

How to Have a Good Conversation: By Fifth Graders at Aspen Creek K-8

with Marjorie Larner and Their Teachers, Andrea Cipoletti and Debbie Deem, Colorado

“No one has yet fully realized that wealth of sympathy, kindness and generosity hidden in the soul of a child. The effort of every true education should be to unlock that treasure...”

Emma Goldman

In spite of all the other pressures on teachers and students, we still find sparks of sympathy, kindness and generosity in the classrooms where teachers collaborate and think together and where they embed this thinking and collaboration into their instructional practice with students.

For several years the Boulder Valley School District has supported a variety of in-school and cross-district collaborative groups. Debbie Deem and Andrea Cipoletti, fifth grade teachers at Aspen Creek K - 8, have taken part in nearly every one of these opportunities to work with other teachers to explore aspects of best practice instruction.

This fall they wanted to more intentionally use their learning from their collaborative experiences to help their students engage in similarly meaningful reflection and conversation. They wanted to guide their students to break through the routine of contrived book discussions to real talk that touched them deeply, changed their thinking, expanded their views, strengthened their relationships.

Drawing on a clear philosophical stance in regard to teaching for understanding, that learning is thinking, and that we learn through seeing models and through interaction with our resources and with each other, Debbie and Andrea spent part of each afternoon with their students engaged in ever-deepening conversations about nonfiction short texts and books, in pairs and small groups.

They began this effort by modeling a conversation about an article from “Time for Kids” for their combined classes. Their main goal was to show their students an authentic conversation, with interactions between them that led to new knowledge, changed understanding, new ideas. After the first modeled conversation they asked the kids what they had noticed that made it a meaningful conversation. This provided the first guidance for the kids’ own conversations. The students volunteered what they would now do differently in their own conversations:

- Ask more questions.
- Try and think more.
- Use notes as a starting point for conversation.
- Don’t just change ideas when someone shares—add on to theirs.
- Listen to what my partner says and respond.

From there the kids were off and running in conversations about a variety of nonfiction topics based on short articles and books, chosen to include topics the kids otherwise might not choose or know about, with an eye to expanding their interests in the world. At each step along the way Debbie and Andrea have asked students to reflect on whether and how their thinking and learning was impacted by the conversation with their classmates. The kids have expanded their initial ideas, generating long ongoing lists of advice, cautions, suggestions and promises of encouraging outcomes. When we told them we were writing an article about their thinking and conversations, Matt exclaimed, “We’re teaching the teachers.”

Indeed, as we read through each day’s reflections, they remind us of what is supported in adult CFG’s through norms and protocols. They remind us to carry these principles of good conversations with us throughout the day with all our colleagues. Following are the lessons and experiences from 60 kind and generous fifth graders.

Advice on how to ensure you have a good conversation:

- Don’t get distracted.
- Respond to each other; don’t just list your ideas.
- Ask each other questions and see if you can answer someone’s question
- Share background knowledge.
- Don’t interrupt each other.
- Don’t argue if you disagree on something.
- Listen to your partners when they are talking and help them when they are confused.
- Take turns reading your notes about your thinking and then talk about it.
- Look at each other.

Advice from what we did when we had a good conversation:

- We worked well because some of that stuff is very interesting.
- We had some background knowledge about other topics so that helped.
- We explained why we thought something and we learned more.
- Sometimes we both had the same thing but we still had different thoughts. For example, the water buffalo weighed 2000 pounds. She did not think that was a lot for a bison and I did.
- We understood each other and agreed and disagreed.
- We had different emotions.
- We stayed on it—stopped and thought about what each other said—one of us said a comment and then another said one that related to it—built on each other's ideas and questions.
- We used our notes to remind us of what we had thought when we read.
- We helped each other with pronouncing names.
- We talked back and forth. We shared our thoughts. We told about some of our experiences.
- We got to share each other's thinking, questions, answer, reasons sometimes we would disagree.
- We added on to each other's questions, explaining it better.
- We talked about things we knew and didn't know.
- We sat close enough together so that we could have a good conversation.
- We left questions open.

Cautions—challenges that came up:

- My partner and I had a hard time knowing what to talk about.
- When we didn't get something it was hard if no one did and so we didn't get the answer to our questions.



Illustration by Galen Roda

- It was sometimes a challenge to think of what words to say.
- We were talking most of the time but my partner and I aren't the best of friends so it was pretty hard to talk to somebody I don't really know all that much.
- Our biggest challenge was staying on topic.
- It was too *long* because the book was BORING.

Advice: how to improve your conversation on the spot:

- ...at first we just went back and forth reading our facts and then after a little while we started looking at the book and we talked a lot more than we had about the facts we wrote down.

- Listen to each other, give each other information.
- Take turns on your conversation.

We asked each other questions and tried to help each other answer them—referring to text, background knowledge, inferring, asking more questions.

- ...I was trying hard to converse with my partner and I was seriously learning some new stuff from him and asking him questions about what he said.
- ...we had a great chat then we started to talk about different things. But we snapped out of it.

What we got from our conversations:

- We talked about what we would do if we were in a drought. We also talked about what the people might have done in the dust bowl. We talked about what happened to us in the drought we had a couple years ago.
- We had a lot of stuff in common. We both thought the same things were funny because they were funny. We could connect to what each other was saying.
- We talked about different things that we both didn't know and we shared questions and got an answer! Also found out things that one of us knew and the other didn't.
- We shared background knowledge—got to know each other a little better.
- We added ideas to each other's ideas

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Students at the Center...

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that weren't in the article or in our notes, took it someplace different.

- If you didn't get something, you get to see their perspective.
- Knowledge grew—much bigger thinking.
- Got more knowledge of things I didn't understand.
- We laughed a lot.
- We probably could have talked about swamp life forever!

What the teachers noticed the kids get from these conversations that are part of their educational goal:

- Laughter and fun. They like to talk. They are first and foremost interested in talking with each other about new information.
- Meta-cognition: students were able to identify themselves along a continuum from a conversation that is stilted and parallel with listing of facts from text, to a conversation that could go on forever as they keep expanding on each other's thoughts and generating new questions.
- Facts about topics and clarifying misconceptions and confusion.
- Talking with each other helps them to naturally use strategies of proficient readers—share background knowledge to support inferences about meaning of facts; highlight what is important or interesting.
- Fluency – oral and written: The kids' reflections began with parroting of language and ideas generated by the class and teachers. We have seen their reflections become more detailed and easy with practice. Now more and more students are writing reflections with distinctive voices and their own ideas about both the process and the content of their conversations.

We keep returning to the initial key ideas students identified: simply listening and being interested in your partners' ideas along with your own. Adding to and deepening, correcting, and clarifying—knowing more, thinking more, connecting with each other more. The classrooms are buzzing with the hum of many conversations, now spreading to every part of the day. □

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It Is Not Rocket Science...

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meaningful contexts helps Black male students acquire language skills that empower them to use language in telling their stories while simultaneously mastering the skills and demonstrating academic excellence through reading and writing.

What does all of this mean for the middle or high school teacher of English working in an urban classroom teaching Black male students? In my mind it means that we, whether we be black or white or yellow or red, need to know who we are in relation to the dominant culture, and how we operate in that dominant culture. We need to be clear about what we believe to be the purpose of education. We need to love Black male students enough to struggle to successfully teach them the literacy skills they need to be successful in the oppressive American society in which we live. I heard an African woman on WBAI state that we need to look at other people as our "other" selves. If we look at Black males as future, current or potential criminals, we are not seeing them as our "other" selves and we cannot teach them. If we cannot look at, and love, a Black male student who is looking hostile, wearing baggy, sagging jeans with his underwear showing and see him as a person connected to us, then we should not and could not be successfully engaging him.

Dr. Tatum's book *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males* approaches the challenge of teaching literacy from the inside. In his book he includes texts, essential questions, and lists of books as well as charts of how and when and in what context to use certain skill-development and assessment tools. Dr. Tatum demonstrates strategies that make the theories, instruction and transfer of skills live in real time in authentic ways in the high school classroom. Aside from the acquisition of skills and the practice of theory and instruction, Dr. Tatum challenges teachers to be activists. The question that remains is: Do we have the will and the courage to truly interrupt and transform public school cultures and our classroom practices in ways that will resonate with and engage Black males in learning, in a variety of challenging ways that will be meaningful in their eyes? This challenge is both a personal one and a group mandate. We must look inside ourselves and examine our personal beliefs and practice while connecting with others to bring out the genius that resides inside each Black male student. □

For more information about essential readings and questions suggested for teaching African-American Males visit our website at www.nsrharmony.com/connections.html
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