a claim which is supported by evidence or reasons that support the claim in a principled way," (Yanklowitz, 2017).

The importance of discourse can also be found in education standards. Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Grade 7 asks students to acknowledge alternative perspectives, while Grade 8 asks the students to acknowledge and respond to alternative perspectives.

Dr. Lyn Sharrat, author of *CLARITY, What Matters MOST in Learning, Teaching, and Leading* (2019), referenced her book in discussing this importance with us. "Impactful teachers create communities of conversation where students can test out their ideas and develop new learning alongside their peers," she explained.

"It causes a deliberate pause for us to ask and monitor, who is doing the most thinking and the most talking in our classrooms?' The answer is that student talk in classrooms must tip the scales and outweigh teacher talk. Students' voices must be heard more than teachers' voices."

"Discourse can also play a critical role when it comes to assessments. **Nordegren (2023)** describes the role effective discourse can play in helping teachers formatively assess student learning, explaining that by giving guided opportunities for students to converse and interact with academic concepts, these discussions are the "most concrete representation of students' higher order thinking."

As we can see, learning how to participate in discourse not only helps students advance their communication, critical thinking, and oracy skills, but supports deeper understanding of course materials.

Let's explore some of the research illustrating the impact discourse-based learning can have on student success.

"Children are hard-wired to talk - we know as teachers from the amount of time we spend settling classes down to 'listen'. But when we tap into children's predisposition to discuss what is in their heads, we can make magic happen. It is often said that if you can explain your learning to someone else then you truly understand it, and purposeful classroom discourse enables children to explore and build on their thinking through talk.

Academic talk should be developed right from the earliest years, for example, by setting up 'talk partners'; paired work where children can discuss learning without waiting, so maximising the amount of discourse going on at any one time. The skills of discourse can then be built on over the years so that by the end of formal schooling students can respectfully debate, counter-argue, and develop ideas in a way that prepares them for higher education, and eventually, the world of work."

— Jo Tillson
VP of Content and Curriculum for Propello
Former Educator

Diving into the Impacts of Discourse in the Classroom

Leveraging discourse in the classroom has been linked to plenty of positive outcomes. From deepening comprehension to increasing student engagement and building collaboration amongst peers, discourse deserves a place in our classrooms for a multitude of reasons.

Improving Student Outcomes

Yale's Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, (Yale University, n.d.) cites the work of psychologist Lev Vygotsky and his social learning theory as one of the earliest examples of the effect of discourse on student acquisition of knowledge: "Vygotskyian social learning theory emphasizes knowledge and conceptual gain through peer-to-peer dialogue. Vygotsky understood peers to coexist in the 'zone of proximal development,' where knowledge could be shared and misconceptions clarified through dialogue (Vygotsky, 1962).

Discourse also encourages students to think critically about different topics, which helps them understand concepts more clearly. Furthermore, it allows students to work together as a team and learn from their peers.

Zone of Proximal Development:

Popularized by psychologist Lev Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is the difference between what a learner can do independently, and what they can achieve with guidance and instruction of a skilled guide or partner.

Source: Simply Psychology

Increasing Equity

A 2008 article published in **Studies in Philosophy and Education** noted that Accountable Talk practices promote equity, support access to rigorous academic learning, and result in academic achievement for diverse populations of students. The researchers specifically cite the establishment of norms and the demonstration of risk-taking as well as the actual practice of how to speak to one another in an academic environment as essential in helping build a culture of respectful student discourse over the long term (Michaels, O'Connor & Resnick, 2007). By building this culture of risk-taking and respect, the classroom becomes an environment where every student has the opportunity to think, speak, and be heard.

Helping English Learners Thrive

While some students are comfortable speaking in class, others, such as English Learners, may not be. Using Accountable Talk when teaching English learners can help them not only practice using their language skills in an academic setting, but give them the scaffolds, practice and ultimately, confidence when it comes to using both social and academic English.

Through this practice, both English learners and their English-speaking peers, have a better opportunity to not only learn discourse, but also develop both motivation and confidence to apply it in a variety of social and academic situations (**Ardasheva and Howell, 2016**).

Creating a Supportive Learning Environment

A **2018 booklet** co-published by the International Academy of Education (IAE) and International Bureau of Education (IBE) further highlights this confidence, explaining that Accountable Talk also fosters a more supportive learning environment. This helps students feel more comfortable participating in classroom discussions and shows them how they not only have the right and the responsibility to contribute to the discussions, but how their contributions add value to the overall learning environment (Resnick, Asterhan & Clarke, 2018).

10 Tips for Implementing Accountable Talk and Discourse in Your Schools

Ensuring students' voices are heard more than the teacher's voice—giving students the floor to discuss, engage, ask, and debate—allows them to grow more comfortable asking their peers to offer insight and also helps students to be more receptive to the perspectives and opinions of others. Discourse-based lessons can also deepen student learning, helping them understand a concept fully, rather than quashing their curiosity due to the risk of feeling like they may be judged for not knowing something.

Despite the benefits of discourse-driven instruction, putting theory into practice can be challenging for many educators. Taking our own hands off of the wheel and putting students in the driver's seat means that a lesson may veer off in an unplanned direction. While this may be intimidating at first, the impact discourse has on student learning can be worth the (temporary) discomfort.

Keep in mind that discourse is a skill and practice to be honed over time, and it's not something you, or your students, will master in the first round.

That said, introducing discourse into your classroom doesn't have to be complicated. The more students practice their discourse skills, the more comfortable they will become in discussions of any type or topic and the more comfortable you'll become leading and supporting discourse.

If you're feeling a little uncertain about how to get started, we're here for you. Here are ten tips for implementing Accountable Talk in your classroom:

01. Take Time to Discuss Rules and Norms of Respectful Dialogue

Before introducing Accountable Talk strategies into your classroom, take time to discuss rules and norms with your students and explain how they will promote respect during dialogue.

The Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at Washington University in St. Louis also recommends asking students to help formulate class ground rules on the first day. According to the CTL, while students' rules will likely be similar to the ones you'd create yourself, "If they have a hand in developing these ground rules, students will be more motivated to stick to them throughout the semester" (CTL,n.d.)).

Establishing these expectations early will help ensure conversations are productive and respectful. Once you've agreed upon the rules, you might display them on posters around your classroom so you and your students can easily reference them anytime.

Example ground rules for classroom dialogue:

1. **Avoid interruptions**
2. **Understand when it's appropriate to speak**
3. **Use inclusive language**
4. **Listen actively to others' ideas.**

"We all know our youngest learners want to raise their hands and participate in class. This is prime opportunity to begin teaching the difference between 'contributing' and 'discourse.' Discourse requires a student to listen to their classmates and to be able to respond. That's really hard for a little one who has a story to tell. But we can start small by having little learners put their hands down when someone is speaking. Listen first. Acknowledge what the speaker said, and then add on. Even kinders can follow these steps with prompts. Imagine the discussions those same learners will have by the time they are in middle and high school!"

— Lisa Thayne
Lead Editorial Program Manager, Science at Propello
Former Educator

02. Model Respectful Discourse

Modeling respectful discourse and Accountable Talk is vital to helping students recognize its value.

In addition to speaking respectfully about others, allow everyone to contribute their ideas without interruption or judgment and acknowledge different perspectives as valid contributions to the conversation. It's also helpful to model specific phrases you want students to use. You might leverage sentence frames to facilitate conversations or use tech (like real-time comment boards like Padlet) or good, old-fashioned sticky notes to promote in-class discussions.

According to Alex Quigley, author of the book and blog **The Confident Teacher**, there are a few micro-moves you can enact to show your students what Accountable Talk, or what he refers to as "academic talk," looks like in action.

Micro-moves from The Confident Teacher:

Revoicing:

Repeating students' responses to clarify their insight and allow them to provide greater understanding.

Example:

"So, I think you're arguing that… is that right?"

Restating peer reasoning:

Encouraging students to restate each other's responses and reasonings.

Example:

"Student 1 thinks rainbows are caused by… Student 2, can you restate Student 1's argument in your own words?"

Wait time:

Giving students more time to think before expecting them to respond, and also waiting more time before following a student's response with a comment. (Quigley, 2022)

03. Introduce Facilitative Questioning

A facilitative question is a strategy that teachers use to center student voice as they engage in critical thinking exercises. Students can also use facilitative questions with one another to process topics within cooperative learning, to engage in reflective exercises, and to give structure in peer evaluation situations.

Traditional teaching techniques might have teachers asking students questions that confirm content was correctly observed. For example, "Did you see X?" or "Did you hear how when X happened, it caused Y and Z?" center the teacher as the source of correct content information, closes pathways to potential connections, and it does not probe students for depth of understanding.

A facilitative question should be open-ended, meaning that the response goes beyond yes, no, or reciting a prescribed answer. Open-ended questions encourage deeper thinking by requiring students to provide more thorough explanations and use critical analysis.

Additionally, facilitative questioning intentionally slows thought processes so that students can negotiate new understandings by clarifying their own ideas and comparing them to their peers' ideas.

Students who are not used to facilitative questioning may hesitate to provide ideas or reasoning at first. This is often because they've been enculturated to only speak in class if they have the correct answer.

For that reason, wait time is critical in facilitative questioning. It also helps the teacher to notice existing "funds of knowledge" that may help students make sense of the phenomena by making connections to familial, local, and cultural knowledge (**Moll and Amanti, 1992**).

"Open-ended questions can create contexts for meaningful interactions in the classroom for learning, prompting children to reason and reflect while encouraging their use of language," writes literacy coach La Niece Newkirk-Denis in an article for NC State University. "Asking these types of questions takes time and effort, as teachers need to learn how to build up their 'question banks.' I tell my teachers to think about the questions they want to ask while planning lessons so that their questions are reflective and intentional" (Newkirk-Denis, 2019).

Some examples of facilitative questioning:

What did you observe?

What did you see/hear/feel/smell?

How can we organize the things we noticed?

How do they belong together? How do they belong apart?

What questions might a scientist or engineer ask that would help to explain the phenomena?

04. Give Students Time To Prepare Ideas and Tools to Respond Appropriately

Give students ample time to critically consider topics before entering into a discussion. This way, they can organize their thoughts and form arguments based on evidence they collect from research or personal experience.

To foster better preparation, encourage students to compose points in a notebook, leverage think maps, or provide them with guided questions that help ignite ideas.

Scaffold and support an academic discussion by introducing sentence frames to help students provide evidence and an explanation for all of their hypotheses and claims, as well as use ideas from their classmates to agree, disagree, express uncertainty, and build upon their own developing understanding.

Examples of sentence frames to scaffold academic discussion:

Agreeing:

"I like how [student name] explained ___ because _____."

Disagreeing:

"I disagree with [student name]'s hypothesis because _____."

Expressing Uncertainty:

"What I think I hear [student name] saying is ___, is that right?"

Building Upon Classmates' Ideas:

"Building upon [student name]'s idea, I think another example would be ___."

Be sure to download our free printable handout with Accountable Talk sentence frames.

05. Give Students Opportunities to Give and Receive Feedback

Allowing for feedback from peers will help students further develop their argumentative skills while providing insight into alternative perspectives.

Of course, it's vital you first build a supportive and safe classroom environment and create rules around how to offer constructive feedback. Research published in **Current Directions in Psychological Science** found adolescents are especially sensitive to social evaluation, explaining why students may become self-conscious and less willing to participate in discussions when they face peer criticism or judgment (Somerville, 2013).

One way to overcome this challenge is to model constructive and respectful feedback and to reflect rather than to correct. It may also be helpful to remind students that we are giving feedback on the subject (the idea, the writing, the project, etc.) and not the person.

Examples of peer feedback:

Informal + Nonverbal:

- Fist to five (five = This is great, I understand; fist = I don't like it, I don't understand)
- Stoplight-colored response cards

Formal + Written:

- Providing a written justification of why an answer is correct or incorrect
- Completing a rubric with criteria and explanations

06. Acknowledge When Different Perspectives Are Presented

Recognizing and pointing out different perspectives presented during class discussions helps you affirm each student's contribution. This encourages further engagement in the conversation and fosters students' confidence in expressing themselves through open discourse.

Examples to highlight different perspectives:

- Restate each perspective, touching on both overlapping and opposing concepts.
- Ask students which viewpoint most closely aligns with their own.
- Ask students how they might expand on the ideas presented.
- Invite students to share additional perspectives.

07. Assign Roles For Group Discussions

Assigning roles within group discussions helps create useful parameters for discourse, allows everyone to participate, and enriches the experience for all students.

According to the **University of Waterloo** (n.d.),assigning roles allows each participant to benefit from others' strengths. Additionally, it's a good idea to periodically rotate so students better understand the value of each function.

Examples of group discussion roles include:

Recorder: This student is responsible for taking notes and keeping records.

Facilitator: This student is responsible for moderating discussions and keeping the group on task.

Reporter: This student serves as the class or group spokesperson and summarizes their conclusions.

Devil's advocate : This student raises counterarguments or alternative explanations.

08. Provide Opportunities for Reflection and Self-Assessment of Discourse Skills

Encourage students to reflect upon what they have learned throughout each class session. One way to achieve this is by asking questions about how they could have improved their argumentation skills if given another opportunity.

Example questions to encourage self-reflection:

"Knowing what you now know about the subject, how has your perspective changed?"

"If you could start the discussion over, what would you do differently?"

"Where do you think you can improve in the future?"

09. Create an Open Environment Where Mistakes Can Be Made

If you want students to excel with Accountable Talk and become more adept at discourse, it's vital you create a classroom culture where progress is valued more than perfection.

It's crucial that students aim to grow and expand their thinking rather than achieve perfectionism — particularly because this helps them stay open to new ideas and fosters a hunger for knowledge.

Take an iterative approach to learning by showing students that mistakes can be stepping stones to understanding something or solving a problem. In fact, mistakes and failures are often a necessary part of mastering a concept because they can provide even more opportunities for deeper learning.

Examples to help normalize imperfection in your classroom:

If you call something by the wrong term or attempt something that doesn't work out, point out your mistake rather than trying to breeze past it.

Share about a time when you realized you were wrong about something and how this helped you grow. It's essential students recognize that it's normal and acceptable to change their minds about something, especially when they're presented with new information.

> "Building a culture of psychological safety in a classroom is key to engaging students in meaningful discourse. Otherwise, they tend to tell you what they think you want to hear. Teachers need to model acceptance of and curiosity about students' ideas and questions. We must also recognize our mistakes and apologize to the students if we fall short of our own expectations. This vulnerability and modeling are part of building the culture."

— Katherine Hovanec, M.Ed.
Propello's Cross-Curricular Instructional Specialist
Former educator

10. Encourage Collaboration Over Competition

One of the most impactful ways to encourage meaningful discourse is to foster collaboration over competition. Provide students with space for individual expression while still feeling supported by classmates — even those who may disagree with their viewpoints.

Remind your students that discourse is a team sport where everyone's participation is valuable, and everyone's questions, contributions, feedback, and insights are welcome.

Mastering classroom discourse takes time — for both teachers and students. Don't feel discouraged if you run into challenges or your initial efforts don't drive the outcomes you were hoping to see. As with applying any new approach or idea within the classroom, give yourself grace and remember that everything takes practice.

Leveraging these ten tips can help you lay the groundwork for more meaningful conversations, healthier discourse between peers, and deeper learning for students.

"Everything about activating a child's cognitive skills begins with activating their social connectedness. Verbalizing, using language, and working with peers creates the kind of social stimulus that drives the biochemical processes that develop the learning centers of the brain."

— Pamela Cantor, M.D.
Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, Author

Next Steps and Resources

Accountable talk and discourse are incredible instructional tools when it comes to bringing engagement and curiosity back to the classroom and nurturing career-ready students.

By equipping students with these skills, you'll help them prepare to have more meaningful exchanges in social and professional environments for the rest of their lives. Supporting students in developing their abilities to engage in thoughtful discourse not only makes for more productive and respectful classroom discussions— it also enables them to be lifelong learners, critical thinkers, and better citizens of the world.

Ready to put Accountable Talk and discourse into action in your school or district? Here are a few useful resources to help:

Propello's Free Accountable Talk Sentence Stems Anchor Chart + Printables

Check it out →

Propello's Inquiry-Based and Project-Based 6-8 Science Curriculum

The Propello science program is explicitly designed for the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) and aligned with state standards. The Propello science program units each start with a phenomenon for our student scientists to observe and discuss, along with formative assessments, embedded scaffolding, translations to 100+ languages, and more.

Check it out →

Get your free account →

Propello's Discourse and Project-Based 6-8 ELA Curriculum

Are you a grades 6-8 ELA teacher interested in bringing project and discourse-based learning to your classroom?

Check it out →

Join the Test Flight Waitlist →

STEM Teaching Tools and Tools for Ambitious Science Teaching offer many resources to support critical discourse in your classroom. Two resources to get you started are:

How Can I Get My Students to Learn Science by Productively Talking with Each Other?

This guide walks through considerations to keep in mind and tips for ensuring equity in classroom discourse.

Check it out →

A Discourse Primer for Science Teachers

This primer offers high-level guidance to help you encourage students to talk about science in productive ways, both with you and with each other.
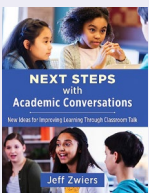
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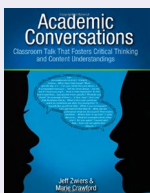
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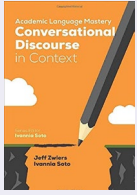
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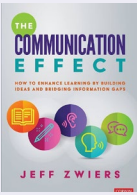
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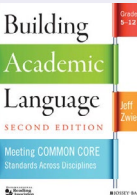
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The Communication Effect: How to Enhance Learning by Building Ideas and Bridging Information Gaps

by Jeff Zwiers

Check it out →

Building Academic Language: Meeting Common Core Standards Across Disciplines

by Jeff Zwiers

Check it out →

Propello's teaching and learning platform combines standards-aligned and discourse-driven curriculum, scaffolding and supports like language translations and leveled reading, and embedded teacher guidance to ensure every student, in every classroom, gets the first-class learning experience they deserve.

Learn how we're improving student outcomes and increasing teacher efficacy at **www.propello.com**.

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