



# Capacity Building Series

SPECIAL EDITION #23

## Grand Conversations in the Junior Classroom

### Why a dialogic stance?

“If an educational goal is to equip students for thinking in adult life, then discourse in school ought progressively to approximate the discourse adults engage in when they are seriously trying to understand something, to reach a decision, to solve a problem, or to produce a design.”

Bereiter, 2002, p. 361

### Supporting the Dialogue that Moves Thinking

A growing body of empirical evidence affirms the important role that oral language plays in learning (Genesee et al., 1994). As children practise listening and speaking skills, and acquire knowledge of how language works, they build not only basic literacy but their capacity for critical literacy as well. An earlier *Capacity Building* monograph drew on Gordon Well’s notion of “grand conversation” to explore the kind of talk that fosters higher-level comprehension skills in the primary years; this monograph focuses on how conversation can become a vehicle for deepening thinking in the junior grades.

In classrooms where a “dialogic stance” has been adopted, students engage in conversation in order to share, shape and improve their understanding of a text or a topic or a problem. They engage in conversation in order to move their own thinking forward.

A dialogic stance works hand in hand with student inquiry. When students pursue investigations, they develop ideas and acquire information that they want to share and debate; at the same time, the problems they encounter call for the joint consideration of alternative possible solutions, setting the stage to expand their current ways of thinking (Pantaleo, 2007; Wells, 2007). The practice of “working on understanding” thrives as students explore inquiry questions of interest to them.

Students do not enter such exchanges naturally; those new to the dialogic process need instruction on the ground rules and protocols. Although most students have lively and natural social language, the ability to think aloud and share ideas (and to

September 2011

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

Student Achievement Division

The *Capacity Building Series* is produced by the Student Achievement Division 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)

think again!) is not universal and is not necessarily linked to academic intelligence. Most students need some help to discover what dialogue is and to develop grand conversation skills (Barnes, 2008).

## A golden gut for teaching?

"Most of us teachers seem to want to believe that if we have a 'golden gut' and a 'heart for the kids' that they will collaborate skilfully (and magically) with each other in small groups. Oh so wrong ..."

Daniels, 2006

"Teaching is not about finding the magic answer and applying it. We can only be really good teachers if we're always questioning what we're doing. Great teaching is a constant quest."

Rolheiser, 2006

## How Teachers Can Support Grand Conversations

When teacher talk dominates the dialogue, students may rely on the teacher to be the expert rather than learning that they can work out their own solutions and learn from each other. Grand conversations provide students with organized and facilitated time to talk about and listen actively to one another's thinking, justify their thinking to others and reflect on what they are learning. These organized – and safe – discussion forums encourage students to share and challenge ideas. Students find that their voices, ideas and experiences are valued and contribute directly to the learning.

An ongoing issue for teachers lies in facilitating student responses without controlling the conversation; they need to anticipate responses but be flexible enough to provide room for the unexpected, the nascent thought – the diamond in the rough of an idea (McKeown & Beck, 1999). Because student talk will not necessarily lead to building meaning, strategic prompts that turn the thinking back to the group are pivotal in assuring that meaning is being built and that responsibility for creating it stays with students (Beck & McKeown, 2001).

To help strike this fine balance – between prompting and directing student responses – some strategies are suggested below:

- Monitor students' engagement as they prepare for the conversation.
- Listen to students' contributions with an open mind – conjectures and misconceptions are valuable in moving thinking.
- Acknowledge and/or paraphrase contributions (withhold evaluations).
- Ask students to restate a speaker's ideas/reasoning.
- Clarify by asking students to explain their thinking or explain it another way – *Tell me more. How else can you say that? How else can you help others understand?*
- Ask questions to surface discrepancies between what students are saying and information – *How can that be? What's up here?*
- Prompt broader participation – *Tell me more. What else might go with that idea? Would someone like to piggy-back on that idea? Would someone like to support or challenge the thinking so far?.*

To move student thinking forward, the following strategies might also be considered:

- Use wait time to allow for students' internal dialogues.
- Turn the thinking back to students – *What's the big idea here? How are these ideas connected? What might the person be trying to get us to believe? Why do you think that is?*
- To prompt further thinking on a problem, ask what might happen next as a result of an action.

(Adapted from Aukerman, 2006; McKeown & Beck, 1999, p.27; Smith et al., 2009; Wells, 2007; Lucy West at <http://edugains.ca>)

## Building Student Capacity for Internal Dialogue

As students participate in and gain skill with grand conversations, their skill with internal dialogue will similarly develop; however, it is crucial to build awareness and basic internal dialogue protocols. To model thinking strategies and practices, teachers can use think-alouds with rich oral texts/picture books/images that raise challenging issues or present difficult comprehension problems. Students might then track their interactions with the text on a chart, using the following strategies:

### *Before interaction with text ...*

- Think about what you already know about the topic.
- Consider the related big ideas.
- Scan the text for details that relate to present understanding.
- Predict what the speaker/author/artist will want you to think as a result of your interaction with the text.

### *During interaction with the text ...*

- Question, comment, re-read.
- Slow down to capture understanding.
- Refocus.
- Examine the illustrations/diagrams and other text features (pitch, tone, cadence).
- Build understanding of challenging concepts or vocabulary.
- Explore problem-solving possibilities.

### *After interaction with the text ...*

- Discuss how problems were solved and consider other strategies.
- Determine what you learned from tracking your interaction with the text.
- Examine your response to the meaning through consideration of other possible points of view.

Small group and individual coaching may be necessary to support the initial thinking about text. Having students track their internal dialogue facilitates teachers' assessment for learning as skills develop. Teachers can also routinely ask questions throughout the day in various subjects and curriculum areas that encourage students to focus on their internal dialogue – *What are you thinking?* or *How did you come to that conclusion?* to assess if and when additional scaffolding is needed.

## Sample Process for Preparing for a Grand Conversation

To implement grand conversation strategies, it is important to ensure that students consider ways to promote effective dialogue as well practise how to manage disagreement.

The following is a sample process for setting up a grand conversation:

1. **Model the initiation and flow of a dialogue** – Using a sample problem or question and working with a partner, model a grand conversation. Stopping or repeating portions will help as the class deconstructs what makes the conversation effective. Keep in mind that students need to see and experience many examples of conversation forms to grasp the characteristics and flow. Filming the encounter can be helpful for future reference. Multiple video clips of other students or adults participating in group dialogue allows for comparison, helping the class to identify characteristics of the most successful conversations. These can then be posted as class success criteria.

## Grand conversations can be risky ...

"[Students] are more eager to co-operate when they feel comfortable in their classroom and connected to their teacher and classmates. They are more willing to take risks as learners when they feel safe in their learning environment."

Charney, 1993

## Special consideration for ELLs at beginning stages of English proficiency ...

1. Having students share their thoughts and ideas in their first language encourages participation. Ideas from their conversation can be shared with the larger group by the more proficient English speaker.
2. Providing opportunities for students to practise their oral English in small groups assists the student in developing a sense of trust and belonging in the classroom.
3. Simplifying vocabulary and sentence structure supports understanding.
4. Allowing extra response time gives students opportunity to think in their first language and compose a response in English.
5. Checking frequently for comprehension assists the student with complex tasks.

Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008a

2. **Talk about differences of opinion** – Explain to the class, “You may have some differences of opinion as you work on this task. That’s okay; this is a topic that people often disagree about. But you do need to hear what everybody thinks; you may learn something that will cause you to think about your own opinion again. You might think of a good argument to support your opinion, or you might want to change it after listening to someone else. Let’s talk about how you can disagree with someone without putting that person down.”
3. **Discuss in groups the following questions – Is it always necessary for everyone to agree? How can you disagree with someone but keep the discussion going and show respect for their ideas?** – Invite members of each group to contribute to a class anchor chart of “expressions” for disagreement. The teacher can take advantage of this opportunity to expand the students’ repertoire by adding some expressions, especially the more formal ones.
4. **Work on a rich task** – Try to use the class anchor chart phrases where appropriate. Cue cards of steps and key phrases may be necessary for students to participate successfully.
5. **Provide time for debriefing** – Individual and group reflection after grand conversations provides opportunities for comparison to success criteria, celebration and goal setting for future conversations. Fishbowl re-runs of difficult and successful situations that groups encountered provide the class with an opportunity to address issues and have appropriate practice modelled again in a different way. It is also a chance to modify the anchor charts with new phrases or procedures.
6. **Differentiate instruction** – Mini-lessons and/or coaching of small groups or individuals may be necessary to scaffold conversational skill development before and/or during the next opportunity for a grand conversation.

(adapted from *Capacity Building Series* – ELL Voices in the Classroom, 2009; Daniels, 2006; Pilonieta & Medina, 2009)

## Assessing Grand Conversations

Grand conversations create contexts where students can make their thinking and understanding visible across a variety of subjects. The potential is tremendous for teachers and students alike to use success criteria to move thinking, listening, speaking and presenting to high levels.

### INVOLVING STUDENTS IN THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

When students share in the assessment process, the benefits are two-fold. The primary benefit is, of course, the student’s understanding of success criteria and learning goals in relation to their current learning and achievement. The second benefit is student engagement. Given their responsibility to look for evidence of meeting criteria and thinking about what they might consider working on next involves paying close attention to what makes an excellent grand conversation (Kennedy, 2007). Having input into the assessment process encourages students not only to come to understand the criteria for success but also to share the teacher’s vision for their learning and achievement.

As students come to understand the nature of dialogue and what it looks like in various conversation forms, it is important to give them opportunities to deconstruct oral mentor texts and to identify what makes each conversation form effective.

An anchor chart of these criteria developed with students should be available for student reference as they establish familiarity with the criteria and practise the form.

### ENSURING AN ACCURATE PICTURE OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Frequent and varied assessment helps students understand how well they are doing with respect to personal and group learning goals. Self-reflection, peer assessment and descriptive feedback are invaluable tools to ensure that progress continues. Using assessment information from multiple appropriate sources contributes to an accurate and robust picture of achievement, providing teachers and students with a clear sense of what they have accomplished and what the current focus for improvement should be.

Students' ability to listen, comprehend oral text, critically respond, build on the thinking of others, make their conceptual content knowledge visible and entertain and present various points of view can be assessed. They can be assessed on their understanding of content areas and different oral text forms. Assessment can also focus on students' presentation skills. To establish where student strengths lie and what next steps might be, teachers can use a wide variety of assessment methods. Some are suggested below:

- Observation coupled with a specific checklist is particularly useful when teachers are moving from group to group and focusing on specific behaviours.
- Filming student interaction allows teachers and students to revisit specific interactions in order to clarify what worked well, what could be improved and next steps for the conversation.
- Requiring students to hand in their preparation notes enables teachers to review the points students were prepared to speak to in response to the task, the evidence they collected and their anticipation of questions and possible rebuttals.
- Students' summaries of the discussion can help teachers track the group's thinking. This might entail assigning two or more students to make notes about the conversation as it happens. The group would then verify the summary and sign off on the assignment.
- Regularly scheduled teacher-student conferences provide an opportunity for students to engage in self-assessment and set personal learning goals based on feedback.

### BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

It is important that assessment *for* and *as* learning reflect an "asset based" orientation. Feedback should always build on students' strengths, outlining where success criteria are largely being met and indicating one or two "most important things" to work on next. Keeping personal learning goals manageable supports focused use of time, attention and energy, increasing the likelihood that they will be achieved.

Learning goals for grand conversations may relate to:

- use of dialogic process
- ability to communicate using such elements as tone, gesture, volume, cadence and word choice as the task requires
- understanding of content/topic(s)

### In accountable talk, who are we accountable to?

#### *To the learning community ...*

Participants listen carefully to one another, build on each other's ideas and ask each other questions to clarify or expand a proposition. They make concessions and partial concessions and provide reasons when they disagree/agree.

#### *To the standards of reasoning ...*

Participants emphasize logical connections and drawing reasonable conclusions. Their talk involves explanation and self-correction, often searching for premises rather than simply supporting or attacking conclusions.

#### *To knowledge ...*

Participants get their facts right and make explicit the evidence behind their claims or explanations. They challenge each other when evidence is lacking or unavailable.

Adapted from Michaels,  
O'Connor & Resnick, 2007

# Choosing a Venue

## for Grand Conversations

Grand conversations come in a variety of shapes and forms. Strategic choice of an appropriate venue must take into consideration the content being explored as well as the interests, skills and experiences of the participants.

### INQUIRY CIRCLES

- small groups formed to discuss a topic, usually using non-fiction or informational text
- discussion supports both individual and larger class inquiries
- understanding of a target concept built through the exchange of facts and information

Multiple concept-related texts, in various forms and formats, are used so that a broad perspective can be brought to the issue. Each student navigates their selected text 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 it is shared, clarified, extended, compared and contrasted across sources and debated in order to co-construct a rich response to the students' inquiry question and/or larger unit inquiry.

### RECIPROCAL TEACHING

- small groups brought together to make sense of a text
- some knowledge of comprehension strategies required to support their thinking
- understanding clarified, big ideas identified

Students come together for the discussion of a text they have read. Students support one another by clarifying confusing pieces, responding to questions and comparing predictions. Students then collaboratively highlight the main ideas, key points and conclusions. The team organizes the reading for the next meeting. Sometimes roles are assigned such as *summarizer, questioner, predictor, clarifier*.

### LITERATURE CIRCLES

- small groups brought together around a common theme using one or more texts
- members' thinking used to construct a collective response to the big idea, rich problem or umbrella question

Conversation roles such as *discussion director, illustrator, word wizard* and *connector* originally characterized this venue; however, a recent update by the author, Harvey Daniels (2006), suggests that using these roles can result in stilted conversations that fail to maximize potential learning opportunities. With broadening classroom attention to instruction in the comprehension strategies, Daniels suggests that students code the text with their thinking (on stickies or thinkmarks) as they read, not unlike reciprocal teaching. They can use their notes to develop a thinking journal response about how they pulled meaning from the text, areas that were confusing, questions, judgments, predictions and critical thinking about point of view and its impact. These notes can be used as a basis for circle conversations.

### QUESTION THE AUTHOR

- whole class, small groups or individual students (in internal dialogue)
- author's perspective addressed
- deeper understanding achieved about the meaning and impact of the text

Although Beck and McKeown (2001) introduced this dialogic form to support students as they navigated history textbooks, the approach can be used with any text form. Questions are posed to encourage dialogue – *What is the author trying to say? ... What does the author want the reader to believe? ... What does the author want us to know? ... What might the author have left out? ... What is the author setting up? ... What's happening here? ... What is confusing here? ... Why? ... Who might have a different point of view? ... How would the message differ if the author had been...?* Students then bring their ideas and evidence to the small/whole group for discussion to build consensus around the meaning and impact of the text.

### MATH OR LITERATURE CONGRESS

- capitalizes on constructivist methodology through whole-class conversation
- based on instructional strategy developed by Fosnot & Dolk (2002) for learning mathematics
- enables focus on a few big ideas derived from present student thinking

Teachers begin by solving the problem or task themselves, anticipating as many possible student responses as they can. Through observation of students working,

and review of student work samples, they think ahead to the ideas and strategies that could be discussed in the congress – *How do these ideas and strategies relate to the lesson goal? How do they build on previous discussions? Which ones can be generalized? How might generalization be provoked?* They then construct a possible sequence for the discussion of the students' work so that it serves as a scaffold for learning. The role of the teacher during whole-class discussion is to develop and to build on the personal and collective sense-making of students rather than to simply sanction particular approaches and conclusions as being correct or demonstrate procedures for solving predictable tasks. Students share their strategies, listen to the ideas of others, question what they do not understand and defend their thinking.

### ○ CLASSICAL DEBATES

Each side gives: (1) an opening argument, (2) a rebuttal and (3) a closing argument. To ensure that multiple perspectives are represented, conciliators may be appointed to offer alternative or conciliatory positions to the original, potentially extreme, positions. Students may also be asked, as part of the preparation process, to organize arguments for two (or more) sides before being assigned to a particular side (Kennedy, 2007).

### ○ FOUR CORNERS

Students respond individually to a position statement by moving physically to one of four spaces in the room labelled: "strongly agree, strongly disagree, agree, disagree." Once there, the students who have chosen the same corner work together to create arguments for their position. After each group defends its position, students can relocate to the space that best represents their opinions if they have changed. Depending on the purpose, the process may be repeated until consensus is achieved or the group can summarize the best arguments and agree to disagree (Bennett & Rohlheiser, 2001; Kennedy, 2007).

### ○ FISHBOWL DEBATES

Fishbowl divides the class into three groups: experts for each side of an issue and the audience. In this venue, chairs are arranged in a circle in the center of the classroom to create the fishbowl while the rest of the chairs surround this circle. Each side has a turn discussing the issue with their fellow group members while sitting in the fishbowl. The audience also takes a turn in the fishbowl and attempts to come to consensus on the issue or question. The groups can rotate several times through the fishbowl. The advantage of this type of debate is that the opponents and the audience hear the thinking being developed by each group and can then respond or clarify during their turn (Kennedy, 2007).

### ○ THINK-PAIR-SHARE DEBATES

Students first think and note ideas individually in response to a problem/issue. They then work in pairs to create lists of reasons to support the possible sides. Next, two pairs work together to come to consensus on which side they wish to support and refine their list of reasons for that side. Finally, each group of four students shares its conclusion and rationales with the whole class (Bennett & Rohlheiser, 2001; Kennedy, 2007).

### ○ ROLE-PLAY DEBATES

Students are assigned individually or in teams to represent a stakeholder in the issue (Kennedy, 2007). For example, if the inquiry question is *Should diamonds be mined in the James Bay Lowlands?*, students may be assigned to groups representing mining companies, jewellers and users of industrial diamonds, local politicians concerned about employment opportunities and prosperity, citizens living close to the mine site and environment and animal protection groups concerned with the environmental impact. This venue allows students to investigate an issue or problem by considering different perspectives.

## Some considerations in choosing a venue ...

- Conversation venues can be piggy-backed to maximize learning in an integrated exploration of content (e.g., an inquiry circle, literature circle or reciprocal teaching venue might be more appropriate prior to any form of debate).
- Social media tools like class tweets, moodles and on-line discussion boards can be used to increase student engagement.
- Over-use of a conversation venue can lead to loss of student interest and impact negatively on potential learning.
- Learning can be compromised when the students' need for practice in a particular venue eclipses the content they are being asked to cover.
- The venue might not lend itself to the exploration at hand.

## Student discussion groups need more than a good launching ...

"We now realize that peer-led [discussion] groups need much more than a good launching; they require constant coaching and training by a very active teacher who uses mini-lessons and debriefings to help kids hone skills like active listening, asking follow-up questions, disagreeing agreeably, dealing with "slackers" and more."

Daniels, 2006

## Some tips for engaging in dialogue ...

- Listen with an open mind.
- Consider partners/group members as sources of information.
- Ask questions.
- Don't interrupt the speaker.
- Be willing to reconsider your point of view after hearing others speak.
- Focus on the topic.
- Offer new ideas and possibilities.
- Build on what others are saying and offer support.
- Don't make it personal when you disagree or challenge a comment.
- Be willing to clarify and explain your point of view.

adapted from Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008b

## References and Related Resources

- Auckerman, M. (2006, Oct.). Who's afraid of the big "bad answer"? *Educational Leadership*, 64(2), 37-41.
- Barnes, D. (2008). Exploratory talk for learning. In N. Mercer & S. Hodgkinson, (Eds.). *Exploring talk in school* (pp. 1-15). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Beck, I., & McKeown, M. (2001). Inviting students into the pursuit of meaning. *Educational Psychology Review*, 13(3), 225-235.
- Bennett, B., & Rolheiser, C. (2001). *Beyond Monet: The artful science of instructional integration*. Toronto: Bookation.
- Bereiter, C. (2002). *Education and mind in the knowledge age*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Charney, R. S. (1993). *Teaching children to care: Management in the responsive classroom*. Greenfield, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.
- Daniels, H. (2006). What's the next big thing with literature circles? *Voices from the Middle*, 13(4), 10-15.
- Dockrell, J., Stuart, M., & King, D. (2004, Sept.). Supporting early language skills. *Literacy Today*, 16-17.
- Genesee, F. Lindholm-Leary, K., Saunders, W.m., & Christian, D. (Eds.). (1994). *Educating second language learners: A synthesis of research evidence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Katula, R., & Martin, C. (1984). Teaching critical thinking in the speech communication classroom. *Communication Education*, 33, 20-27.
- Kennedy, P. (2007). In-class debates: Fertile ground for active learning and the cultivation of critical thinking and oral communication skills. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* v19(2). p 183-190.
- Ketch, A. (2005). Conversation: The comprehension connection. *The Reading Teacher*, 59(1), 8-13.
- McKeown, M., & Beck, I. (1999, Nov.). Getting the discussion started. *Educational Leadership*, 25-28.
- Michaels, S., O'Connor, C., & Resnick, L. (2008). Deliberative discourse idealized and realized: Accountable talk in the classroom and civic life. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 27, 283-297.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2005). *The Ontario curriculum, Grades 1-8: Mathematics*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2008a). *Supporting English Language Learners: A practical guide for Ontario educators, Grades 1 to 8*. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2008b). *Guide to effective literacy instruction, Grades 4 to 6 - Volume Four, Oral language*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2006). *The Ontario curriculum, Grades 1-8: Language*.
- Pantaleo, S. (2007). Interthinking: Young children using language to think collectively during interactive read-alouds. *Early Childhood Education*, 34(6), 439-447.
- Pilonieta, P., & Medina, A. (2009). Reciprocal teaching for the primary grades: "We can do it too!" *The Reading Teacher*, 63(2), 120-128.
- Rolheiser, C. (2006, Autumn). Quoted in M. Wells. A constant quest. *University of Toronto Magazine*, pp. 20-26.
- Smith, M., Hughes, E., Engle, R., & Stein, M. (2009). Orchestrating discussions. *Mathematics Teaching in the Middle School*, 14(9), 549-556.
- Wells, G. (2007). Semiotic mediation, dialogue and the construction of knowledge. *Human Development*, 50, 244-274.
- 
- Ontario Ministry of Education's Capacity Building Series**  
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/capacityBuilding.html>
- Grand Conversations in Primary Classrooms (2011)  
Communication in the Mathematics Classroom (2010)  
ELL Voices in the Classroom (2009)  
Let's Talk About Listening (2009)