

Intentional Instructional Moves

Strategic Steps to
Accelerate Student
Learning

Companion Guide

Chapter 17: Intentional Step Four



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Intentional Step Four: Promote Student-to-Student Discourse

Students might be hesitant at first to initiate conversations with their peers, especially if they aren't accustomed to engaging in academic discourse with other students. The goal is to find strategies that promote peer-to-peer conversations. If students see their peers as resources for information, ideas, and guidance when they get stuck, then they will be less likely to turn to the teacher for those needs. Teachers should reinforce a culture of help-seeking and create a safe space where students' ideas are welcomed and accepted. This reaffirms the notion that they will often end up with a better answer when everyone contributes ideas and solutions.

Strategy 1: Literature Circles

Students come together in small groups to discuss a text, but instead of being guided by the teacher, the students lead the discussion. If one student dominates the conversation, the teacher can help redirect questions to other group members. If students get stuck or run out of things to talk about, the teacher can also model how to seek help from their peers or deepen the conversation. Literature Circles can be enhanced by graphic organizers, or digital apps like Voicethread and FlipGrid.

This strategy helps build accountability among group members. According to Lauren Resnick, a professor and researcher at the University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Learning, accountable talk occurs when students agree to hold each other accountable for the quality of the conversation (Allen, 2008). This means they will listen respectfully to their peers, help each other stay on topic, recognize and challenge misconceptions, justify new ideas and challenges, ask peers to explain and clarify, ask for evidence when peers make claims or arguments, and

interpret and revoice peers' ideas (Allen, 2008). As the teacher releases responsibility to group members to direct the conversation, students must practice effective discourse skills to accomplish the task along with social and communication skills. Literature Circles also improve reading comprehension and language skills and reinforce peer-to-peer help-seeking (.72).

Strategy 2: Fishbowl Discussion

Students read a text and prepare for discussion by writing a list of thoughts and questions about the reading. In class, the teacher randomly selects a small group of students to form a discussion group in the middle of the room. The rest of the class forms a circle around that group. The teacher reminds students of discussion norms and guidelines, then selects a group leader or facilitator who will begin the discussion by sharing one idea or question. The rest of the group then responds to the question and shares their ideas and questions. The group facilitator can help decide on a main topic for the discussion and keep the other group members on task. As the group talks, the students sitting outside the fishbowl observe the conversation and take notes on points they agree or disagree with, examples of discussion norms, and other assessments of the group's dynamics. The teacher also sits outside of the group and observes and takes notes. At the end of the discussion, the class will debrief by sharing the outside students' ideas, observations, and questions. At first, the teacher might need to serve as the group facilitator, but as students gain more experience and confidence, the teacher can hand this role over to students. Teachers should also plan to incorporate this strategy throughout the year so all students can try different roles.

The Fishbowl strategy might seem intimidating at first, but it's a great way to get students talking to each other without relying on the teacher. Once they learn the ropes, students often

enjoy this activity and take it seriously, as they know their peers will be watching them. If students veer off topic or are struggling to move beyond surface level thinking, teachers can sit back and wait before intervening. If they do need to step in, they should model how to redirect the conversation or deepen students' inquiry. Again, as they become more comfortable with the exercise, students will often realize the issue on their own and work together to solve it.

Student-led discussions create space for students to talk about issues and ideas that matter to them. They also encourage students to engage in productive struggle as they figure out how to have meaningful conversations about a topic without the teacher's prompting. This often leads to better social and communication skills, self-management, and teamwork.

Strategy 3: Socratic Seminar

Students prepare a list of questions about a topic ahead of time. In class, students sit in a circle facing each other. Similar to the Fishbowl exercise, the group leader poses a question to start the conversation. Students will then discuss answers to the question and pose additional questions. They should use relevant sources and materials to support their answers with evidence. As students are talking, they should be encouraged to summarize and paraphrase other's ideas and ask for clarification if they don't understand something. They can also ask probing questions to help deepen the conversation. If there's a lull in the discussion, the group leader can call on group members to share their questions and/or responses. The leader can also direct students back to the text for evidence, remind them of discussion guidelines, and prevent dominant students from taking over. At the end, students complete a writing prompt that asks them to summarize the main points of their conversation and evaluate the process (AVID).

At first, the teacher will need to facilitate these seminars. Over time, they can gradually release support and delegate student leaders, intervening only when necessary to redirect or involve reluctant students. Additionally, teachers will need to start small, with brief conversations, and eventually build up to longer, more in-depth discussions.

Like the Fishbowl, Socratic Seminars help students become more comfortable participating in and facilitating classroom discussions (.82) with their peers. They must take responsibility for their role in the conversation and be mindful and respectful of their classmates. Proficiency in group dynamics is a highly desirable professional skill, one that will benefit them in many avenues beyond the classroom.

Strategy 4: Discussion Mapping

Building on the Fishbowl and Socratic Seminar strategies, teachers can use the concept of an inner and outer group to map the discussion. For instance, a group of students can form an inner group to discuss a particular topic. The rest of the class will sit in an outer circle around them and observe. The inner group is in charge of directing the conversation, with little to no intervention from the teacher or other students. As the students discuss their topic, the teacher has a large sheet of paper with the names of the group members on it. Each time someone talks, the teacher draws a line to show where the conversation went (from the first speaker, to the second, to the third, and back to the first, etc.). At the conclusion of the discussion, the teacher holds up the discussion maps to illustrate what happened during the conversation. Did one student talk more than others? Did the conversation tend to flow in a certain direction? Was that beneficial? Why or why not? How could we change that? Once the teacher has demonstrated this evaluation technique, they can then designate a student to map the discussion.

Additionally, the teacher can ask students to map the quality of what was said during the discussion. For instance, the teacher can assign specific students to track different speakers in the group. Each time a speaker says something, the student assigned to that speaker records it. During the reflection period, students will share their notes about what was said and the class can assess the depth and quality of the conversation.

Discussion Mapping is a valuable tool for the assessment period at the end of a discussion (Dearie & Kroesch, 2011). It gives teachers and students specific evidence of what happened during a conversation, which they can then use to analyze the strengths of the discourse and offer constructive feedback on areas that can be improved. This kind of reflection helps students develop their reasoning, self-efficacy (.92), self-discipline, and growth mindset.