Teaching the Talk, Not the Text

Typically, middle school students are ill-prepared to discuss books, and when they do, conversations tend to skip from idea to idea, topic to topic, connection to connection, with little development or extension of ideas. Students do not know how to extend, expand, or explicitly support or defend topics and ideas once they are generated. As Lucy Calkins has argued, “talk is rarely taught. It is rare to hear teachers discuss their efforts to teach students to talk well” (2000, p. 226).

This article reports the effects on a sixth-grade class of a four-month intervention designed to teach students how to engage with text and create literary interpretations by explicitly teaching them how to engage in progressive discourse—that is, discourse that goes somewhere, that has a destination.

Literacy instruction should teach learners how to read for deeper meanings or big ideas and support their interpretations and inferences with textual evidence, elaboration, and explanation (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). We argue that this outcome can be achieved by making the emphasis of instruction less about the text and more about deliberate teaching moves that help young readers learn to create, sustain, and delve deeper into meaningful dialogue. Teaching students how to talk about and think about ideas, how to develop and refine ideas, and how to extend and constructively critique the ideas of fellow students will lead to deeper understanding. In response to Calkins’s call, then, this article reports our efforts and systematic investigation into how to teach students to talk well and to build a talking community.

Dialogic approaches to literacy instruction, where reading, writing, and speaking are used to build students’ literary thinking and understanding, have a strong effect on improving students’ understanding of literature (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003), especially when taking the perspective of “high literacy—the reading, writing, and discussion skills that allow students to participate effectively in the disciplinary conversations or secondary discourses of English as a school subject” (p. 695). Thus, it is not just instruction in reading and comprehension that impacts students’ literary understanding; it is the effective use of language, written and spoken, that students use to socially construct literary understandings.

Knowledge building is a theory of learning that is gaining momentum in studies of learning in science and mathematics classrooms, but it remains largely untested on language arts teaching and learning. In knowledge-building classrooms, learning is organized around the collaborative creation of a knowledge product, such as a literary interpretation, a plan, an explanation, or...
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Figure 1. A portion of a “Chalk Talk” exchange

a theory. More than constructivist approaches to learning that feature a similar emphasis on student construction of knowledge, knowledge-building approaches require students to create, improve, or add value to knowledge products (Bereiter, 2002; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006).

An essential feature of knowledge-building learning is its emphasis on progressive discourse, the kind commonly associated with scientific communities where knowledge is advanced as theories, facts are scrutinized and tested, and the body of knowledge is added to by a community of participants. For knowledge-building learning to take place, progressive discourse must focus student talk and discussion on the creation of a knowledge product. In the case of this intervention, we wanted students to engage in progressive discourse to socially construct, over time, an in-depth literary interpretation demonstrating deep understanding of text.

In studies of knowledge-building classrooms, Knowledge Forum©, an online program, is the principal environment where ideas are set forth, discussed, revised, organized, and combined (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 2003). Like other online discussion boards such as Moodle or Blackboard, Knowledge Forum allows students to post, read, and respond to others’ comments. However, unlike those digital environments, Knowledge Forum requires students to select from a menu of scaffolds for each discussion note posted to facilitate progressive discourse. For example, scaffolds initiate the participant’s note-composing by providing guidance with categories such as “my theory,” “I need to understand,” “new information,” “a better theory,” and “putting our knowledge together.” Knowledge Forum allows students the freedom to generate and share literary interpretations; however, all subsequent posts and student comments must “rise-above” the initial post by selecting scaffolds requiring them to extend, justify, or clarify emerging ideas.

The Intervention

A formative or design-based experiment was conducted to test knowledge-building principles and their effect on deepening the reading skills of adolescent students. A suburban middle school bordering a major northeastern city was selected for the study. The intervention was designed to deliberately instruct sixth graders in how to engage in literate conversations—in other words, to socially construct textual interpretations without teacher intervention. We employed a combination of classroom learning activities and scheduled Knowledge Forum sessions twice weekly in the school’s computer lab. Using Sharon Draper’s Out of My Mind (2010), a young adult novel capturing the experiences of a child with cerebral palsy, as a shared read aloud, explicit instruction was designed to model and scaffold students through guided collaborative and individual practice in how to initiate something they wanted to talk about, how to extend and develop an idea through talk, how to build on other students’ contributions, how to challenge other students through constructive talk, and how to put ideas together into a “big idea” understanding.

To make talk visible and enable ways to explicitly teach, model, and debrief each of these perspectives for continuing book talks, instruction began with a series of “chalk talks”—silent, written conversations, set within a specific time frame, that require all students to go to the board, write what they want to say about the text, and then, as they wish, to extend, comment, question, or build on other students’ comments (see Fig. 1). Chalk talks were used to point out and...
practice ways to “rise above” (extend, question, justify, or build on) any student comment using the above categories. For example, a connected series of statements on the board might lead to interesting ideas, and the whole class would be asked to practice ways to write a “Can you show me something in the text that makes you say that?” or “I think I agree or disagree with you because . . .” response.

Afterwards, class debriefings asked students to comment not on the content of the chalk talk but on the process of the development of ideas. Teacher feedback would focus on the process and the development of literary ideas—what worked and what a writer could have done to build on a previous author’s comment to keep the ideas and lines of discourse moving deeper into close reading of the text. Coupled with frequent debriefings of Knowledge Forum discussions, these learning activities became a very visible, tangible way to scaffold student dialogue via teacher feedback and guided practice.

Halfway through the intervention, while we were pleased with student agency and ownership of dialogue, we found that most students still needed to move the dialogue beyond initial impressions and questions and dig deeper into the text. Subsequently, it was decided to provide students with a list of sentence starters (see Appendix A) that would give them the language to practice the more complex, literate thinking involved with taking textual conversations and expanding, justifying, and challenging ideas. Every time students engaged in dialogue or written conversations, in class or through Knowledge Forum, the sentence starters were always on their desks. As conversations would develop, students were asked to practice extending conversations or putting big ideas together using the language modeled in the sentence starters.

Over the course of the intervention, we found that the most valuable instructional tool for teaching talk was the weekly debriefing of the digital discourse. During these sessions, we pulled up discussion threads from previous Knowledge Forum conversations on the classroom projector and offered feedback on the process of dialogue. Additionally, as the conversations and ideas about the novel deepened and became richer and more complex, the thinking strategy that might have moved the conversation even deeper at a particular time was modeled and scaffolded. For example, as students began to put forth theories about symbolism or theme or character development, it became apparent that guided practice in challenging and justifying ideas might best serve the students’ needs. Furthermore, we introduced “big picture” thinking, modeling and scaffolding how to make connections and how to dovetail individual discussion threads into some kind of coherent whole—the kind of literate thinking, reasoning, and analysis valued by schools. We wanted students to be able to state an interpretation of text, analyze discrete elements, and support an overall understanding incorporating several literary elements.

**Results**

Without any instructional intervention by the teacher and no comments on “correctness” of student ideas, were students able to achieve insightful, deep reading on their own? Early in the intervention, just after reading the first chapter in which they were introduced to a protagonist trapped within her body due to cerebral palsy, students were invited “to say something about the chapter” during classroom discussion:

**CATHY:** I would die if I couldn’t talk or walk.

**SILVIO:** She’s just a little younger than us. She hasn’t talked her whole life.

**CATHY:** Like we’ve talked so many words and she can’t even say one word. If you think about it, we’ve said so many words.
AZIM: She must have some disability.

EDITH: It must be so frustrating,

MELISSA: It must be so frustrating that she’s so smart but can’t talk.

Two elements are worth noting. First, there is little progressive discourse here. Students are generally agreeing with one another and perhaps extending the initial response to acknowledge the degree of pain the protagonist suffers. Second, while making personal connections and inferences, as well as responding affectively to characters, are indicators of cognitive reading strategies, students do not offer any textual justification to support their opinions, thereby failing to demonstrate a hallmark of deep reading.

Toward the end of the intervention, however, students showed growing familiarity and more effective use of scaffolds to engage in progressive, literary discourse. The following discussion thread from Knowledge Forum is typical of the extended digital conversations that students began to conduct:

AZIM: I want to talk about [boldface type indicates the scaffold selected by the student to initiate or continue the discussion]: I think that the fish bowl on the cover represents Melody’s head. The fish is trapped in the bowl, kind of like how Melody’s words are trapped in her head. The fish is constantly swirling around the bowl, kind of like Melody’s words swirling around her head. One day when the fish really can’t take it anymore, he gets out, and I think that when Melody can’t take it anymore, the words will come out. What do you think?

ASHLYN: I have a question: I agree with what you think the cover of the book means. I wonder what will happen if one day Melody has a major tornado explosion and she won’t stop?!?!?!?!?!

LINDSEY: The big picture: I think that you are correct, but since the fish just decided he couldn’t take it anymore and jumped out, will Melody really explode? And not be able to take it anymore?

CYNTIA: Expanding Ideas: I agree with you. I also wonder if the fish bowl is a warning for something that might happen later in the book. Maybe that something doesn’t have to be Melody that has to explode, maybe it’s Mrs.V or Melody’s dad or mom. The Dad could explode from all of his stress, or maybe Mrs.V has a dramatic character change, and explodes in one way. Or it might be Mr. Dimming that explodes. Does anybody else think this?

AZIM: Justifying ideas: Wow, you made a great point. I should’ve thought of that. Maybe it’s not Melody that explodes, it could be someone else! Great point, Cynthia.

BRIAN: Expanding Ideas: It might also be Melody has such a big tornado explosions [and it] is so bad Melody could have a heart attack from all the stress on her heart and the fish that resembles the beat of the heart giving up and jumping out “stopping.”

Students were not asked to look for particular literary elements such as symbols, but they brought them up on their own during Knowledge Forum or classroom discussions. When they did, they were given the language and definition (in this case, symbolism) to capture their ideas. This excerpt shows students engaging in the close reading of literary elements, then challenging and extending each other’s evolving understandings to form a cohesive interpretation of the novel’s characters and theme.

We found that students took the skills developed through progressive, literary talk and practiced in the digital medium they developed in Knowledge Forum, and transferred them to face-to-face discussions in class. The following example took place immediately upon completion of Chapter 29 from Out of My Mind in which the protagonist’s mother confronts the teacher and students for lying to her daughter and excluding her from a trip to Washington to compete in a national quiz competition:
MRS. BRUMER: In the other class, we started to build some theories about why this happened. Abe?

ABRAHAM: So, they probably like forgot. She’s the smartest person on the team. Maybe Rodney should have called.

SITA: I think they did this because it takes a lot of time for Melody to eat, so maybe they thought we shouldn’t call her and maybe we could be late.

MRS. BRUMER: So because at dinner . . .

BRIAN: I think maybe it was Claire’s job and somebody was supposed to watch the weather. Maybe Molly was assigned the weather and maybe Molly had to call Claire.

TIM: I want to build on Sita. Well, even if they didn’t want her to eat breakfast, couldn’t they have not told her about breakfast and had her meet them at the airport?

ABRAHAM: Maybe they didn’t want to look bad on TV.

MALIK: I want to build on Abe. Claire said a few times that she didn’t want to look bad on TV. Maybe she doesn’t realize what she did. She was probably really mad about being left out of the competition.

CYNTHIA: I want to build onto what Malik said. Claire told her to shut up. It would be better if they didn’t bring her.

SHARON: Melody was in the newspaper, and maybe they didn’t want her to be in the newspaper again.

ASHLYN: I like what Sharon said. They only wrote about her and a big picture of her in the paper, and they all wanted to be recognized, so they didn’t invite her because they all wanted to be recognized.

JACKIE: Melody is always the center of attention. Everyone else at least tries to be nice, even though they’re all kind of mad at her for stealing the attention.

While it may sound unnatural to hear 11- and 12-year-olds say “I want to build on,” these students are clearly listening to each other and expanding on several ideas. As theories unfolded to explain the unreasonable actions of the books’ characters, students moved from their initial anger at the teacher through tentative ideas about why the characters acted that way. Abe’s initial theory—the narrator was intentionally left behind—includes justifications for this tentative idea. This discussion is moving forward because students have internalized the language of extending dialogue as well as the nuances of literary discussion. They extended ideas, challenged ideas in appropriate language by suggesting alternative theories, took up other students’ theories in their own responses, and moved the dialogue toward solving a problem of understanding character motivation.

At the end of the intervention and to determine whether emphasis on literary, progressive discourse resulted in deeper reading rather than just conjecture about the text, students were asked to write literary analysis essays in which they stated a unifying theme or overarching literary interpretation supported by paragraphs analyzing discrete literary elements (symbolism, characterization, and plot). A framework for evidence of deep understanding was applied, moving from reading for meaning, stating judgments, and supplying evidence, through understanding literary elements in isolation and cohesion, where students demonstrated explanations about causal relationships and made connections in which literary elements were analyzed with evidence and used to support a cohesive interpretation. Analyses of student essays revealed only 11% of students could not move beyond discussion of plot, while 56% could analyze literary elements in detail, and 33% were capable of seeing how literary elements combined and were also able to articulate an overarching literary interpretation. Ultimately, 100% of the student essays revealed...
deep reading in that they were interpreting and analyzing a novel and justifying their responses with textual evidence.

**Suggestions for Practitioners**

1. *Focus on the process, not the product.* Students need to be scaffolded into the literate talk and thought of responding, justifying, extending, and evaluating textual interpretations.

2. *Expect this to take time.* We were not concerned initially with student failures to achieve progressive discourse. We saw these as instructional stepping stones that would help us focus instruction explicitly on inviting student comments and suggestions for how a “failed” conversation might have been improved.

3. *Teach listening.* Using technology and requiring students to read others’ posts established a culture of listening to everyone’s ideas. Explicit instruction that focused on teaching students to use language like, “I want to build on what Mary said,” helped those students demonstrate listening as well as ways to extend literary talk.

4. *Technology is a tool for literacy.* We found technology to be especially beneficial in making the process of talk explicit as well as in providing a teaching tool for monitoring and assessing student progress. Even though we used Knowledge Forum for this research, many online discussion boards are free to teachers (e.g., Moodle or Blackboard), and even though scaffolds for progressive discourse aren’t built into these modules, teachers can still use discussion threads to teach and scaffold the process of effective literary talk.

**References**


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### Appendix A. Sentence starters for progressive, literary talk

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<tr>
<th>Broad Topic</th>
<th>Sentence Starters</th>
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| I want to talk about   | I want to talk about . . .  
|                        | I noticed . . .  
|                        | As I was reading, I noticed . . .  
|                        | After reading/discussion, I noticed . . .  |
| I have a question      | What still confuses me is . . .  
|                        | I don’t understand . . .  
|                        | I wonder why . . .  
|                        | What if . . .  
|                        | Why is it that . . .  |
| Challenging ideas      | I have a different idea . . .  
|                        | I’m not sure I understand. Could you show me something in the text that makes you say that?  
|                        | I disagree with you because . . .  
|                        | Everyone seems to think . . . , but I think . . .  
|                        | What in the text makes you believe that?  |
| Justifying ideas       | This makes sense to me because . . .  
|                        | I agree with you because . . .  
|                        | While I realize . . . , I think . . . because . . .  |
| Expanding ideas        | This reminds me of . . .  
|                        | At first I thought . . . ; now I think . . .  
|                        | A part of the text that makes me believe this is . . .  |
| The big picture        | Maybe this book is about . . .  
|                        | I think it means . . . because . . .  
|                        | In the end I believe . . .  
|                        | My conclusion at this point is that . . .  |