



Supporting Meaningful Student Discussion



Heather Shaffery, Shayna Pond

Published by *K20 Center*

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons CC BY-SA 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

Time Frame 60 minutes

Essential Question(s)

How can instructional strategies be used to support meaningful student discussions?

Summary

Meaningful student discussion is an important component of Authentic instruction, but many teachers find it challenging to facilitate effectively. This session explores effective approaches to planning for and facilitating student discussion, common discussion roadblocks, and strategies to support meaningful student discussion. Participants will learn practical suggestions for planning discussions. They will also engage as learners using instructional strategies that scaffold discussion and encourage a culture of meaningful talk. Building on these experiences, participants will explore instructional strategies that they could use in their own classrooms to address common issues they experience when trying to facilitate meaningful discussion. Participants will conclude and apply their learning by identifying a strategy or strategies to implement in an upcoming class discussion.

Learning Goals

In this session, participants will:

- Learn approaches for supporting meaningful student discussion.
- Engage with instructional strategies that address barriers to discussion.
- Plan how to apply one or more strategies to an upcoming classroom discussion.

Attachments

- [Discourse Moves—Supporting Meaningful Student Discussion.docx](#)
- [Discourse Moves—Supporting Meaningful Student Discussion.pdf](#)
- [Four Corners Signs—Supporting Meaningful Student Discussion.docx](#)
- [Four Corners Signs—Supporting Meaningful Student Discussion.pdf](#)
- [Presentation Slides—Supporting-Meaningful-Student-Discussion.pptx](#)
- [Strategy Note Catcher—Supporting Meaningful Student Discussion.docx](#)
- [Strategy Note Catcher—Supporting Meaningful Student Discussion.pdf](#)
- [Strategy QR Codes—Supporting Meaningful Student Discussion.docx](#)
- [Strategy QR Codes—Supporting Meaningful Student Discussion.pdf](#)

Materials

- Presentation Slides (attached)
- Four Corners Signs (attached, one copy)
- Strategy QR Codes (attached, one per participant)
- [Designing Group Work](#) article (linked here; print one per participant or provide participants with the link)
- [Talk Activities Flowchart](#) (linked here; print one per participant or provide participants with the link)
- Strategy Note Catcher (attached, one per participant)
- Discourse Moves (attached, one per participant)
- Sticky notes
- Poster paper
- Printer paper
- Markers
- Pens
- Printed strategy cards (from LEARN, optional)

Engage

Facilitator's Note: Session Prep

Prior to beginning the session, post a sheet of chart paper or designate space on the board for the first activity, "[This session will be a success if...](#)" Distribute three colors of sticky notes to each table that participants can use to write their responses.

As participants are entering the room, display **slide 2**. This slide instructs participants to identify one thing that they personally should do ("I do"), one thing the group should do ("We do"), and one thing the facilitator ("You do") should do to make the session successful. Assign a different color of sticky note for each item.

Once it's time to begin, share **slides 3 and 4** to introduce this session's topic and go over the session objectives. Move to **slide 5** to begin establishing norms for the session based on the sticky notes. This can be done by having groups read the sticky notes aloud for each category and then creating a list of common themes to use as the norms for today's learning. Explain that norm-setting that asks students to identify their own behavior and needs creates buy-in and student comfort.

Explore

Have participants find a partner and discuss their experiences with facilitating student discussion in their classroom, using the questions provided on **slide 6** as a guide:

- What do discussions look like in your class?
- What are some memorable conversations, successful or unsuccessful?

Let participants know that we are using the [Partner Speaks](#) strategy and they should be prepared to share each other's answers. Highlight how Partner Speaks can support student discussion by setting the expectation before the discussion begins that each person will need to listen to their partner closely enough to share what they said with the whole group. Listening for understanding and holding off on responding is a critical skill for productive classroom discussions.

After every pair has shared out, move to **slide 7** and introduce the [Four Corners](#) strategy. Slide 7 highlights four major issues that teachers report having when facilitating discussion:

- Students are afraid to be wrong.
- Students don't talk with one another.
- Student groups don't stay on topic.
- Students don't share out or volunteer answers.

These four statements should easily validate some of the discussion points that teachers shared in the Partner Speaks activity. Designate a corner of the room for each of the statements and have participants select and move to the corner containing the roadblock that they feel is the most relevant or pressing for them personally. Move to **slide 8** for the activity instructions and provide the **Strategy QR Code Sheet** to the group at each of the corners. This handout links to resources for participants to explore in their groups based on these themes.

Facilitator's Note: Corner-Specific Strategies

Each corner has a different subset of strategies, which are grouped together on the Strategy QR Code Sheet. Be sure that participants know that they are not exploring the entire sheet at this time, only the three or four strategies associated with their corner.

Facilitator's Note: Strategy Card Printing

If it is necessary to have hard copies of the session materials, the selected strategy cards included on the Strategy QR Code Sheet can be downloaded in a pdf format from the K20 LEARN website. Print these double-sided and provide a few copies of each of the strategies at each corner, as appropriate for the group size.

As a corner group, participants should discuss how the provided strategies could help overcome the roadblock and select one strategy to share with the whole group. Have them put their ideas on a sheet of poster paper to share. As you close out of this activity, highlight how Four Corners can support student discussion by allowing students to choose what is relevant to them and discuss with peers who are like-minded.

Explain

Move on to **slide 9** and briefly summarize the general strategies that support classroom discussion:

- Normalize making mistakes.
- Build peer-to-peer relationships and classroom culture.
- Reduce the stakes and lower the pressure on students.
- Provide scaffolding to build skills and confidence.

On **slide 10**, share the two questions that teachers should consider when planning for discussion.

1. Why are you having students engage in discussion?
2. What kind of conversation are you asking students to have?

Facilitator's Note: Conversation Planning

Planning should involve knowing where teachers want the conversation to end up (why) and what they're asking students to do in order to get there (how). Pre-thinking about the conversation and the end goal will help to keep conversation flowing and prevent the teacher from getting held up mid-discussion.

Highlight the four purposes of student discussion on **slide 11**. There are other purposes for discussion, but these are the most common.

- Activating and eliciting student ideas: soliciting prior knowledge and initial ideas
- Helping students make sense of new information: processing information and beginning to develop explanations
- Connecting activities to concepts: applying concepts to experiences, building consensus
- Pressing for evidence-based explanations: synthesizing information and developing thorough explanations

Move on to highlight the kinds of intellectual work that students are engaging in during a conversation on **slide 12**. Again, there are others, but these are most prevalent.

- Sharing, expanding, and clarifying ideas
- Thinking with each other
- Listening carefully to one another
- Deepening reasoning

Wrap up the activity by reviewing best practices for facilitating discussion on **slide 13**. This list is not comprehensive. Validate any experiences that participants mentioned during the Partner Speaks activity.

Back-Pocket Questions

Consider suggesting that teachers develop "back pocket questions" that they can (figuratively) pull out for use in real-time to support the types of intellectual work best suited to a conversation's purpose. These can be general facilitation questions or questions specific to the conversation at hand. They can choose talk moves based on both the purpose of conversation and student intellectual work.

Extend

Display **slide 14** and ask participants to locate their Strategy QR Code Sheet as you begin handing out the following additional resources for planning discussion to each participant:

- **Designing Group Work:** <http://ambitioussciencelearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Designing-Group-Work.pdf>
- **Talk Activities Flowchart:** <http://stemteachingtools.org/assets/landscapes/taf.jpg>

Give participants time to explore these resources as well as any additional strategies they might find on the LEARN website. Ask them to identify a strategy from these resources that they can use either in an upcoming class or to develop a plan for an upcoming discussion.

Ask for some volunteers to share the strategy they found or their classroom discussion plan.

Evaluate

Move to **slide 15**. Have participants return to their groups from the Four Corners activity.

In their groups, participants will create a [Collaborative Word Cloud](#) to summarize what they learned during the session. Each participant should come up with their own list of five or more keywords that represent their big takeaways from the session. Group members should then combine their lists and tally how many times a common word or phrase appears among them. Using the combined list, they should create a word cloud on a piece of printer paper with the most common words or phrases in the biggest print. Depending on time, either have a few groups share or allow participants to complete a [Gallery Walk](#) to look at the other groups' clouds.

Complete the session feedback.

Research Rationale

Student conversations, supported by cooperative learning structures, have a reputation for developing skills in learners that are relevant to success in today's society. Social skills, problem-solving skills, cultural competency, and increased self-efficacy are all supported when students work together in the classroom (Chui, 2008; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Nemeth-Wachtler, 1983; Sharan, 2010; Huber & Snider, 2006). When students discuss their learning, their learning is made visible to themselves which aids the development of metacognitive skills. Students are able to come to know what it is that they know better as they talk through it (Chiu, 2008; Resnick, Michaels, & Connor, 2010). This visible learning is also valuable for the instructor who can see what students' prior understandings are, their misconceptions, and how their knowledge is changing over the course of a lesson. Contributing to the conversation requires reasoning, giving structure to concepts, and doing so allows the speaker to assess and correct logic gaps, resulting in deeper learning (Windschitl, Thompson, and Braaten, 2018).

Resources

- Ambitious Science Teaching. (2015). Group work: Designing for student participation. <http://ambitiousscience Teaching.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Designing-Group-Work.pdf>
- Chiu, M. M. (2008). Flowing toward correct contributions during group problem solving: A statistical discourse analysis. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 17(3), 415–463.
- Huber, R. B., & Snider, A. (2006). *Influencing through argument*. New York: International Debate Education Association.
- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (2009). An educational psychology success story: Social interdependence theory and cooperative learning. *Educational Researcher*, 38(5), 365–379. doi:10.3102/0013189x09339057
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Collaborative word clouds. <https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/103>
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Four corners. Strategies. <https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/13>
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Partner speaks. Strategies. <https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/62>
- K20 Center. (n.d.). This session will be a success If.... Strategies. <https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/122>
- Nemeth, C., & Wachtler, J. (1983). Creative problem solving as a result of majority vs minority influence. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 13(1), 45–55.
- Sharan, Y. (2010). Cooperative learning for academic and social gains: Valued pedagogy, problematic practice. *European Journal of Education*, 45(2), 300–313. doi:10.1111/j.1465-3435.2010.01430
- Windschitl, M., Thompson, J., & Braaten, M. (2018). *Ambitious science teaching*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.
- Wingert, K. (2016, August). "How can I foster curiosity and learning in my classroom? Through talk! (Research brief). STEM Teaching Tools. <http://stemteachingtools.org/brief/35>
- Wingert, K., & Rhinehart, A. (2016, August). Talk activities flowchart (Diagram.). STEM Teaching Tools. <http://stemteachingtools.org/assets/landscapes/taf.jpg>