

Background Information On Classroom Discourse

From our own experiences in learning and teaching situations, we can all recognize the important role that conversation, discussion—TALK—plays in any socially connected group of learners. It is through such *discourse* that the meaning-making needed for the development of ideas and concepts can be accomplished. From the sociocultural viewpoint, learning occurs through discourse within social interactions (Rogoff, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky emphasized the importance of discourse by arguing that higher mental functions have social origins that are first expressed between individuals *before* they are internalized within the individual—that learning relies on discourse. For students, engaging in discussions and conversations can foster more creative, complex thinking and enable them to practice crucial abilities, such as asking questions and communicating ideas effectively. For teachers, all manner of talk and discussion in the classroom provides a window into students' prior knowledge, skill-level, personality, previous experience, and ability to articulate ideas and reasoning. Such discourse happens in many ways.

Reflective Discourse.

When a teacher facilitates a conversation where students, as well as the teacher, pose questions, respond to one another's comments and questions, and seek to understand each other, this exchange can be referred to as reflective discourse. The student has the freedom to express his or her own thoughts, ideas, and questions while authentically engaged and curious about the subject of the discussion. The teacher and students can thus engage in a free-flowing exchange, asking and answering one another's questions, and trying to understand the thinking of the other person (van Zee & Minstrell, 1997).

Dialogic Instruction

In a dialogically organized classroom, the teacher uses reflective discourse to validate and elaborate upon student ideas and guides them to "negotiate" their understanding with the other students in the class. The teacher uses strategies such as uptake (Collins 1982) where a particular student's response is incorporated into a question to the group, in order to encourage students to build on others' ideas. The emphasis is on creating a "give and take" where student responses help shape the course of the discussion, as opposed to relying on the teacher asking questions to drive the exchange. A dialogic approach to instruction is often characterized by the use of broad questions, which do not have pre-specified answers and therefore convey a genuine interest in students' opinions and thoughts. The discourse in these classrooms is therefore less predictable and repeatable because it is jointly determined – in character, scope, and direction – by both teachers and students as teachers pick up on, elaborate and question what students say (Nystrand, 1990a, 1991a). Dialogic conversations engage students because they validate the importance of students' contribution to learning and instruction. The purpose of dialogic instruction is not so much the transmission of information through the teacher, as the interpretation and collaborative co-construction of understandings by the students themselves (Gamoran & Nystrand, 1992).

Monologic Instruction.

In what has been called monologic instruction, also termed a "teacher monologue," the teacher explains, describes, clarifies, identifies, and questions. In this type of instruction the main goal is for the teacher to present views and explanations. The teacher is doing most of the talking, although whose turn it is to talk may alternate between

teacher and students. Monologic instruction can be criticized for reducing opportunities for students to derive and articulate their own understanding of ideas. It can also be criticized for expressing the viewpoint that knowledge is obtained primarily from the teacher (or another expert source), and for not giving students the opportunity to learn by thinking, and exchanging and evaluating ideas against evidence as professionals do. Monologic instruction may be a fine method to achieve learning that consists of memorizing facts and information, but it can hinder a deeper more conceptually focused type of learning for students.

I-R-E and I-R-F

Of course, there are variations in teacher directed talk. In one pattern, abbreviated as I-R-E, the teacher initiates the conversation with a question or comment (I), the student responds (R), the teacher evaluates the response (E), and then repeats the pattern with another question (Lemke, 1990; Mehan, 1979).

IRE example:

Teacher: Is this a solid, liquid or gas? (Initiate)

Student: It's a liquid. (Respond)

Teacher: Yes, it is a liquid. It takes the shape of its' container. (Evaluate)

Teacher: What about this one, is it a solid, liquid or gas? (Initiate)

Student: It's a liquid too. (Respond)

Teacher: No, this one is a solid. (Evaluate)

The student responses may be short answers, while the teacher's evaluations of the responses may be long and elaborate. In another variation, often called I-R-F the teacher initiates the conversation with a question or comment, the student responds, the teacher seeks follow-up ideas and comments from the students, then the pattern repeats with response and follow up (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975).

IRF example:

Teacher: Is this a solid, liquid or gas? (Initiate)

Student: It's a solid (Respond)

Teacher: What makes you say that it's a solid? (Follow-up)

Student: Because it holds its shape. (Respond)

Teacher: You're right, it is a solid. (Evaluate)

In both cases, the turn-taking switches back and forth between teacher and student regularly, and the teacher directs the conversation and makes knowledge public. Again, these patterns often fail to provide students with opportunities to articulate their own understanding and express themselves in the language of the discipline (Alexander, 2005 ; Wellington & Osborne, 2001). On the other hand, such interactions can be a way to extend the student's answer, to draw on its significance, or to make connections with other parts of the student's total learning experience (Wells, 1999)

Peer-to-Peer Discourse

Peer talk occurs in pairs or groups of students where adults are either not present or are refraining from full participation in the discussion. Researchers believe that having a more equal structure for participation in a discussion (i.e. when the teacher acquiesces control to the students) promotes more active cognitive involvement, as students may

not be as intimidated from freely expressing their ideas. (Rogoff 1990, Piaget 1977)
Recent studies on discourse patterns have found that talk with other children can help provide the opportunity for the kinds of social interactions that help support student learning (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2004).

These various patterns of talk are neither intrinsically good nor bad; their merits and demerits come from the reason and ways they are used to support and achieve intended goals. In teaching, there is often tension between the teacher imparting information and directing the conversation to communicate the content and "holding themselves back" in the conversation in order to encourage children to develop their own ideas, and for everyone to voice their views.