

# Quality Talk About Text

*Discussion Practices for Talking and Thinking About Text*

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**ONLINE RESOURCES**

The forms in the Appendix can also be found under Companion Resources at <http://hein.pub/QualTalk>.

## Foreword | Nell K. Duke

Years ago a group of researchers followed a group of children, from low-income homes, from preschool through fourth grade (Dickinson and Porche 2011). In preschool, among other things, the researchers looked carefully at language use in the children's classrooms. One of the items they coded was how much analytic talk there was, including talk about the meaning of words and the reasons for events or for characters' actions. The researchers found that the proportion of analytic talk in preschool classrooms predicted children's vocabulary in fourth grade! How is this possible? The researchers hypothesized that "[c]hildren in classrooms with teachers who engaged in analytical discussions might have become more attuned to books and more able to engage in and learn from classroom discussions" (882). This is the power of quality talk about text.

In another study, a research team observed eighty-eight middle- and high-school English language arts classes with forty-four teachers in twenty-five schools in four states. Using state test data, researcher Judith Langer (2001) separated the schools into those with typical student achievement compared to other schools with similar demographics, and those that had relatively high student achievement compared to other schools with similar demographics. One of Langer's key findings was that in the classrooms that had relatively high student achievement, "[s]tudents work[ed] together to develop depth and complexity of understanding in interaction with others," whereas in typical classrooms,

"[s]tudents work alone, in groups, or with the teacher to get the work done, but do not engage in rich discussion of ideas" (857). This is the power of quality talk about text.

Looking across forty-two studies that examined the impact of specific approaches to discussion of text, mostly at the upper elementary level, researchers found a number of approaches that worked to increase student talk, decrease teacher talk, and improve students' comprehension of text (Murphy et al. 2009). Evidence for the power of quality talk about text has really accumulated.

Given the findings I have just shared, and others, I was eager to have a book on text discussion in the Research-Informed Classroom series. I was thrilled that Ian Wilkinson and Kristin Bourdage agreed to write the book, given their enormous depth of expertise in both research and practice. I had high expectations for the book—and the authors have exceeded them. The book is beautifully written, firmly grounded in research, and yet eminently practical. One of my favorite features of the book is that it enables educators to match the discussion approach they select with their goal for the text discussion: to emphasize personal response, knowledge building, or argumentation. Even within these three discussion purposes, the authors offer multiple approaches to discussion, so that teachers can select just the right approach for their context. Another feature of the book I especially appreciate is the Talk Assessment Tool for Teachers (see the Appendix). It is challenging to facilitate discussion and reflect on the quality of that discussion, but this tool helps make that achievement more attainable. I could go on, but suffice it to say that there is a lot to like about this book. I truly believe that if our field engages deeply with it, we could see substantial improvement in the quality of text discussion and in students' reading comprehension. We can harness the power of quality talk about text.

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# SECTION I

## The Big Picture: Different Talk for Different Purposes



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# 1

## Why Talk?

Language is a funny thing. It doesn't always work very well. Almost every word, every phrase, every sentence and paragraph carry multiple meanings. Let's take the title of this chapter, for example: "Why Talk?" Even these two simple words have at least two interpretations. One interpretation is *why should we talk to each other?* Another interpretation is *why is talk the focus of this book?* This ambiguity of language becomes even more apparent when we try to interpret the meaning of more complex texts, such as the US Constitution, a Shakespearean play, or a poem. Words rarely elicit precise meaning. Their meanings are slippery, hard to pin down, especially when each one of us brings different stores of knowledge and experience, and, likely, different understandings of the context in which the words are heard or read.

But therein lies the power of language. Because no one of us assigns meanings to words in exactly the same way, understanding what an author or speaker is saying is an act of interpretation (Mercer 2000). Because of the inherent ambiguity of language, where words do not always generate precise meanings in the minds of others when we communicate, the reader or listener may create new understandings different from those intended by the author or speaker (Littleton and



Mercer 2013; Mercer 2013). The very unreliability of language, and the space it creates for different perspectives, is the engine that can generate new ideas!

## The Power of Talk

Talk, of course, is one way of using language and it is a powerful tool for teaching and learning. In fact, it is the primary tool for teaching and learning. It is through talk that we conduct most of our teaching, and it is through talk that we think and learn. Let's look at some of the amazing things we accomplish with talk.

First, talk makes our thinking public. We use talk to communicate with each other and to share our thoughts. Of course, as we have just seen, talk is not a perfect window into the minds of others because of the inherent ambiguity of language. And let's not forget that what we say (and don't say!) is usually tailored to our audience. But talk offers a partial window nonetheless. So, in a classroom discussion, for example, we can use talk to share how we interpret the text, and through talk we can learn what others are thinking and how others are constructing meaning. We might learn that there are other ways of interpreting the text and different points of view on the issue at hand. This means that we walk away from the discussion with knowledge of other strategies for making sense of the text and, hopefully, an understanding and appreciation of others' perspectives.

Second, talk is a tool for thinking. Talk is a way of using language to help us organize our thoughts, to reason, to plan, and to reflect on our actions. Think back to the last time you were faced with performing a difficult task, such as trying to assemble a complex piece of furniture that arrived "ready for easy assembly." Faced with such a task, you might have heard yourself talking to yourself in your head, or even out loud, in an effort to make sense of the instructions. Your talk helped you think through and perform the task. Translating this into the context of a discussion about text, the mere fact of having to explain our thinking to someone else helps us to clarify and elaborate our thinking, perhaps finding flaws in our argument or something that we still do not understand. As a result, we walk away from the discussion with a much clearer understanding of our own thinking about the text.

Third, and this is key for discussion about text, talk is a tool for *thinking together*. Talk gives us a tool for combining our intellectual resources to collectively make sense of experience and to solve problems. Neil Mercer, a British psychologist who studies language use in the classroom, calls this use of talk as a social mode of thinking "interthinking" (Littleton and Mercer 2013; Mercer 2000).

Talk is a resource for jointly creating knowledge and understanding. This means that we can walk away from a discussion not just with a good understanding of our own ideas and those of others but having co-constructed new ways of thinking about the text that go beyond the individual capabilities of the participants.

It is in using talk as a social mode of thinking, or interthinking, that the generative power of language really comes to the fore. By wrestling with the text together, offering differing interpretations, and trying to reconcile them, we are using talk to create new understandings and ideas.

So, talk is a medium of communication for sure, but it is much more than that. It is a psychological tool to help us think, and a social or cultural tool that enables us to think together. In all cases, what we take away, or “internalize,” (Vygotsky 1978, 1981), is a richer understanding of the text and, ideally, a more sophisticated way of thinking about text in general.

## **Not Just Any Kind of Talk—Quality Talk**

But simply placing students in groups, stepping back, and encouraging them to talk about a text is not enough to promote thinking and learning. In some discussions, students talk a lot but this doesn't always mean there's deeper learning. More important than the amount of talk is the kind of talk (Murphy et al. 2009; Wells 1989). As we will see in the next chapter, we want students to engage in a particular kind of talk we call “quality talk.” As its name suggests, quality talk is a type of discourse in discussions about text that reflects and helps promote high-level thinking and comprehension. The richer the discourse in terms of quality talk, the more productive the discussion is and the more likely we are to achieve the outcomes we want for our students.

To illustrate what we mean by quality talk, let's look at an excerpt from a discussion among a small group of students in a fourth-grade class. The teacher and the students are discussing a story called “Victor” by James Howe (1997). The story is about a young boy named Cody, who is lying in a coma in a hospital bed. To help him get through his time in the hospital, Cody creates an imaginary world called “The Land Above” in the ceiling tiles above his bed. During his stay, a mysterious man named Victor visits Cody and tells him stories about what his life will be like when he grows up. The teacher and students are grappling with the question *Who is Victor?*

**Michelle:** I think Victor's an angel.

**Teacher:** You think Victor's an angel? Can you tell me why you think so?

**Michelle:** Because he, well maybe he comes from like the land above, and that's where he's talking to him. And that's why maybe Cody can't see Victor 'cause he's from the land above and he's talking to him from up there.

**Nancy:** Maybe's he's just a figure, but he always has this thing on his face that he doesn't have . . .

**Matt:** But he, Cody, kept saying "three tiles up, two to the left."

**Teacher:** That was interesting.

**Andrew:** You mean "three tiles down, two to the left."

**Nancy:** Yeah, he was talking about the ceiling.

**Sam:** He thought it was a real place where people lived and stuff, but he said the funny thing about it was, he never gave them a name.

**Andrew:** And also, the reason why I don't think Victor was in the land above, well how could he be talking from the land above because remember when Cody said he could hear him, hear the screeching on the floor from when Victor was pulling up a chair to keep Cody company.

**Teacher:** So that's—are you saying that's evidence?

**Andrew:** Yeah.

**Teacher:** Interesting.

**Andrew:** So how could he be from the land above? I mean he could be from the land above, but how could he be talking from the land above?

**Matt:** But how do you know people can't travel from and to [the] land above?

**Nancy:** This isn't realistic. This isn't like nonfiction, so anything can happen.

(Wilkinson and Nelson 2020, 231-232)

When we look at this excerpt, the first thing we notice is that the students have considerable control over the talk. Michelle states her opinion about Victor, and the teacher asks an authentic question that probes the reason for her opinion ("Can you tell me why you think so?"). This elicits a variety of responses. Most of the contributions come from students and there are several consecutive exchanges among students with only brief, occasional comments from the teacher. These exchanges often involve long, elaborated explanations. Notice, too, that the students have responsibility for constructing their understanding and interpretation of the story. They ask questions, manage turn taking, and evaluate each other's answers. What is not apparent from the transcript is that the students do not raise their hands to speak. They converse with each other much as adults do, waiting for a space to talk and building on each other's ideas.

When we look "inside" the students' utterances, another thing we notice is that they are engaged in some fairly high-level thinking about the story. They engage in inductive reasoning, trying to tie things together to account for Victor's actions ("I think Victor's an angel"), deductive reasoning as to why things happened the way they did ("The reason why I don't think Victor was in the land above. . .") and lots of speculation as to what might be going on ("Maybe he comes from like the land above, Maybe's he's just a figure"). Words such as *I think*, *I don't think*, *so*, *maybe*, *because*, *how*, *why*, and *could* are good clues that some powerful thinking is going on during this discussion.

When we step back and look at the excerpt as a whole, yet another thing we notice is that students are not just reasoning individually, they are also reasoning collectively. They offer alternative perspectives about Victor, challenging and counter-challenging each other's ideas constructively, all the while giving reasons and evidence from the text to support their ideas. Granted that the teacher interjects after her key question, but she does so slightly, almost as if she were just another participant in the discussion. Indeed, the students are engaging in what Mercer (2000) calls "exploratory talk."

The excerpt above is very different from the more traditional recitation or I-R-E (Mehan 1979) style of classroom talk with which you may be familiar. In this style of talk, the teacher *Initiates* a question (e.g., "What was the other big thing that Max sent her?"), a student *Responds* (e.g., "a blue jay"), and the teacher *Evaluates* the response (e.g., "Was it really a bird? No, it wasn't."). In a recitation style, the teacher talks the most—about two-thirds of the time—and controls the topic. She asks the questions, nominates students to answer, and is responsible for evaluating the students' answers. Students typically take a passive role and let the teacher shape the direction of the discussion. Recitation has its place in a teacher's talk repertoire, for recapping what has been covered in a lesson or assessing students' knowledge and understanding, but it is not the type of talk that promotes high-level thinking or comprehension.

## What Does the Research Say?

The research evidence on the benefits of discussion that involves quality talk is strong. Research shows that when students engage in such talk they make gains on a variety of learning outcomes. What is surprising in some studies is how large and durable the gains can be. We describe the results of research in later chapters. For now, let's visit four studies for a taste of what the research says.

First is a study of Project Challenge, a project that was conducted from 1998–2003 in one of the lowest performing school districts in Massachusetts (Chapin and O'Connor 2012; O'Connor, Michaels, and Chapin 2015). Each year, the researchers worked with a new cohort of one hundred fourth-grade students and engaged them in a variety of activities that included structured discussion. After one year in the program, results showed that 57 percent of students scored "Advanced" or "Proficient" on the state math test, compared with only 38 percent in the state overall. After three years, 82 percent of students scored "Advanced" or "Proficient," compared to only 40 percent in the state overall. These results held up in a more controlled comparison. Even more interesting was the finding that the benefits lasted beyond the first year in the program and that they transferred to the students' performance on the state English Language Arts test! Several things were involved in Project Challenge, but many of the participating teachers reported that the biggest factor contributing to students' gains was the intensive use of classroom talk.

Second is a recent study conducted in England (Jay et al. 2017). This was a large-scale randomized control trial that checked all the boxes for a rigorous experimental study. The researchers compared an approach called "dialogic

teaching" with business-as-usual instruction. Seventy-six schools and almost five thousand Year 5 students participated. Teachers in the dialogic teaching program learned to use different types of talk for particular purposes, including to discuss, reason, argue, and explain (Alexander 2018). After only twenty weeks, students who participated in the program were two months ahead of their control group peers on national assessments in English, math, and science.

Next is a study of a version of Philosophy for Children (P4C), one of the discussion approaches featured in this book. The study was conducted in a Local Educational Authority in Scotland with 177 ten-year-olds in seven classes in six schools. After participating in discussions for just one hour per week over sixteen months, using texts developed to teach basic philosophical concepts, the students showed substantial gains on a measure of verbal, nonverbal, and quantitative reasoning compared to those in a business-as-usual control (Topping and Trickey 2007a). These gains persisted when the students were followed up two years later, after they had moved to high school (Topping and Trickey 2007b).

Last, we go to a low-income middle school in Texas where researchers sought to replicate the Scottish study. This study used the same outcome measure, and the same version of P4C, but for a shorter duration (just six months). One hundred and eighty-six seventh-grade students participated in the discussions in their language arts classes for one hour per week. At the end of the program, results again showed substantial gains in reasoning relative to a control group (Fair et al. 2015a). And once again, when students were followed up, three years later this time, researchers found the gains persisted (Fair et al. 2015b). Tellingly, eighth graders who participated in only four to ten weeks of discussions showed no such gains.

This research is compelling. What we find most encouraging about these findings is how large the benefits for students can be, that they can be sustained, and that they can even transfer from one subject area to another. Something powerful is happening in and through the talk. Another frequent finding to be discussed later in this book is that the benefits of this kind of talk are especially apparent for students who, for many different reasons, are disadvantaged (e.g., Gorard, Siddiqui, and See 2017). Quality talk opens up space for all students to benefit.

## Different Talk for Different Purposes

As you may have noticed, there is a theme developing in this book: *different talk for different purposes*. As we have intimated, there are a number of options available to us when it comes to engaging students in talk. Recitation has its purpose

if we want to recap with students what we have covered or to assess their knowledge and understanding. Discussion has its purpose if we want to further students' thinking, understanding, and learning—especially if it involves quality talk. There are other types of talk, too, such as exposition (good for explaining and conveying information) and rote repetition (good for drilling facts, ideas, and routines) (Alexander 2017). The important thing to keep in mind is that different kinds of talk serve different purposes and our role as teachers is to use talk purposefully to accomplish the goals we have for our students.

Even within the broad class of talk called discussion, different talk serves different purposes. In this book, we provide a menu of approaches to discussion about text that teachers can use to foster high-level thinking and comprehension. Some of the approaches are more suited to instructional goals that emphasize responding to literature on an expressive level; others are more suited to goals of acquiring information from a text; and still others are more suited to goals of adopting a critical-analytic stance toward the text. As we will see, different ways of organizing and conducting discussion promote different types of talk, and that talk encourages different ways of thinking about or orientations toward the text. Of course, this is not an all or nothing affair; while a particular approach to discussion might privilege one goal or stance, other goals or stances can still be operating, albeit a bit below the surface. Nonetheless, to use talk effectively, we ask you to consider how your instructional goals align with those of different discussion approaches and how the approaches can be used to support the needs of your students. When talk and learning goals align in the classroom, something very magical happens.

## **But I Have Standards!**

But you have standards, you say? Yes, as teachers we are required to ensure that our students meet certain standards, whether they be the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, and The Council of Chief State School Officers 2010), individual state standards, or other standards. Thankfully, discussions that promote quality talk about text help meet many of the standards typically found in the English language arts. Most standards express expectations for students to be able to converse and collaborate with each other. Most lay out expectations for students to respond to literature, to build knowledge from informational text, and to think critically about text. For example, let's look at the Common Core State Standards in the United States. In Figure 1.1, we show a sample of the English Language Arts standards for different grade levels.

**Figure 1.1** Sample of the Common Core ELA Standards

<b>Conversation and Collaboration</b>	<b>Standard</b>
Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.	Anchor standard, speaking and listening, K–12
Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions (e.g., listening to others and taking turns speaking about the topics and texts under discussion).	Speaking and listening, K
Continue a conversation through multiple exchanges.	Speaking and listening, K
<b>Response to Literature</b>	<b>Standard</b>
Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.	Reading standard for literature, grade 5
Identify words and phrases in stories or poems that suggest feelings or appeal to the senses.	Reading standard for literature, grade 1
<b>Knowledge Building</b>	<b>Standard</b>
Determine the main idea of a text; recount the key details and explain how they support the main idea.	Reading standard for informational text, grade 3
Ask and answer such questions as <i>who</i> , <i>what</i> , <i>where</i> , <i>when</i> , <i>why</i> , and <i>how</i> to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.	Reading standard for informational text, grade 2
<b>Critical Thinking</b>	<b>Standard</b>
Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.	Anchor standard, reading, K–12
Delineate a speaker's argument and specific claims, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not.	Speaking and listening standard, grade 6
Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.	Anchor standard, speaking and listening K–12

Classroom discussions are obviously a perfect fit for helping students to develop skills of conversation and collaboration. But discussions that promote quality talk about text are also well suited to fostering students' abilities in other areas of the standards—responding to literature, building knowledge, and thinking critically. We will see that, depending on which approach we use, classroom



discussions address these standards to varying degrees—again, different talk for different purposes.

A nice thing about talk is that it makes students' thinking visible. So, from listening to what they say, we can "see" what and how they are thinking and whether they are meeting expectations. And because talk is a building block, or scaffold, for students' thinking, quality talk gives us a ready tool for supporting students' high-level thinking and comprehension. When we know what quality talk sounds like and how to promote it, we have the tools to capitalize on the power of talk in the English language arts classroom.

## **But I'm Teaching Online!**

While putting the finishing touches to this book in the spring of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic hit with a vengeance and we found ourselves teaching online and using web-based platforms (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet) to hold discussions about text. In our online classes with preservice teachers, and in conversations with our K-12 colleagues, we explored the ideas in this book and we learned about some of the pitfalls and promises of engaging students in quality talk in a synchronous web-based environment. In the final section of this book, we share some tips for having discussions with your students in a virtual environment.

Although online teaching and learning presents challenges of inequitable access to computers or high-speed Internet, disruption to the rhythm of face-to-face schooling, and fewer opportunities for social interaction among students, discussions with quality talk are highly adaptable to the online environment. In fact, discussion involving quality talk offers one of the few ways to enrich our students' learning outside of the classroom and to approximate face-to-face learning in an online space. The key words here are *adaptable* and *approximate*—the goal of online education should not be to replicate what we do face-to-face in the classroom; adjustments have to be made to offer a productive learning experience (Brewer and Brewer 2015). The suggestions we offer later in this book are to help you adapt discussion and quality talk for online teaching and learning in web-based platforms.

## **Where to from Here?**

Our goal in writing this book is to provide teachers, literacy leaders, teacher educators, and others with a repertoire of approaches for conducting classroom discussions about text. In doing so, we introduce the discourse features of quality

talk—features that reflect and help foster high-level thinking and comprehension. These features not only help us think about the strengths and weaknesses of the different discussion approaches, they also give us clues as to what is going on in the talk. By highlighting the discourse of the different approaches, we hope to help you build an “ear for talk”—a phrase we use throughout this book to refer to the skill of listening for and identifying different kinds of talk during discussion. By developing an ear for talk, we can become more sensitive to what is going on in a discussion—so we know when quality talk is happening and when it is not—and more adept at stepping into the discussion to support students’ thinking.

This book is organized into five sections.

- In this first section, we orient you toward talk and classroom discussion. In this chapter, we hope we have convinced you of the importance of talk. In the next chapter, we introduce the discourse features of quality talk. We also introduce the Talk Assessment Tool for Teachers (TATT), an assessment rubric designed to help you assess the quality of talk. In the following chapter, we provide an overview of nine research-based discussion approaches and give you ways of thinking about their similarities and differences. Among these approaches, we hope you will see some familiar faces, as well as some that are not so familiar.
- The next three sections form the core of the book. Each section is devoted to discussion approaches that foreground a particular stance toward the text: talk to emphasize personal response, talk to emphasize knowledge building, or talk to emphasize argumentation. Within each section, we first introduce the discussion approaches. Then follow three chapters, each devoted to a particular approach and sharing a common structure: we provide a graphic summary of the approach; describe what the talk sounds like in terms of quality talk; give a frank, critical appraisal of the research evidence; and describe how to put the approach into practice (how to plan the discussion, the teacher’s role, and what it looks like in action). We also describe the origins of the approach and provide a brief list of resources to learn more about it. We conclude each section by asking how we know students are engaged in the kinds of talk we want. Here we try to capture what you should hear in the talk and show how the talk in the three discussion approaches might be scored on the TATT.
- In the last section, we include a chapter describing how to get started with discussions that promote quality talk in your classroom. We also have a

chapter providing answers to questions that teachers frequently ask when trying to implement text-based discussions in their classrooms.

This book is organized in such a way that you can dip in and out of the chapters as your time and interest allow. Our hope is that, by reading different parts as you see fit, you will be able to determine which discussion approaches are most aligned with your goals and the needs of your students at any given time so you can make informed decisions about the most appropriate approach to use.