Classroom Talk: Learning, Thinking and Classroom Communities

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If you want to change some of your language in your classroom, here are some simple questions and phrases that you might try. These ones don't require anything more complicated than finding a time to say them and you can put one or two at a time in a place you will notice them to remind you to say them.

• Did anyone notice any …? What are you noticing? • Were there any surprises? • **What problems did you come across today?** • How did you figure that out? What could you do? • What do we need to do to be ready to…? • How are you planning to go about this? • How else …?	• That's like … • How did you know? How could we check? • I wonder… Maybe… • Are there any other ways to think about that? Any other opinions? • How do you think ___ feels about that? • Say more about that.

Teaching children to think together

Teaching children to think together (not just alone) is important because: compared with controls, children taught how to think together, show an increase in: • Reasoning ability • Comprehension • Expressive language • Creative thinking • Examining assumptions • Willingness to speak in public • Willingness to listen to and consider others' ideas • Frequency of providing reasons or evidence for their view • Quality of interpersonal relationships • Confidence, self-esteem and persistence • Supportive group interactions (along with a reduction in negative comments)	**Teaching to think together is helped by:** Start with engaging problems or discussions in which children are likely to disagree (see dialogic classrooms below) – particularly dialogical discussions. Help *children generate* rules for their conversations, e.g.: An example from problem solving might be: • We listen, and respect each others' ideas • Everyone gets to be heard • We give reasons when we agree or disagree, and we ask for reasons when people forget to give them. • Everyone is responsible for group decisions, so we try to agree. Help them reflect on their discussions through the lens of the rules they've created to improve their ability to participate effectively.

Dialogic Classrooms are Characterized by:

Comfort with uncertainty and focus on making meaning responsibility. Language like: • I wonder … maybe…. perhaps … • Open-ended questions • How could we check? *Valuing difference and disjuncture –multiple perspectives (real or imagined, but expected) and evidence - Language like:* • Are there any other ways to think about that? Any other opinions? • Hmmm. What do others think?	*Language for understanding how to think together and valuing doing so* (extended exchanges among 3 or more students, more follow-up questions) • Can we build that idea bigger? • I notice Laurel that when he was talking it sort of jogged your mind – what were you thinking? • Make sure each person has a chance to say something so that your learning grows from each other. • When you put those two ideas together for us, it helped us to understand that…

Symmetrical power relationships and mutual engagement • Thanks for straightening me out on that.. • Is that fair? • Remember when John taught us… • Wow.. [Silence]. • ~~Yes. Good. Excellent…~~ (reduce judgment) *A social imagination* • How do you think he felt about that? As a scientist? • What is he thinking? How can you tell? • I wonder why she got mad? • I wonder why the author chose that word.	• I heard each of you sharing your ideas with your partner. These great ideas will help us to understand the story better! • Building a conversation: ○ I wonder, perhaps, I think ○ That's like ○ I agree with you (because) ○ I disagree with you (because) ○ I can add on (I agree, and) ○ I have evidence ○ What do you mean? I'm confused. ○ What are you thinking? ○ What could we do about that?

Significance of Dialogic Classrooms:
"Students recalled their readings better, understood them in more depth, and responded more fully to aesthetic elements of literature than did students in more typical, monologically organized classes" Overcomes potential disadvantages of SES, track, race, and ethnicity. (Nystrand, 2006)
Cognitive growth is "more likely when one is required to explain, elaborate, or defend one's position to others as well as to oneself; striving for an explanation, often makes a learner integrate and elaborate knowledge in new ways" (Vygotsky, 1978)
Classroom language should foster a dynamic knowledge frame as the core of the dialogic classroom.

Language to Expand Social Imagination:
Use mental verbs and mental state language, particularly in the context of other people's minds. For example:
I wonder what she's thinking right now?
How do you think she feels? Why do you think she feels angry?
If you were in his position, what would you be feeling right now?
Show me with your face how he feels.

Dynamic (dialogic) vs. Fixed View of Knowledge - Beliefs and Behaviors

Dynamic knowledge frame	*Fixed knowledge frame*
Believe knowledge is growing, changing and likely to be affected by context and perspective.	Believe knowledge is a collection of facts that are not affected by context. Have a strong desire for stability and certainty – knowledge that everyone agrees with.
Even after having made up their mind about an issue, they are prepared to consider new information or different perspectives and change.	Judge ideas quickly based on the most accessible quality and cling to that judgment regardless of new information and particularly in the face of minority perspectives.
When considering conflict situations can understand the perspective of both sides.	View conflict situations as black-white, right wrong.
Open questions that are amenable to a range of answers and perspectives are most interesting. Uncertainty and novelty are interesting.	Avoid uncertainty and unpredictable situations including open questions that can be answered in different ways.
Enjoy interacting with people whose opinions are very different from their own.	Prefer to socialize with familiar friends and people who think similarly.
When thinking about a problem, consider as many different opinions as possible.	Decide on a solution, seek confirming evidence and avoid conflicting opinions.
Interested in multiple perspectives	Annoyed when one person disagrees with what others in the group think.

Changing plans can be exciting.	Hate changing plans.
Controversial topics and books are good places for interesting conversations	Avoid controversial topics or books.

A disposition toward reciprocity: A willingness to engage in joint learning tasks, to express uncertainties and ask questions, to take a variety of roles in joint learning enterprises and to take others' purposes and perspectives into account (Carr & Claxton, 2002).

A Disposition toward Resilience: The tendency to maintain a focus on learning when the going gets tough. It's opposite is brittleness – the tendency to avoid challenging tasks and to shift into ego-defensive behaviors when learning is difficult (Carr & Claxton, 2002).

Some language choices to reconsider

Think carefully about the praise you use. Remember that when children are engaged in an activity, praise only distracts them from the engagement and risks shifting their goal to pleasing you. Turn children's attention to the successful parts of new things they are trying, and how they are doing them. Focus their explanations on process-strategies and effort, not on personal traits.

In general, remember that it is not praise that is central, but the information that a strategy was successful, what it was, and what it accomplished. Pointing out that "I like the way you figured out that problem by yourself" provides the child with an agentive narrative – a sense of independence. However, at the same time, the "I like the way you…" part is a distraction and sets the goal of pleasing you. Consider "When you….. you figured that out by yourself (or by yourselves)." That's probably enough. Sometimes it's good to add, "can you think of another way you could have figured it out?" which builds flexibility. If you feel you need to add some praise on top of that, you could add "Nice job" which, although it judges, doesn't open a fixed frame.

Avoid	**Possible Alternatives**	**Logic**
Person-criticism like, "I'm disappointed in you."	"Maybe you could find another way to do it." "You didn't really get a chance to fix that yet." "How could you do it differently?"	Reduces the risk of undermining a feeling of respect and viewing problem as a trait. Turns attention to solving temporary problems and building agency/resilience.
Person –praise like, "I'm proud of you" or "You're good at this"	"How did you do that?" "You found a good way to do it. Could you think of another way." "You must have worked hard at that."	Person praise on success encourages child to infer person criticism on failure (even if you don't say it) which undermines resilience. Alternatives turn attention to process-strategy and effort, and build resilience.
"You're really smart"	"You really worked hard" "You used some great strategies. That must have been fun"	Smart (as a trait) is not something you have control of, effort and process are. Unsuccessful events invite the child to attribute the trait 'not-smart.'
"That's what good readers do."	"That's what readers do."	'Good reader' (trait) opens possibility of children 'bad-reader' when unsuccessful. 'Readers' is a more accommodating identity.
"I like the way you…"	"Look at how you did that, you…." When you did x, y happened.	Keeps child in control, focuses on the process (and preferably the consequence), and doesn't shift the goal towards pleasing the adult.
"Good girl."	"Thanks."	Judgment offers an asymmetrical power relationship, "Thanks," not only offers a symmetrical power relationship but encourages community contributions. "Good girl" is global praise and invites its opposite when the child is not successful.

Belief System Frames

Dynamic/ Learning frame	Fixed/Performance frame
The more you learn the smarter you get. Smartness, minds, who you become can be changed.	People have fixed traits such as smartness, intelligence and personality that they cannot change.
Learning takes time and effort, so trying hard is valued.	Learning happens quickly for smart people so trying hard is not valued - if you have to try hard you probably aren't smart.
The most important information is <u>how</u> someone did (or could do) something because that's what we can learn from.	The most important information is whether one is successful. It shows who is smart and more valuable. How one succeeds is irrelevant. (Cheating - lying justifiable routes to success.)
The goal is to learn as much as you can.	The goal is to look as smart as you can.
Frequent success without trying hard indicates choosing activities that are too easy to learn from.	Frequent success without trying is an indicator of one's (fixed) ability and value.
Problems/challenges/errors are to be expected if a person is taking on challenge – which is valued (even experts/authors make mistakes).	Problems/challenges/errors are indicators of one's intellectual ability.
Challenging and novel activities are engaging.	Challenging and novel activities are risky/stressful.
Value collaboration and believe that success requires it, along with, interest, and efforts to comprehend. Seeking help is sensible after exhausting one's own resources.	Value competition and believe that success requires ability and a competitive focus. Seeking help is evidence of one's intellectual inadequacy.
Greater competence means being able to take on new challenges and greater opportunity to help others.	Greater competence means being smarter and therefore better (and more valuable) than others, and potentially having power over others.

Each row in the belief system table offers an aspect of conversation in which you can shift the frame.

Consequences of Belief System Frames

Dynamic- Learning frame	Fixed-Performance frame
Explain behaviors in terms of mental processes and context.	Explain behaviors in terms of permanent traits.
Choose challenging activities in which you will learn as much as possible. Get into your zone of proximal development (zpd).	Choose activities that make you look smart, easy enough to be successful but just below your zpd.
When encounter difficulty, engage in self-monitoring and self-instruction, increase strategic efforts, don't see self as failing.	When encounter difficulty, they see it as failure, question their ability, assign blame for failure, and cease acting strategically.
What advice would they give to a peer who is having difficulty? Lots of strategic advice.	Minimal advice, and sometimes sympathy.
Feel smart when taking on challenge or teaching others.	Feel smart when do it better or faster than others.
What do they make of a new child in class who misbehaves (or does badly on work)? Probably not a bad student, Probably better in a couple of weeks.	Probably a bad student, probably much the same in a couple of weeks.
When faced with transgressions tries to understand the thinking and the context that produced the behavior, and forgive and educate the transgressor.	When faced with transgressions invoke punishment.
When faced with disagreements in the process of learning: engage the disagreement and try to synthesize the views. Enhances view of partner in the process.	Turns the disagreement into a relational confrontation. Puts partner down.
Slow to judge and form stereotypes	Judge quickly, and form stereotypes

Older students think education is to help people understand the world and to prepare them for socially useful work.	Older students think the purpose of education is to enhance wealth and socioeconomic status.

To Open a Dynamic Frame Emphasize the following themes:

- Mistakes are normal when you're learning – fix them.
- Problems are normal and are where we learn
- We are all changing and growing
- Focus on the process

Examples of ways to shift the frame are:

Emphasize Change

- (e.g. introducing the computer room) This is where you'll be doing things like typing stories, which is really hard but you'll be able to do it by the end of the year.
- I don't think you could do that last month. Now you can.

Focus on problems, problem-solving and process

- What problems did you encounter today?
- How did you figure that out? How else could you figure it out?

The Bottom Line:

1. Respect matters. Big time. And it requires listening.
2. Developing a sense of agency is crucial and requires drawing attention to the process through which someone achieved something – specify the outcome and the process that caused the outcome.
3. A singular focus on academics will not serve children or their academic development (or their futures) well.
4. Take seriously the fact that the adult is not the only teacher in the room.
5. When referring to people and to knowledge, avoid fixed frames.
6. It is not enough to teach individual minds.
7. Children's social imaginations should be taken more seriously.
8. Focusing on children's engagement changes everything.
9. Making meaning is good. Doing meaningful things is better.

Recommended Readings

Carol Dweck, (2006). Mindset: The new psychology of success. New York: Random House.

Peter Johnston (2004). *Choice Words: How our language affects children's learning*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Peter Johnston (2012). *Opening minds: How classroom talk shapes children's minds and their lives*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Favorite books with great examples of language in context:

Ruth Charney. (2002). *Teaching children to care: Classroom management for ethical and academic growth, K-8*. Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.

Horn, M., & Giacobbe, M. E. (2007). *Talking, Drawing, Writing: Lessons for Our Youngest Writers*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Maria Nichols (2006). *Comprehension through conversation*. Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann.

Ray, K. W., & Glover, M. (2008). *Already ready: Nurturing writers in preschool and kindergarten*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.