EDITORS’ MESSAGE

I didn’t know what I thought about it until I heard what I said about it.

Consider the above paraphrase of EM Forster’s famous quote, “How do I know what I think until I see what I say.” Both the quote and the paraphrase illustrate the power of orally articulating one’s ideas so that deepened thinking can begin to take shape. By listening to our thinking—hearing our ideas take shape—we begin to formulate what we really mean. Then through a continued conversational exchange in which we listen to others’ thoughts and expand on our own, we sharpen our clarity about our own thinking. We often go away from these conversations better able to reconsider, reevaluate, and fine tune our initial thoughts as we find mirrors for them within the context of others’ responses.

The power associated with being able to effectively communicate one’s ideas begins from our earliest language encounters. Opportunities to engage in meaningful conversation around a myriad of topics start long before coming to school. Unfortunately, since early language experiences are not similar for all students, each comes to school with a different range of vocabulary, various levels of knowledge about syntax, grammar, and language use, and widely differing understandings of how to engage in conversation. Although these early language encounters greatly influence one’s academic language performance, classrooms that promote oral communication provide opportunities for every student to learn and continually grow their language.

Realizing the power of oral language to support learning and share information, it is not surprising that three of the four areas highlighted in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) address language in the performance of speaking and listening, language use, and writing, each with the intent that all students, and especially English learners, are provided with enhanced language opportunities. In the Introduction to the Standards, it is noted that students acquire language proficiency across the disciplines as they “read purposefully and listen attentively to gain both general knowledge and discipline-specific expertise. They refine and share their knowledge through writing and speaking” (p. 7). Additionally, the CCSS include specific expectations for middle school students and their abilities to communicate orally.

Unfortunately, oral communication is often forgotten when students are engaged in instruction primarily focused on reading and writing opportunities that exclude or minimally attend to speaking and listening practices. Consider how you ensure that students in your classes are developing oral language proficiency. How is your instruction supporting connections between speaking and listening and reading and writing? How do you effectively facilitate students’ listening comprehension and presentation skills? As educators, we all realize that to become proficient communicators, students need to be engaged in supported practice around many topics.
in the disciplines of mathematics, science, art, literature, social studies (history and geography), and technical subjects. The specifics of just how to accomplish this is a conversational topic in which we educators like to engage.

Through the excellent articles in this issue, we explore the oldest of our communicative abilities, exploring innovative ways of addressing speaking and listening in the classroom with the realization that these skills must be significant components of instruction if they are to be significant components of learning. To this end, our authors share examples of very purposeful instructional practice.

Jeff Zwiers, Susan O’Hara, and Robert Pritchard discuss the power of conversation as a way for students to jointly build complex ideas and solve problems. Stressing the key role that teachers play in supporting and guiding conversations in school, they identify conditions that promote students’ building on one another’s language in a nonscripted manner.

Instructional ideas supporting a group of middle school students who are learning to talk deeply about text are also shared by Mark Nachowitz and Nancy Brumer. In addition to talking about the text, these educators also helped students consider and reconsider the ways in which they were talking about the text. Students were invited to consider conversational threads and then to analyze and justify the discourse patterns. An exciting outcome was that they transferred all they were leaning about academic discourse to their less formal face-to-face conversations. They were listening to others, speaking intently, and justifying their positions. They learned to be very effective communicators through instruction that delved them deeply into meaningful dialogue.

Being a participant in one’s own language growth is described by Pooja Patel, who illustrates that it’s quite a skill to be able to make an oral presentation that keeps the audience engaged and also shares information that causes deepened thinking. It is equally complex to assess the power of one’s oral presentation. The specifics of how an English and humanities teacher taught her students to use a formative assessment framework to scaffold their oral presentation skills are made so transparent in this article that it can be easily replicated. As these students self-assessed their presentations, they grew stronger in their presentation performances.

Also addressing the role of language in self-empowerment, Cristian Aquino-Sterling shares a three-step instructional plan identifying how to support students’ expansion of oral language that moves them beyond sentence-level structures. Teacher modeling of language patterns and the explicit teaching of language functions are two significant ways identified to support language development. However, the primary goal is to concretize students’ understandings and facility with a wide array of discourse patterns through the use of language frames.

Mary Ellen Miller connects oral and written language as she describes the very successful writing experiences of fifth- and sixth-grade students who were engaged in an action research project. Their abilities as writers grew because of their many experiences orally sharing their ideas, which they later transformed to written texts. Conversing about their writing was a dimension of their written practice. Through this experience, they realized that a first step to writing a powerful essay is having an opportunity to share one’s ideas orally. What resulted were students who felt empowered to communicate their ideas through both spoken and written discourses.

Sophie Deneger and Jennifer Berne also take us into the classrooms of middle school teachers to share examples of instructional moves teachers made as they listened to the conversations of their students and then pushed students’ thinking, language, and comprehension with questions that caused them to dig more deeply into the texts they were reading. The examples shared highlight the very positive effects of guided instruction on literacy learning across the disciplines.

The power of debate to expand all of the literacies is shared by Dee Burek and Carol Losos.
The lesson sequence they share illustrates how to weave the process of respectful debate and argument into the middle school curriculum. What resulted were students who learned to work cooperatively, brainstorm ideas, read to support and evaluate an opinion, and expand their language through academic conversations. While learning to take notes, summarize, question, and clarify information, these students acquired the skills of communication—skills they will use throughout their lives.

Mary Styslinger and Jessica Overstreet describe the experiences of eighth-grade students within the context of a Socratic Circle and, in so doing, illustrate the power of debate. While exchanging viewpoints, students began to reconsider their initial perspectives, identify counterarguments, and formulate written rebuttals. The dialog they shared spurred them to more fully develop all of their literacy processes. As these authors emphasize, students can be taught deep reasoning as they engage in structured listening and speaking experiences that prepare them to engage in thoughtful arguments.

The many positive outcomes of engaging students in projects involving audiovisual character analyses were illustrated by Theresa Redmond and Mark Maya. These teachers required students to produce, record, and remix scripts. The results included motivated students who were able to expand their sophistication with digital world applications as well as their literacy practices. Their collaborative investigations pushed them to explore projects, explain their thinking, and continually evaluate and revise their work in much the same way as they will be called upon to do in their 21st-century workplaces.

Each of these articles described situations that engaged students in learning new dimensions of language by participating in language exchanges where they crafted, revised, and communicated their ideas. Our authors have provided instructional examples illustrating that students will develop and learn to use academic language when they are invited and taught to do so. We hope you will gain insights from them that you can add to your own instructional toolbox. We invite and look forward to your responses.

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