

## **In the know ...**

***In this article Lauran Hampshire-Dells offers some pointers to using effective talk in the classroom in order to help improve written outcomes for students.***

## **EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH**



### **Classroom ideas: Write less, talk more**

Socrates believed that “the disciplined practice of thoughtful questioning enables the ... student to examine ... and be able to determine the validity of those ideas”.

While Socrates was in the classroom long before the stresses of Progress 8 and performance-related pay, there is no doubt that the value of delicately structured conversation has not diminished.

There is a lot of research about cognitive acceleration through discussion (especially by Professors Michael Shayer and Philip Adey), and programmes such as Let's Think from King's College London, are helping thousands of teachers put down their pens and focus on discussion. But with time and budgets becoming ever tighter, it can be easy to wonder “why bother?” and instead just plan another exam practice lesson.

### **The case for talking**

If you are unconvinced, here are a few of the reasons why this is worthwhile...

**Workload:** We know workload is a problem. The expectation to mark everything, create amazing resources, run interventions and keep up with research/new education books is exhausting. Planning a discussion lesson takes a lot less work: it does not need marking, it will inform your future lessons, and it often requires very few resources.

**Progress and pedagogy:** If I ever open a school, its motto will be “Students don't have to write every single lesson to make progress”.

Yes, books can be a good indicator of what is happening in lessons – they can show some snapshots of what is being studied, and what students might be achieving – but they are certainly not the only indicator of progress and might just show that students are fantastic at copying off the board or using a textbook.

Taking time out for discussion will lead to significantly improved writing and understanding beyond what can be achieved through just writing tasks alone. Students need to have conceptual and critical understanding to engage with tasks; if this is not provided in the classroom then it is likely students will merely parrot your phrases, leaving both sides feeling frustrated.

Finally, discussion lessons are totally flexible and fit into almost every classroom, so whether you are a fan of flipped learning or big on Bloom's, these lessons will fit around your favoured pedagogical approach.

**Pressure:** Expectation to always have something written to show your lesson even happened is one of the worst education trends.

Often teachers are beaten with the Ofsted stick and spend hours every week using the right stamps, coloured pens and acronyms for quite literally no reason. Freeing up one lesson a week for a structured discussion will relieve pressure on you and your students and bring some explorative joy back into the classroom.

## Making plans

So hopefully you are now ready to put down the pens – but what next? Here are a few tricks to help those initial discussion lessons run smoother.

**Create space:** Bring back circle time! Even our biggest students love the comfort of this primary school classic. This can be on the floor or on chairs, but opening the space up for conversation will make a big difference; it allows students to see each other, talk in pairs or small groups, and bounce ideas across the space.

Put books, bags and pencil cases to one side. “You won’t be writing this lesson,” often wins reluctant students over quickly and you will find that they will be willing volunteers to rearrange the room.

**You:** As an English teacher I am usually planning discussion lessons to get deeper into a character or text. Depending on your subject, you might be discussing consequences of actions, ethical and philosophical viewpoints, or maybe whether methodologies, hypotheses or reasonings are correct and accurate.

One of my favourite ways to start is to pit ideas, theories, people, characters against each other and use evaluative phrasing in the question. It might look something like this: “Henry Jekyll is more dangerous than either Macbeth or the Birling family. How far do you agree?”

In order to answer this question, students need to recall the events of three texts and start comparing the severity of the events in them – all of which they need to be able to argue and justify.

This also segues into a conversation about what we can define as “dangerous”. When structured, this question can allow students to pull apart three key texts and get into the deeper workings of the text.

If your students struggle to evaluate (a skill required across so many subjects), giving options is a good way to encourage students to wrestle with the topic. After a few discussions, you will see students become more critical in their writing and then you can encourage them to evaluate different perspectives.

Another easy opener is some empathic provocation where you give students a moralistic dilemma that does not have a right or wrong answer (think something like: is it ever right to genetically engineer a baby?). Aside from being almost guaranteed to give you interesting, and potentially amusing responses, they can really help students get to grips with the minutiae of a subject and see beyond their own perspectives.

**Rules and roles:** It takes time to establish good questioning habits in the classroom. I begin by saying that everyone must speak at least once, only one voice at a time, and that we must not take disagreements personally. While students are getting used to this, it can help if they have a piece of scrap paper to write down their ideas until it is their time to talk. Other ways to monitor input include:

- Numbering all the students one to five and having all of each number stand up and chat to each other or reply to your question.
- Undertaking eyes-closed voting on “big” questions (this prompts very interesting results!).
- Keeping hands down and cold calling students to ensure participation.

- Finally, learn to accept silence: give students time to think beyond their initial, impulsive answers and let them think around a question before asking for feedback.

**Questioning and vocabulary:** Scripts and sentence stems have their place too. I try to create short scripts of questions to have ready in case the discussion tangents (although this can be good at times). However, mostly my questions are responsive to student ideas and take the form of devil's advocate – “but what if...”, “what about...” and “so X is more acceptable than Y?”

For students, some key phrases on a little sheet can help them structure their response and settle into the dynamics of discussion lessons: phrases like “building on X's point”, “in defence of...”, “in contrast to...” and “in the case of X, could Y be argued?” help students feel confident – often our students have the ideas, they just need to vocabulary to express it.

## **Conclusion**

I love the Socratic method and find it one of the best ways to provoke student responses. The exciting thing about a discussion lesson is that you have no idea where it is going to go: it is live teaching in its most riveting form. I have lost entire lessons to it when I had only planned for a 20-minute discussion – but it is after these lessons that attainment spikes.

Just two to three discussion lessons over a half-term will help students to develop their ideas, engage critically and, most importantly, have something to say when you give them their pens and books back.

- ***Written by Lauran Hampshire-Dells and first published on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2020.***
- ***Lauran Hampshire-Dell has been a teacher of English for five years and a literacy coordinator for the last two.***

## **Further information & resources**

- Let's Think in English, King's College London: [www.letsthinkinenglish.org](http://www.letsthinkinenglish.org)
- For more on the research behind Let's Think, including research from Professors Michael Shayer and Philip Adey, visit [www.letsthinkinenglish.org/evidence-of-success/adey/](http://www.letsthinkinenglish.org/evidence-of-success/adey/)

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