WHO'S DOING THE MOST TALKING? WHO'S DOING THE MOST THINKING?

Accountable Talk: A High-Impact Instructional Approach K-12

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DR. LYN SHARRATT

The "Providing CLARITY" Series

Wonderings

How do we ensure all teachers and leaders know the research about, the impact of, and how to use Accountable Talk across all subject areas?

How do we continue to ensure all voices of leaders, teachers and students are heard when using technology and 'learning from home'?

Where do we find 'Knowledgeable Others" who can walk alongside us, coaching and mentoring us, to embed Accountable Talk in practice, that is, in classrooms and in Professional Learning (PL) sessions?

Accountable Talk: A High Impact Instructional Approach

Why Accountable Talk? Accountable Talk is an evidence-proven, high-impact instructional approach that not only should be taught but can also be measured through ongoing conversations using an individual, whole-class and small-group format. This paper unpacks that strongly-held belief.

Accountable Talk *builds on* Oral Language development – so critical in early years' learning (CLARITY, Chapter 5), and *becomes essential* in the creation of new knowledge. We learn from others. Learning is a social process. Talk is our single most valuable indicator of thinking, making meaning and understanding in order to assess our own learning and that of our students. Learning to express oneself literately is often difficult enough one-on-one with a teacher or a mentor, without adding the stress of having to express a thought, or to read one's thoughts to a group of peers without time to think it through and "talk it out" (Sharratt, 2019).

Effective teachers and leaders create communities of conversation with protocols that reduce anxiety and enable students to test out their ideas and their new learning alongside their peers. It causes a 'deliberate pause' for us, as leaders, to ask and monitor, **"Who is doing the most thinking and the most talking in our classrooms and in our PL conversations?"** Student-talk in classrooms and teacher-talk in learning sessions must tip the scales and outweigh teacher or leaders talking-at learners in their care.

Reading and writing, and presenting a point of view, verbally, must always begin with talking about one's thinking with someone else, such as a 'talk partner'. Learners, from young

learners to graduate students and adult Professional Learning (PL) participants, appreciate the opportunity for oral rehearsal first before being called upon to answer.

Accountable Talk is a **data collection tool** for classroom teachers: "What do my students know?"; "What do they need to know next?"; "What do I need to know to move my students forward?" Accountable Talk is a **learning tool** for students who ask: "What do I know?"; "What do I want to learn?"; "How will I learn it?"; "Who can I talk to in order to clarify and extend my thinking?". In parallel, these are certainly the questions that leaders ask when planning staff PL sessions.

In this paper, I unpack what Accountable Talk is; offer a strong research base of evidence that recommends using it; describe the practical application of Accountable Talk in the classroom with students and during Professional Learning (PL) sessions for teachers and leaders together; and, in conclusion, consider what Accountable Talk looks like in an online environment.

What is Accountable Talk?

The term "Accountable Talk" in classrooms refers to talk that is meaningful, respectful, and mutually beneficial to both speaker and listener. Accountable Talk stimulates higher-order thinking - helping students to learn, reflect on their learning, and communicate their knowledge and understanding. To promote Accountable Talk, teachers create a collaborative learning environment (The Third Teacher, CLARITY, Chapter 1) in which students feel confident in expressing their ideas, opinions, and knowledge *(A Guide to Effective Literacy instruction, Volume I Grades 4 - 6)*.

Accountable Talk Has a Strong Research Base

Accountable Talk as a critical way to bring learners' voices into focus is steeped in research. The following are some of research studies available that substantiate the importance of students' verbalizing their thinking in classrooms.

1. Sharratt, 1996, discusses the four levels of discourse/talk:
    a. Discussion: lowest level and often quick as a decision needs to be made;
    b. *Dialogue:* higher level because there is no expectation that a decision must be

made so conversation flows more easily;

c. *Reflection:* very high level as more time is taken to not only *retell* your thinking but also *relate* it to what has already occurred. Conversation then ends with *reflection* on what is possible;

d. *Silence:* is often an indicator that ideas are being formulated, making meaning is being investigated, and new knowledge is being created. This is when teachers must resist in rushing-in and rescuing a student. *Wait-time is a virtue.* It is ok to let students struggle and talk it through before expecting a 'correct' answer as that struggle is often the very best time for our brains to be working. Teachers need to be attuned to silence and determine why students are being silent – is it that they are thinking or not understanding or disengaged?

2. The research of Michaels, O'Conner and Resnick (2007) about academically productive classroom talk suggests that the critical features of classroom talk fall under three broad dimensions: accountability to the learning community, accountability to the knowledge, and accountability to accepted standards of reasoning. For example:

   1. Accountable to the Learning Community
   This is talk that attends seriously to and builds on the ideas of others; participants listen carefully to one another, build on each other's ideas, and ask each other questions aimed at clarifying or expanding a proposition.

   2. Accountable to the Knowledge
   This is talk that is accountable to knowledge is based explicitly on facts, written texts or other publicly accessible information that all individuals can access. Students make an effort to get their facts right and make explicit the evidence behind their claims or explanation.

   3. Accountable to the Accepted Standards of Reasoning (Rigorous Thinking)
   This is talk that emphasizes logical connections and the drawing of reasonable conclusions. It is talk that involves explanation and self-correction. It often involves searching for premises, rather than simply supporting or attacking conclusions.

3. Mathieson et al. (2007) propose that in order to create a learning environment that builds learning power, a teacher must create positive interpersonal relationships, honor student voice, and encourage perspective-taking. Similarly, teachers can also nurture Accountable Talk by fostering a culture of learning and promoting an 'open-to-learning' stance in the classroom where all responses are accepted, all students are respected, and mistakes are treated as rich opportunities for learning (Sharratt, 2019).

4. Lucy West (2012) states that only when you make students' thinking visible, can you hear what they are thinking and give accurate feedback. That's how it is possible to give verbal descriptive feedback every day to a number of students because you listen to what they are thinking and then can respond immediately with relevant feedback.
5. A research monograph produced by the Ontario Ministry of Education, in 2011 summarizes many research studies by stating, " 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 … makes a difference in student learning and achievement, supporting the development of the higher-order thinking skills which are so critical to today's learners."

Professional Learning for Teachers and Leaders Models 'Accountable Talk Moves' in Classrooms

Professional Learning for teachers and leaders must reflect what good classroom practice is. By co-constructing operating norms and modeling what Accountable Talk looks and sounds like for speakers, listeners, and responders, teachers serve the instrumental role of creating and establishing the 'Third Teacher' or a culture of learning in every classroom. Some key 'Talk Moves" to ensure ongoing dialogue during every PL session and also in every classroom follow.

1. Co-construct Operating Norms

Every PL session must mirror what we expect to see as quality teaching in classrooms. For example, Operating Norms that are established for PL sessions would be similar to those that teachers and students would co-construct. In studying Accountable Talk, we would expect to develop the following Operating Norms:

- Listening to others

- Hearing every voice
- Building on the thoughts of others
- Disagreeing agreeably
- Practicing sentence stems, such as: "I agree with Dr. Johnston and would add…"; I disagree with what Dr. Johnston is saying because…"; Based on my evidence, I think…"; I can clarify what I mean by …"
- Encouraging others

We benefit from the strengths of all when we encourage peers to contribute their thinking in our learning communities. In focusing on Accountable Talk, we must use Operating Norms and refer to them often in order to establish an environment of safety and trust, not only at PL sessions but also in all classrooms.

2. Establish an "Open-to-Learning Stance"

We invite risk-taking, participation and inquiry when we invite others to share their thinking by proposing they "say more about that." For example, teachers and leaders in all learning-focused sessions use and model

- attentive listening,
- think alouds,
- participation prompts,
- leading conversations,
- justifications of proposals and challenges.

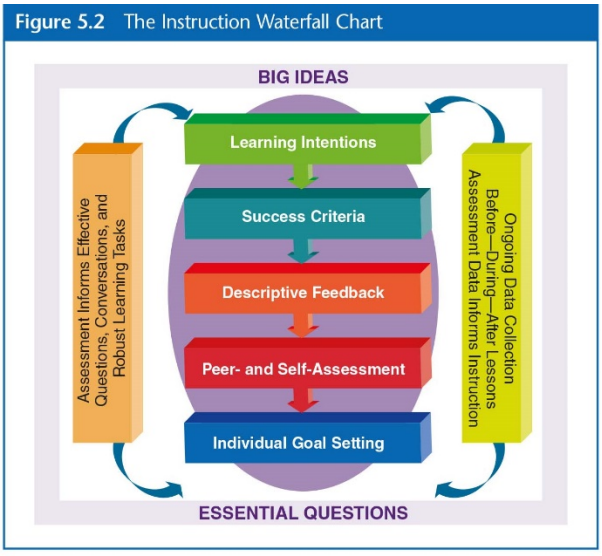
Teachers and leaders have learners practice these strategies, so they know how to own and present their own thoughts and how to reflect on and respond graciously to the thoughts presented by their peers. This is 'Accountable Talk-in-Action'.

3. Model Attentive Listening

Listening is an active meaning-making process that requires explicit instruction, time, practice and commitment. Teachers need time to sit alongside students to listen in to their thinking in order to understand where they are and then, to help them to clarify their thoughts. Monitoring our own ability to listen, contribute and build on ideas rather than impatiently waiting for our turn to speak is critical to exposing and supporting student thinking (T. Meikle, Blog, 2014).

4. Commit to Assessment 'for' and 'as' Learning

Developing understanding of the Assessment Waterfall Chart (below, and in CLARITY, Chapter 5) provides another opportunity to embrace Accountable Talk. Through co-constructing meaning of every component part, everyone learns and through their verbal input demonstrates they are learning the meaning of every step of the waterfall.. This is a process not only with students, but also with teachers when co-planning units or lessons – the work with teachers should of course, be first.



A substantial portion of instructional time must involve students in talking that is related to developing concepts, big ideas, and essential questions that surround the Assessment Waterfall Chart above (CLARITY, Chapter 5, Figure 5.2). To do this, teachers use the powerful

Accountable Talk **approach**. Within that approach, are many instructional strategies as I elaborate on in the next section.

Practical Application of Accountable Talk in Classroom Practice

Many instructional strategies reflect the Accountable Talk approach in classrooms. The monograph "Having Grand Conversations" (PDF attached) elaborates on many Accountable Talk strategies to be heard in K-12 classrooms in every subject area. The following are a few of the most powerful:

1. Allow Think Time/Wait Time

Research conducted on the pacing of questions shows the average amount of time a teacher waits between posing a question and eliciting a response (think time) is less than one second (Rowe, 1986). This must increase in order for students to talk about what they think to another student before being called on to answer. With only one-second wait time, students' answers were very short (5 seconds on average) and less than 3 words 70% of the time. (Alexander, 2001). The addition of a minimum of 3 seconds of "think time" has been shown to improve the quality of student responses and learning. (refer to Questioning Viewer Guide Learning Video Series www.edugains.ca).

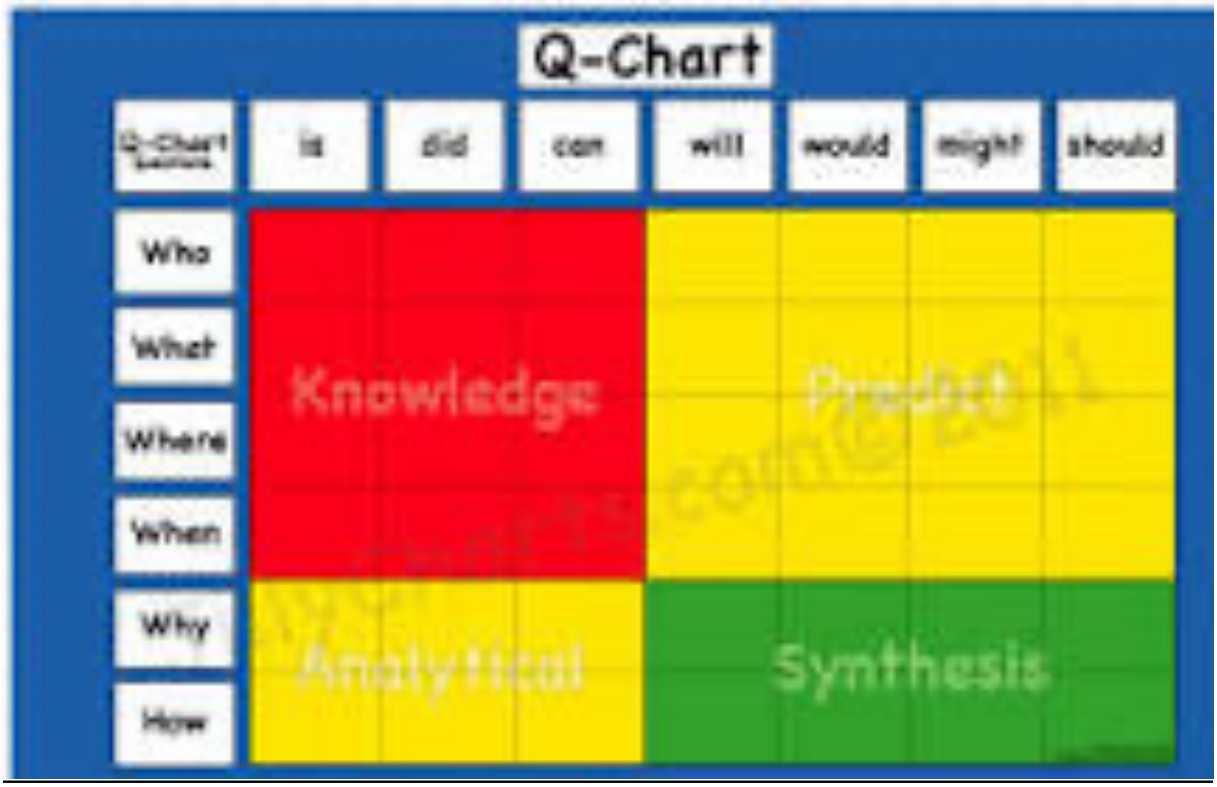
2. Use Think- Pair- Share and Turn and Talk

Think-Pair-Share and Turn and Talk are designed to promote and support higher-order thinking. The teacher asks students to think about a specific topic, pair with another student **to discuss their thinking,** and then **share their ideas with the group.** Don't give students too much time for the sharing or they may go off topic or lose interest. You want to give enough time, however, to allow for in-depth conversation. Professional judgement and careful observation needed here. To increase individual accountability and to increase student confidence you could also have students write or diagram their answers after thinking and before sharing (Questioning Viewer Guide Learning Video Series www.edugains.ca).

3. Encourage Student-Designed Higher-Order Thinking (HOT) Questions

University of Melbourne researcher, Dr. Janet Clinton, found that, on average, teachers asked about 200 questions per day and students asked two questions per student per week. The part that may be even more disturbing? Our high-achieving students are OK with this, because they can weed through what is important and what is not. Our struggling students, on the other hand, want the teacher to stop so they can talk it out with a peer who can explain it to them in more student-friendly language (DeWitt, 2020).

Strategies like the use of a Q-chart (see photo below), KWL chart (We **Know** – We **Wonder** – We **Learned**), or a display of 'Question Starters' help students generate questions that make them active participants in Learning Conversations.



4. Create Rich Tasks

In order for the students to begin using Accountable Talk there must be interesting, complex ideas and rich tasks to talk and argue about which require teachers to move away from simple questions and one-word answers to problems

that support multiple positions or solution paths. (Michaels, O'Conner and Resnick, 2007). Rich tasks build on a knowledge framework and ask students to consider what the task is asking, how to solve the task, what strategies to use, what processes are needed, and how to explain their reasoning (West, 201I). In Chapter 5, CLARITY, Figure 5.12 displays questions teachers ask themselves when planning a rich task for students.

Figure 5.12 Self-Assessment of a Robust Performance Task

Key Questions to Ask When Planning a Robust Performance Task

- Is there a clear link between the Learning Intentions from the curriculum expectations and the task that students are expected to do to demonstrate their learning?
- Is there evidence of the big ideas and essential questions being asked?
- Are the students involved in the co-construction of the Success Criteria they will use to self-assess their performance task?
- Is there an opportunity to give Descriptive Feedback linked to the Success Criteria?
- Does the task demand Accountable Talk through partner and small group work?
- Is the text selection suitable to the age and ability of the learners?
- Are there different entry levels for different learners?
- Does the task require higher-order thinking, reading, and writing?
- Is there an opportunity to scaffold the learning for each student?
- Is the task relevant to students' lives?
- Will it allow the students to demonstrate the Success Criteria to achieve the highest level of performance—an "A," for example?

Source: Compiled by Michelle Sharratt, University of Toronto, 2015.

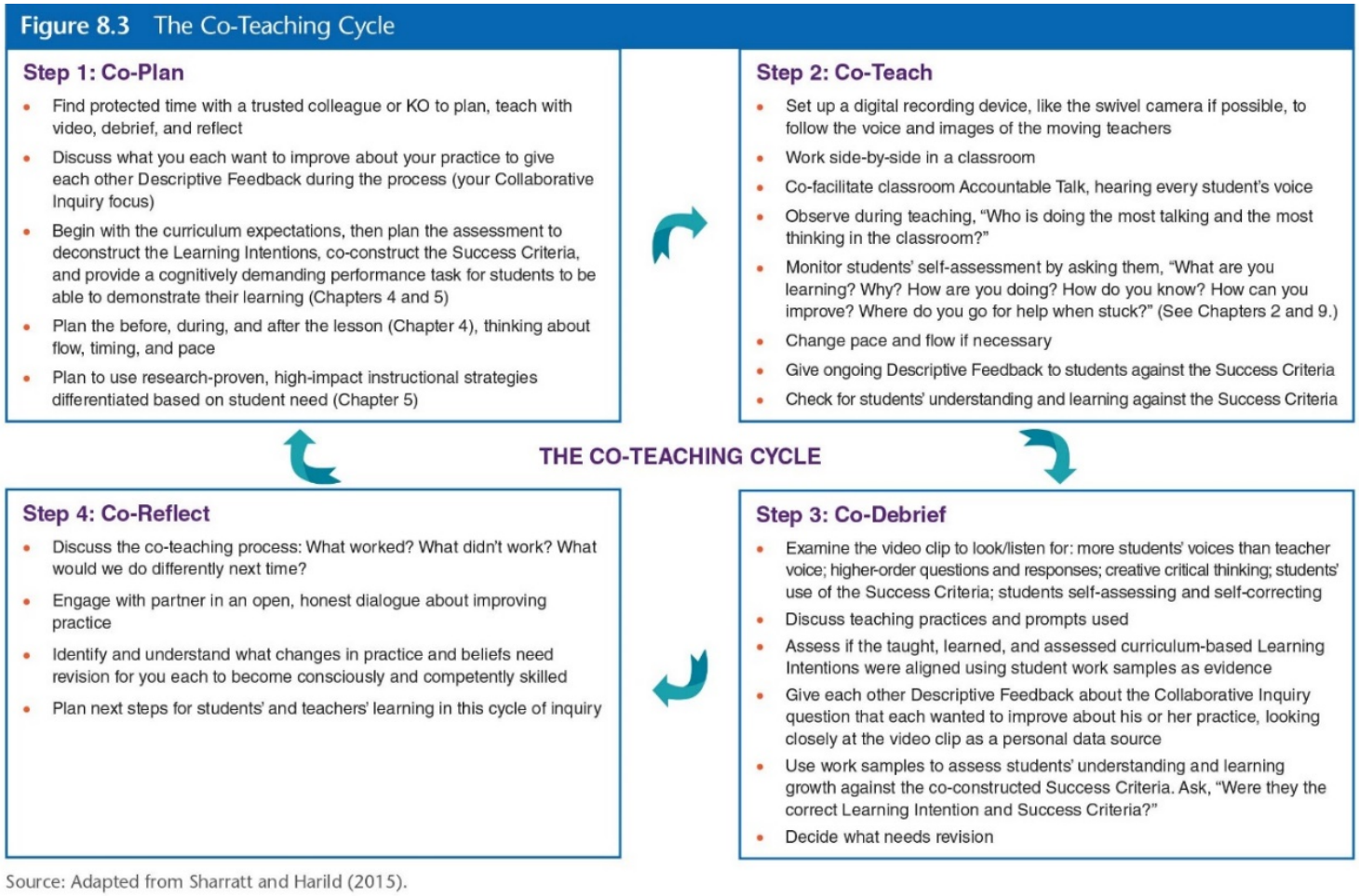
Rich tasks demand Accountable Talk through partner- and small group-sharing in a risk-free learning environment.

5. Co-Planning, Co-Teaching, Co-Debriefing, Co-Reflecting (The 4 C's Model)

The rich-task methodology for Knowledgeable Others working with teachers, The Co-

teaching Cycle, that we refer to as the 4 C's (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009; Sharratt & Harild, 2015, Sharratt & Planche, 2016), is most effective when they have time ,during the school day, to engage in Accountable Talk, themselves, while using the 4 C's cycle to explore 'precision-in-practice in all K-12 classrooms. The detailed 4 C's process for this is shared in graphic 8.3 below and in CLARITY, 2019, Chapter 8 and, although not explicit, demands Accountable Talk Moves at every step.

What can make the 4C's model even more effective is to concentrate on the elements of Accountable Talk within the new practice to be trialed. By including a focus on Accountable Talk in the 4C's plan, student reaction is intensified and clarified resulting in increased levels of students' interaction and feedback to co-taught lessons.



Source: Adapted from Sharratt and Harild (2015).

6. Even More!

Additional Accountable Talk strategies that are detailed in the 'Having Grand Conversations' Monograph (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011) include:

1. panel discussions;
2. literature circles;
3. case study exploration,
4. presentations, interviews, debates,
5. inside-outside circles,
6. fishbowl, and
7. 'Say Something'

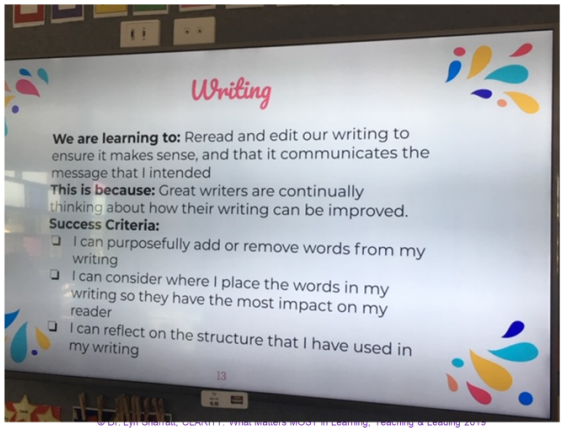
Changing up the Accountable Talk strategies stretches thinking and allows receptivity to be measured and monitored to ensure learners' knowledge-building. Accountable Talk makes learning 'come alive' and allows the classroom, anywhere and at any time, to be a fun and interesting place for students and teachers.

How Does Accountable Talk Apply to Online Teaching?

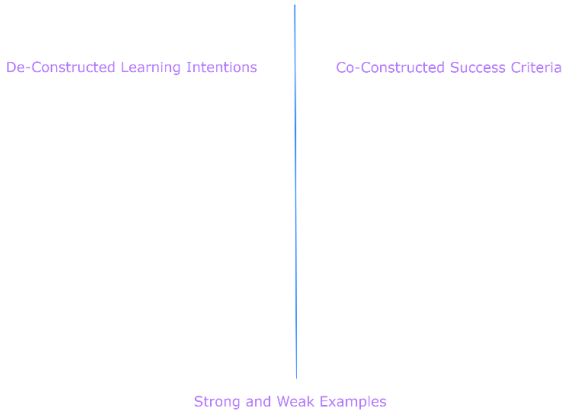
Students' voices must be heard more than teachers' voices no matter what the communication vehicle. Online learning does not preclude quality teaching. Collecting ongoing assessment data to inform instructional strategies for individual students, small groups and whole class instruction is a 'must do' wherever, and however the teaching or Professional Learning takes place.

Current leading technology providers offer cues for users to ensure Accountable Talk and safety of participants on platforms (e.g. ZOOM).

Teachers/leaders in classrooms or attending PL sessions must become 'evident-based' facilitators who, by listening attentively, manage the time for talk, the quality of the talk, and the opportunities for every voice to be heard. For example, they share with colleagues, online or in-person. Knowledgeable Others, leaders and teachers teach each other how to develop co-constructed Success Criteria with students online, using strong and weak examples of expected tasks. The result is 'precision-in-practice' as the photo below shows. By sharing the screens with students and having them come up with the planned, expected Success Criteria for task completion, teachers and students co-construct meaning. By using the white board tool, found in ZOOM for example, they record their thoughts and reflect together on what success looks like and what might be each student's next steps and goals.



Below is using the Sharing Screen feature and White Board tool, using a screen shot from one of my ZOOM meeting:



Giving Descriptive Feedback will be with individual students or in small groups unless the platform can handle a whole group experience which I refer to as "collective descriptive feedback" (CLARITY, Chapter 5). Peer- and Self-Assessment and Individual Goal setting are easily done using the same online tools of a shared screen and using the white board tool for example in ZOOM however in smaller groups or one-on-one sessions.

Tips for teachers and leaders (Retrieved from Twitter, source unknown) using online communication for 'Learning-At-Home' may include:

1 - Develop a "one-stop-shop"

2 – Post a week's worth of work (or a chunk of time rather than by day) and provide students with an idea of what might be upcoming

3 – Be as consistent as possible

4 – Introduce only one new tool or app every other week (if you plan on introducing new tools/apps)

5 – Only use new tools if necessary

6 – Check in and support students… consistently

7 – Ease in, take your time and don't overdo it

8 – Provide constant feedback, but students don't need to submit everything

9 – Communicate often, especially at the start

10 – Aim for clear, precise, and repeated instructions (you will never be clear enough)

11 – Avoid sending emails and announcements on weekends, if possible

12 – Enjoy, breathe, and make the best of it

Accountable Talk must be planned and implemented with the deep understanding that *every voice matters* in every classroom whether it is online or face-to-face teaching and learning. I believe, as many do, that online learning, even using the Accountable Talk approach, cannot replace in-person, human interaction. Instead, online learning can serve and (when done well) does serve as a bridge between life experiences: the virtual versus the "real deal" of 'being there' as teachers. The pressure of having to immediately transport ourselves as educators between these two experiences, because of the impact of COVID-19, has been dramatic and stressful for all us if we are totally honest with each other. And, ***we can be totally honest*** if we have set the stage for Accountable Talk, online, between ourselves and our colleagues, between ourselves and our students, and between ourselves and their parents.

It is in a culture of learning that we learn from each other, through Accountable Talk. New knowledge is built together so that all learners flourish. This is the goal. **Learning that leads to critical thinking (the complex interaction of skills, resources, and 'thinking aloud') propels students, teachers and leaders to think creatively and reflectively.** In moving toward

this goal, learning in any setting must be scaffolded so that learning is progressive, engaging and empowering. The more we talk, the more we learn, and the more we learn, the more we achieve.

Commitment

I commit to:

Understanding the research that points to the power of Accountable Talk being a pillar of quality teaching in every classroom.

Investigating what works best in our classrooms.

Understanding that Accountable Talk Moves must be well-planned and thoughtfully executed.

Working alongside others to co-plan, co-teach, co-debrief and co-reflect to embed Accountable Talk in our Unit and Lesson Plans.

Giving it 'a go'!

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Appendix

"Having Grand Conversations in the Classroom"

Capacity Building Series

SECRETARIAT
SPECIAL EDITION #18

*** Original title modified to reflect the importance of these strategies throughout the grades.**

* Grand Conversations in Every Classroom

Why grand conversations?

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

(Gambrell, 2004)

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).

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For information: lns@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 reponse 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.

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)

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.

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 ("Uhuhh. 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?")

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)

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

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.

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