

Steps to Better Classroom Conversations

Students need to learn how to have interesting, focused, respectful group conversations. As with all classroom procedures, discussion skills need to be talked about, role-played, modeled, practiced and monitored.

Below are suggested steps for introducing and teaching classroom conversation skills, excerpted and adapted from Barbara Stanford's "Training a Classroom in Discussion Skills." (1996)

Step 1 – Getting into place

Model how students should arrange themselves and/or their chairs for discussions. Allow them to practice doing this as quickly and quietly as possible (timing this can turn it into a fun classroom challenge).

Step 2 – Everyone contributes

Create, model and practice a routine for ensuring that every student contributes to the discussion. For young students, each child could hold a marble or stick that is put into the middle after they have had a turn. For older students, one child could be the record keeper, and record the name of each student who speaks. Students will also need to self-monitor to ensure that no one "hogs the conversation." Clear expectations and procedures for sharing time will help address this problem; appointing a "time-keeper" to monitor group process is also useful. As with literature circles, establishing "roles" within the discussion, and practicing them in advance, will foster much clearer and deeper conversations.

Step 3 – No one interrupts

Respectful discussions allow participants to finish their thoughts without being cut off. This is not an easy skill for children, especially when they are excited about learning! Using a "speaking object," such as a decorated stick, is a good practice; whoever is holding the stick has the floor until the stick is passed. You can also appoint a student the "speaking rights" monitor.

Step 4 – No put downs

Belittling someone else's thoughts quickly destroys a conversation. Having a clear "no put-downs" rule will create an atmosphere of trust in which students will take risks. As students are learning these discussion skills, if put-downs or name calling are used you may want to have a "ten seconds of silence" rule, to interrupt the cycle and let everyone re-gather their thoughts.

Step 5 – Listening for information

Students need to learn how to listen for information. Listening skills should be taught, modeled and practiced throughout the day. In a circle, each student might be asked to summarize what another student just said, to help them focus their attention and skills. If this is done explicitly for the first few weeks, students will learn to do it implicitly.

Step 6 – Connecting ideas

One of the most glaring weaknesses in discussions with young or unskilled participants is that, rather than responding to what others are saying, each speaker adds new, often unrelated, ideas. This behavior is often linked to poor listening skills, but also comes from discussions that do not have clear topic or purpose. At the beginning of the year, students might be asked to direct their comments to the person who spoke before them, so they are “talking back” instead of just talking. Model, practice and expand this skill. Discussion circles will also benefit from having a topic monitor who is empowered to intervene if the conversation wanders from the topic.

Step 7 – Summarizing

Students will also need to learn how to take information from the discussion back into their work. One way to teach and model this is to have your students write about the discussion during writing or writing center time. The prompt for this might be: “Write about one thing you learned in your discussion circle today. Did anything surprise you? Did anything make you curious?” If the students are discussing something specific, such as a book or project, the “record keeper” can be called on to give a summary of the discussion.

References:

Stanford, B. (1996). *Training a classroom in discussion skills*. Little Rock, AR: Author.