



# Capacity Building Series

SECRETARIAT  
SPECIAL EDITION #18

## Grand Conversations in Primary Classrooms

### Sowing the Seeds of Deeper Comprehension

Oral language is the foundation for the complex literacy skills that are critical to a child's success in today's knowledge society. The capacity to analyze rich text (including media and digital representations), to explore different perspectives, to negotiate meaning and to critically question authors (and authorship) are all expectations of today's literate learner. This monograph, building on Gordon Wells notion of "grand conversation," explores the kind of talk that enables students to meet these expectations and build the comprehension skills that are the foundation for high levels of literacy.

### Gentle Inquisitions Versus Grand Conversations

One talk pattern, familiar to most classroom teachers, is the "gentle inquisition" – an interaction between teacher and student(s) which is built on a series of questions and answers (Eeds & Wells, 1989). The teacher initiates a topic by posing a question, selecting one or more students to respond, providing evaluative or responsive feedback ("Right"; "Good idea, but not quite what we're looking for"; "Would you agree with that, Paul?") and then introducing his/her own ideas, interpretations and opinions. In this talk pattern, exchanges occur at a relatively fast pace between teacher and student(s) as the teacher moves from child to child and question to question. Throughout, it is the teacher who is in charge of directing the discussion, determining who will talk and what will be talked about and bringing the group to the understanding of the text (or problem) that he or she has in mind. In this pattern, the teacher retains authority for determining meaning, leaving little "interpretive space" for students (Serafini, 2008).

### Why grand conversations?

"...student engagement in discussions about text results in improved reading comprehension, higher level thinking skills, and increased literacy motivation."

(Gambrell, 2004)

April 2011

ISSN: 1913 8482 (Print)  
ISSN: 1913 8490 (Online)

The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat

The *Capacity Building Series* is produced by the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat to support leadership and instructional effectiveness in Ontario schools. The series is posted at: [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/)  
For information: [Ins@ontario.ca](mailto:Ins@ontario.ca)

## Some conversation starters for a PLC ...

What does a grand conversation sound like to you?

How do you know whether a conversation is “grand” or merely a gentle inquisition?

List the key characteristics that distinguish grand conversations from gentle inquisitions.

A different talk pattern, one which has the potential to foster higher-level comprehension of text and improve students’ attitudes to reading, is termed a “grand conversation” (Eeds & Wells, 1989). The grand conversation refers to authentic, lively talk about text. The teacher initiates the discussion with a “big” question or interpretive prompt. The talk pattern is conversational – the teacher asks fewer questions, but the questions she or he asks are an authentic response to what students are saying. Turn-taking occurs spontaneously with students taking responsibility for shaping the content and route of the discussion. Decisions about who talks, in what order and for how long, flow naturally as students and teacher alike exchange ideas, information and perspectives. During the conversation, the teacher participates as a member of the group, stepping in as needed to facilitate and scaffold the conversation, but it is the students who carve out the conversational path. The teacher typically brings closure to the conversation by summarizing, drawing conclusions or establishing goals for the next conversation or by assisting students to do this.

To be successful, grand conversations require a safe and inclusive classroom environment that can support students in freely expressing their ideas and opinions and collaboratively constructing meaning.

## Moving from Teacher-Led to Student-Led Conversations

### SELECTING A TEXT

Grand conversations can be about all kinds of texts – wordless picture books, poetry, non-fiction texts, magazine/newspaper articles, advertisements, graphic novels, photo essays, film clips, zines, blogs and so on.

Selecting a text that is rich enough to stimulate and support a grand conversation is a critical first step. The text needs to be sufficiently challenging so that it requires students to wrestle with the concepts presented; it needs to be multi-layered so that it allows a variety of interpretations and opinions. Books with interesting plots and characters, detailed descriptions and dialogue are good choices for fiction. Non-fiction texts should present content clearly and at times provide strong visual support. Poetry is also a good choice for stimulating rich discussion.

Wordless picture books and books with limited text also provide opportunities to engage students in rich conversations about text because they remove the linguistic challenges presented by written text while encouraging collaborative construction of meaning. The visual story invites students to look closely in order to make connections, draw inferences and make predictions, and to express personal thoughts, feelings and opinions. To support conversation, the pictures must be clearly and easily visible to all participants. Unless the teacher has access to a “big book” version of a wordless text, small-group structures generate the most productive conversations.

### MODELLING CONVERSATIONAL SKILLS

Initiating students into the kind of talk that fosters higher-level comprehension requires varying levels of scaffolding. Students need to be taught the skills and behaviours that will enable them to consider the ideas presented in a text, share and defend their own ideas and opinions in response to the text and build on and question ideas and opinions contributed by others.

Initially, teachers may take a more “hands-on” role, initiating the conversation with a dilemma, big question or prompt and modelling appropriate discussion skills. They need to be ready to step in just in time to contribute new questions or prompts to redirect talk that has become tangential or remind students to direct their comments to group members. Teachers need to be prepared to support students in negotiating and accepting differences in ideas and opinions about the text and building upon the ideas of others; they may also need to intervene to invite responses from quieter students and to assist students in practising appropriate turn-taking and discussion techniques.

As Wells and Arauz (2006) note, “keeping control of the floor does not necessarily entail keeping control of the content of the discussion. Although it is almost always the teacher who proposes the topic of an episode and brings it to a conclusion, the topics of individual sequences are often selected by the students, as they propose alternative perspectives on the issue that is ‘on the floor’ or react to preceding contributions by their peers” (p. 420).

Both whole-class and small-group settings provide an opportunity for the teacher to model skills and behaviours and for students to practise them with teacher guidance and support. Anchor charts about rules and norms for productive conversations can be collaboratively developed and posted for ongoing reference and revision. Over time, as students become more proficient in applying these skills and behaviours, teacher support gradually fades and students assume more responsibility for independently conducting the conversation. The teacher’s role shifts from that of *discussion director* to *discussion facilitator* to *participant* in the discussion as students gain greater independence and proficiency as conversation participants and contributors.

## RECOGNIZING RICH TALK ABOUT TEXT

A fishbowl activity can be used to help students reflect on the features of an effective conversation. Discussion group members sit in a circle facing each other as they conduct their conversation. Other class members sit in a circle around them so that they can see and hear the conversation. The teacher reads the text to (or with students) so that all are familiar with the text to be discussed. Alternatively, students in the discussion group may have read a common text while other students – the observers – have not.

Prior to beginning the activity, teacher and students review the elements of a quality conversation about text and decide on key elements to watch and listen for. If developmentally appropriate, the teacher may want to give students in the outside circle a checklist to focus their observations. In the initial stages, the teacher joins the group and initiates conversation with an authentic question or prompt, intervening strategically to encourage the exchange of ideas and support participation and turn-taking. When students in the inner circle have completed their discussion, the observers are invited to pose questions about what they have heard and provide the members of the discussion group with constructive feedback.

## Class norms for group discussion ...

- Make sure only one person talks at a time.
- Give others a chance to share their ideas.
- If you don’t agree ... say so, but be polite!
- Listen carefully! What is the speaker really saying? Has the speaker finished speaking?

(Sipe, 2006, p.290)

## What Rich Talk About Text Might Sound Like ...

Action	What it might sound like
Link to and build on others’ comments	I agree with him but I also think ... I think that’s a good idea and also ... Yes, but I also feel ...
Disagree constructively	I don’t really agree with that because ... I don’t think so because ... That’s not what I think it meant because ...
Ask for clarification	What did you mean when you said that ... I don’t understand what you’re saying. Tell me again. Can you explain that again?
Ask questions	I was wondering why ... How come ... Why do you think ...
Explain your thinking	‘Cause in the book it says ... Me and my family did something just like that when ... I think so because ... Well that’s not what I meant. What I meant was ...

Adapted from Pearson (2009)

## Examples of authentic questions/prompts ...

- What do you think the author wants us to think?
- How would the story be different if another character was telling it?
- How does the author show his point of view? Do you agree?
- What do you think was the most important thing that happened?
- What was something that confused you or that you wondered about?
- How did you feel about what happened in the story? What made you feel that way?
- Are you like any of the characters? In what ways?
- Did you agree with what (character's name) did? Why?
- What do you think will happen next? What do you think (character's name) will do? What would you do in the same situation?
- Is there someone in the book you'd like to talk to? What would you say? Why makes you want to say that?

## ASKING AUTHENTIC QUESTIONS

To begin shifting responsibility from teacher-directed to student-led talk about text, teachers model the use of authentic questions and prompts to initiate conversation and stimulate critical and reflective thinking about a text. This initial conversational move opens the floor for students to share what they are thinking and feeling and creates “interpretive space” (Serafini, 2008) for the co-construction of meaning. The teacher makes judicious use of questions and comments during the discussion to sustain the conversation and to keep moving it forward without taking over control.

Authentic questions and prompts are open-ended, “big” or interpretive in nature, so that they allow for a range of possible responses. The teacher needs to be prepared to respond spontaneously to move the discussion to deeper levels. Questions asked in response to student input encourage elaborated thinking. At the same time, the teacher models exploratory talk and appropriate discussion group behaviours and supports students as they practise these skills in the group setting (Barnes, 1976; Barnes & Todd, 1977).

## SETTING UP DISCUSSION GROUPS

The teacher organizes students so that they are seated in ways that support face-to-face interaction such as “knee-to-knee/eye-to-eye” or in a circle. The teacher then steps back from the traditional role of teacher as discussion director and moves into the role of discussion facilitator/participant in order to allow students to shape the conversation.

Teachers may also use a strategy such as “turn and talk” in order to allow students to discuss a point arising from the larger conversation and to practise engaging in the free exchange of ideas. After some talk time, two pairs of students can come together to form a discussion “square” and continue the conversation. As students are talking, the teacher should circulate, listening for the content of the conversations and scaffolding appropriate language and behaviours as necessary. When sufficient time has elapsed, the teacher pulls the group back together and invites students to share their thinking.

“Discussion triads” offer another strategy to enrich discussion. The teacher arranges students in groups of three and presents them with an open-ended “big” question or prompt to get the discussion started on a text they have just read (or have had read to them). The teacher allows students approximately three minutes to discuss the question in their triad and then brings them back together to continue the discussion, share their thinking and confront differences in understanding and opinion.

## Encouraging Students to Share Ideas

Rich conversations about text cannot be scripted and student responses are often unpredictable. Although teachers begin with a clear picture in mind of the important issues, ideas or concepts that they want students to explore, and have a plan for how to initiate this exploratory talk, grand conversations require a high degree of responsiveness on the teacher's part. In a question and answer talk pattern, the teacher responds with an evaluative comment or summary statement and then moves on to another student and another line of thinking or inquiry. Often students fail to see the relationship between these lines of thinking and do not listen to the ideas of others when they themselves are not called upon to respond, waiting instead for the next question to be posed and the next student to be called on.

In grand conversations, by contrast, the teacher invites the speaker to elaborate his or her thinking and then invites other students to link to and build on it. This is a conversational move that acknowledges the intent of a student's contribution and keeps his or her thinking "in play."

Often the teacher simply remains silent, providing "wait time" for students to formulate their ideas and reflect on their thinking and the thinking of others. The teacher monitors the pace of the conversation to allow ideas to be fully developed and explored while maintaining student interest and engagement. She or he draws out quieter students and makes sure that all students who have something to say are given a turn. It is the teacher's role to "keep the floor open," sustaining the conversation so that students have both the time and space to explore the possible meanings of a text and work collaboratively to create richer individual and collective understandings of the text.

Some ways to encourage students to share their thinking (adapted from Pearson, 2009) are suggested below:

- invite elaboration of an idea ("Uhuuh. Tell us more about that.")
- ask for clarification ("I'm not sure I understand. Is there another way you can explain that?")
- encourage new points of view ("Mmhmmm . . .so what does everyone else think?")
- invite new voices to enter the conversation ("That's interesting. I'm wondering if anyone else has an idea to share.")
- refocus the conversation ("We were trying to decide why the character acted the way he did. Any ideas?")

## Preparing Students for Discussion

A number of engaging and innovative strategies have been designed by educators to support students in thinking about the text they have read in preparation for classroom discussion. Some of these are described below.

### LITERATURE LOGS AND JOURNALS

Journals provide students with an opportunity to record their personal ideas, reactions, questions, connections and learning from their readings. Logs can be used after reading a text and before participating in discussion to provide students with the opportunity to reflect on and "ink their thinking" (Donnelly, 2007). A "picture-it journal" can be especially useful for students who are not yet able to encode and record their thoughts easily. Students use pictures which may or may not be accompanied by approximated spellings and a few sight words to capture their thoughts and feelings about the text. In later primary, a "double entry journal" offers a flexible format that allows for a range of response activities. To begin, students divide the page in half lengthwise. On the one side, they record a quote from the text or a description of a specific portion of text. On the other side, across from the entry, they record personal ideas, opinions, feelings or questions about the quote or specific piece of text.

### CONSENSUS BOARD

This advance organizer is suggested by McGee and Para (2009). After reading a rich text worthy of discussion, each student is asked to draw a picture of what aspect of the text they think should be the focus of the group conversation. Younger students can label their pictures; older primary students can write a sentence or two to explain more fully the aspect they have selected. The teacher works with the students to group the

## Productive discussions ...

- are structured and focused yet not dominated by the teacher
- occur when students are prompted to discuss texts through open-ended, authentic questions
- occur when students hold the floor for extended periods of time
- maintain a high degree of student involvement

(Adapted from Soter et al,  
2008, p. 389)

pictures and attach them to large pieces of paper, labelling each group so that students can see what was considered most important and worthy of discussion. The category with the most pictures is then used as the starting point for the group discussion.

### SKETCH-TO-STRETCH

Sketch-to-stretch (originally from Whitin, 1996; discussed in McGee & Para, 2009 ) is an activity in which students use sketches to respond to a text that has been read to, with or by them. Rather than drawing a picture to show a part of the story or the main idea of the story, students use images, words, shapes and other symbols to show what the story means to them. The teacher can have students stop at key points during a read-aloud to record their sketches or wait until the reading is complete. Students meet together in small groups to share their sketches and use them as a starting point for the group discussion. Sketch-to-stretch requires students to create an abstract representation of their thoughts, connections and reactions to a text. Additional scaffolding may be necessary for students who are very literal and want to draw a picture of their “favourite” or “most important” character in the story.

### CLOSE READING OF A TEXT PASSAGE

Close reading refers to careful interpretive reading of a short passage of literary text. Teachers select a story that is rich and interesting enough to warrant close reading by and select or invite children to assist in selecting a part of the story that seems important. In a small group, students read, reread and discuss the passage carefully in order to work out the author’s stated and implied messages and how they align with the students’ own thinking.

### TRAFFIC LIGHTS

This strategy (Marcell, 2007) can be used with students who are able to read a text independently to help them prepare for discussion. Each student in the group is provided with narrow strips of sticky note paper, two to three each of green, yellow and red. Students are directed to think of these three colours as “traffic lights.” They use the green GO strips to mark points in their text that they agree with, think are important, make a connection with, made them laugh and so on. They use the red STOP strips to mark points that they disagree with, did not like, made them upset (sad, angry, unhappy) and so on. They use the yellow CAUTION strip to mark points that they are unsure of, found confusing, left them wondering, raised questions and so on. Students are encouraged to use at least one of each strip.

## Structuring Grand Conversations

Grand conversations have many names – *literature circles*, *book clubs*, *reading response groups*, *literature discussion groups* and so on. Students come together to talk about a text they have read (or have had read to them) in order to question the text as they examine it from different points of view. Read-alouds also fuel grand conversations about text.

### TEACHER READ-ALoud

The teacher read-aloud provides a context for rich conversations at all grade levels, but especially in the primary grades when many students are unable to read more challenging and conceptually complex texts. Although teacher read-aloud can occur in a small-group setting, it is most commonly used as a whole-class activity.

In the primary grades, teachers most frequently use picture books, both fiction and non-fiction, for their read-aloud activity. As they read aloud, they bring students physically close to the text and hold it so that students can observe the pictures as the teacher reads. Students are encouraged to listen to the words and simultaneously examine the pictures in order to make sense of the text. Often the teacher interjects questions to assist students in clarifying understandings and constructing an overall understanding of the message conveyed by the text. After reading, teachers can use the read-aloud text to kick off a grand conversation. Students are asked to form a circle so that all speakers can see and hear one another. The teacher and students review collaboratively-established norms for group discussions. The teacher introduces a big question or prompt to initiate discussion and scaffolds the conversation as necessary.

### SHARED AND GUIDED READING GROUPS

Shared and guided reading groups also provide an opportunity for students to practise student-led conversation about a text. After using a shared or guided approach to read a common text, the teacher presents a big question or prompt related to the text. Following review of the class anchor chart for grand conversations, the teacher withdraws, providing an opportunity for reading group members to engage in student-led conversation stemming from the question or prompt. During this time, the teacher checks in with other students and observes the functioning of the discussion group from a distance. After a few minutes, the teacher returns to the group and joins the conversation in progress. Students are encouraged to share, explain and elaborate their thinking about the question or prompt. The teacher may assist in resolving conflicts that may have arisen as a result of conflicting opinions or procedural issues such as turn-taking and conversation domination. Before ending the session, teacher and students reflect on and assess the functioning of the group in relation to the class guidelines for grand conversations.

### LITERATURE CIRCLES

In primary classrooms, small groups of students (about three) can come together around a common theme or big idea (or umbrella question) using one or more texts. The teacher selects books for these small-group discussions based on student needs and interests. After listening to “book talks” given by the teacher, students may choose the text for their group discussion by holding a vote. Before beginning the discussion the teacher may want to introduce students to various conversational roles – such as discussion director, illustrator, word wizard and connector – as a way of scaffolding student-led conversations. Although these roles can be helpful, teachers need to be cautious that learning the role and “doing it right” do not become more important than the actual conversation and inhibit the natural exchange of ideas characteristic of a genuine conversation. The goal is for students to be able to participate in grand conversation without taking on a specific role.

### INSTRUCTIONAL CONVERSATIONS

Instructional conversations (Tharp & Gallimore, 1998) are whole-class or small-group discussions about a common text that combine instruction and conversation. They share many of the characteristics of grand conversations, but are intended primarily to help students extract information from a text. The teacher begins with a specific curriculum goal in mind – a theme, topic or concept – and facilitates classroom conversation in order to meet that goal. Teacher and students share their prior knowledge and integrate it with new information gathered from the text to extend understanding

### When teachers do read-alouds, they act as ...

- storybook tour guides who point out certain features of the text
- managers/encouragers who call on students, praise them and ask them to respond to the comments of their peers
- clarifiers/probers who connect students' comments, ask for more information or explanation
- fellow wonderers/seekers who question along with the children
- extenders/refiners of the children's responses, identifying threads of conversation that could lead to teachable moments or summarizing groups of responses to achieve closure

(Sipe & Brightman, 2006, p. 278)

of the topic or concept. Throughout, the teacher facilitates sustained discussion encouraging students to share and clarify understandings, link new knowledge to prior knowledge and consider issues presented in the text from various points of view. Again, the teacher brings closure to the conversation by summarizing, drawing conclusions or establishing goals for the next conversation.

## IDEA CIRCLES

Idea circles are heterogeneous small groups that support discussion focused on learning about a concept. Their purpose is to have students build an understanding of a concept through the dialogic exchange of facts and information (Guthrie & McCann, 1996). The goal of the discussion is to ensure that each student leaves the group with a clearer, more thorough and more accurate understanding of the target concept. Multiple concept-related texts, at varying levels of reading difficulty, are provided by the teacher. Each student reads their selected text, either independently or with a partner, for the purpose of gathering information about the topic under discussion. Students then bring their information to the circle where the information is shared, clarified, extended and debated in order to co-construct a deeper and more elaborate understanding of the concept.

## In Sum

Student engagement increases when students are given opportunities to think deeply, articulate their reasoning and listen with purpose in conversations about issues that are important to them. When teachers open up a conversation that allows students to take the lead, the classroom becomes a place where learning from one another is the norm, not the exception. Involving students in collaborative structures and teaching students how to engage in meaningful conversations about text makes a difference in student learning and achievement, supporting the development of the higher-order thinking skills which are so critical to today's learner.

## References and Related Reading

- Barnes, D. (1976). *From communication to curriculum*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Barnes, D., & Todd, F. (1977). *Communication and learning in small groups*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Donnelly, P. (2007). Inking your thinking. *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years*, 15(1).
- Eeds, M., & Wells, G. (1989). Grand conversations: An exploration of meaning construction in literature study groups. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 23(1), 4–29.
- Gambrell, L. B. (2004, Oct.). Shifts in the conversation: Teacher-led, peer-led, and computer-mediated discussions. *The Reading Teacher*, 58(2), 212–215.
- Guthrie, J. T., & McCann, A.D. (1996). Idea circles: Peer collaborations for conceptual learning. In L. B. Gambrell & J. F. Almas (Eds.), *Lively discussions! Fostering engaged reading* (pp. 87–105). Newark Delaware: International Reading Association.
- Marcell, B. (2007, May). Traffic light reading: Fostering the independent usage of comprehension strategies with informational text. *The Reading Teacher*, 60(8), 778–781.
- McGee, I., & Parra, A. (2009). Grand conversations in the classroom: A presentation for the 2009 National Reading Recovery & K–6 Classroom Literacy Conference. [http://www.readingrecovery.org/pdf/conferences/NC09/Handouts/McGee\\_Inger\\_Grand\\_Conversations.pdf](http://www.readingrecovery.org/pdf/conferences/NC09/Handouts/McGee_Inger_Grand_Conversations.pdf).
- Mercer, N. (2008). Talk and the development of reasoning and understanding. *Human Development*, 51(1), 90–100. [http://www.bath.ac.uk/csat/seminars/documents/Mercer\\_Reading.pdf](http://www.bath.ac.uk/csat/seminars/documents/Mercer_Reading.pdf)
- Pearson, P. D. (2004). Rich talk about text. [http://www.nlnw.nsw.edu.au/videos09/lo\\_Pearson/documents/Pearson.pdf](http://www.nlnw.nsw.edu.au/videos09/lo_Pearson/documents/Pearson.pdf)
- Serafini, F., & Ladd, S. M. (2008). The challenge of moving beyond the literal in literature discussions. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 4(2), 620. [http://www.coe.uga.edu/jolle/2008\\_2/challenge.pdf](http://www.coe.uga.edu/jolle/2008_2/challenge.pdf)
- Sipe, L. R., & Brightman, A. E. (2006). Teacher scaffolding of first-graders' literary understanding during read alouds of fairytale variants. *National Reading Conference Yearbook: 55*, 276–292. [ftp://yearbook.nrconline.org/55th\\_Yearbook/Sipe.pdf](ftp://yearbook.nrconline.org/55th_Yearbook/Sipe.pdf).
- Soter, A. O., Wilkinson, I. A., & Murphy, P. K., Rudge, L., Reninger, K., & Edwards, M. (2008). What the discourse tells us: Talk and indicators of high-level comprehension. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 47, 372–391. [http://quality-talk.org/pdf/Soter\\_et\\_al\\_2008.pdf](http://quality-talk.org/pdf/Soter_et_al_2008.pdf).
- Stien, D., & Beed, P. (2004). Bridging the gap between fiction and non-fiction in the literature circle setting. *Reading Teacher*, 57(6), 510–518.
- Wells, G., & Arauz, R. M. (2006). Toward dialogue in the classroom. *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 15(3), 379–428.
- Tharp, R., & Gallimore, R. (1988). *Rousing minds to life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.