To support students to develop the skills for academic conversations:

- Develop a reference tool (e.g., anchor chart, bookmark) listing the skills and sample prompts (See columns 1 and 2 in the chart) and encourage students to actively use the tool during their collaboration.
- View examples of effective discussions (e.g., Student-Facilitated Literature Circles) with students and prompt them to identify effective conversation skills.
- Develop a set of look-fors with students for their collaborative discussions (See column 3), and use these to assess and provide feedback (e.g., as part of Learning Skills and Work Habits).
- Scaffold by having students practice one or a few of the skills at a time, and make connections to the purpose of those skills to their work.

**RECOGNIZING COLLABORATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS**

Students’ understanding of the skills of collaboration can be supported by having them note and recognize the contributions of their peers when working collaboratively. One way to do this is by asking them to respond as part of an exit card.

In recognizing their peers’ contributions, students can note:

- The name of the peer they wish to acknowledge,
- The collaboration skill they note,
- How their peers’ contributions have enhanced the collaborative work, and/or
- How their peers have helped shape new thinking.

This information can be used to publically acknowledge the collaborative contributions, and/or to confirm or inquire about other observations made during collaborative work.

**IN BRIEF**

Providing opportunities for students to work together, and then supporting their collaboration skills in a variety of ways, helps them develop deeper understanding of content. In addition, collaboration fosters skills to bring a variety of ideas and perspectives into students’ work.

**REFERENCES**


Supporting student collaboration capitalizes on the high value adolescents place on their social interactions with their peers. At this time in their development, adolescents’ social worlds tend to expand, they identify themselves with various social groups (that differ from those they had as children), and their memberships within peer groups become increasingly important (Ontario Ministry of Child and Youth Services, 2012). Combining learning opportunities with their desire to be with peers is often motivating, partly due to students being accountable to each other rather than just to the teacher.

Effective collaboration also has the potential to help learners to recognize the strengths they bring to a task, as well as to appreciate the contributions of their peers. This helps them develop more accurate perceptions of the reliability of their social network to guide them through a variety of situations as they become more independent (Steinberg, 2008).

**IN THE CLASSROOM**

**GETTING STARTED**

- Create a safe, inclusive environment that promotes risk-taking and work with students to develop norms of collaboration and discussion etiquette (See Discussion Etiquette, Think Literacy Cross-curricular Approaches, Grades 7-12).
- Use short, partner-driven conversations (e.g., Think-Pair-Share, Save the Last Word) including in students’ first language, and provide feedback to promote interpersonal skills needed for more complex tasks (Fisher, Frey & Everlove, 2009).
- Help learners distinguish between types of conversation (e.g., storytelling, agenda setting, problem solving, brainstorming, decision making) (Probst, 2007), and guide them to monitor what types of talk they are using, and which ones are supporting their collaborative efforts.
- Explicitly teach and model collaboration skills (e.g., using role play, discussion, fishbowl, coaching).
- Set up flexible, short-term groupings to allow students to work with a variety of peers with a variety of strengths, interests and perspectives, and that provide opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate their strengths.
- Develop learning tasks that focus on big ideas and essential questions where students have reasons to collaborate, and where there are a number of skill sets that lead to successful achievement of the learning goal(s).
- Conduct group- and self-assessments that focus on the learning process and skills of collaboration.

**TRY IT OUT: SHAPING IDEAS COLLABORATIVELY**

As students are reading or viewing a text, ask them to individually take summary notes (e.g., jotting points on sticky notes). Once they have their notes, form groups of three or four students. Invite each member of the group to share their summary notes, then ask students to form a gist statement which incorporates the ideas from the entire group. Follow this by asking students to reflect on what they knew about the topic before and after they collaborated. Invite students to discuss how collaboration helped them shape or deepen their initial ideas on the topic.

**SUPPORTING EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIVE TALK**

In order for students to engage in effective collaboration, they need to use purposeful talk, or what Zwiers and Crawford (2011) call academic conversations. Academic conversations require students to use five conversation skills which are necessary for seeking understanding, supporting thinking, and expanding ideas. The chart below lists the conversation skills, sample prompts to help students use the language of the skill, and sample evidence that supports the assessment and feedback of the skill.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversation Skills</th>
<th>Sample Prompts</th>
<th>Look and listen for students to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elaborate and Clarify</td>
<td>• What do you mean by…?</td>
<td>• ask for and offer additional information related to the topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Can you tell me more about…?</td>
<td>• provide specific details in response (rather than repeating what is already said)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How does that connect to…?</td>
<td>• put ideas into their own words, finding alternate ways of saying what they are reading, hearing, seeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I am a little confused about… Can you explain more about…?</td>
<td>• provide examples and details relevant to the topic or issue under discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• In other words…</td>
<td>• directly refer to texts and other material to identify information, making clear to peers from where they are drawing information (e.g., pointing to the text, reading aloud excerpts to the group)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• It is important because…</td>
<td>• visualize and imagine possible scenarios as examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I think it means that…</td>
<td>• provide input that is relevant and that builds on ideas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Support Ideas with Examples**

- Can you give me an example from the article (or other text)?
- Can you show me where it says that?
- What might be an example of what you are talking about?
- What might that talk like?
- For example…
- In the text it said that…
- One case showed that…
- An example from my life is…

**Build on and/or Challenge Peers’ Ideas**

- What do you think about this idea?
- Do you agree?
- What might be some other points of view?
- How can we bring this back to the question of…?
- What other ideas could we include?
- I would add that…
- I want to expand on your point about…
- The question I have about that is…

**Paraphrase**

- How can we relate what I said to our topic/question?
- What do we know so far?
- In other words, are you saying that…?
- Let me see if I understand you…
- In other words…
- It sounds like you are saying…

**Synthesize Conversation Points**

- What have we discussed (or determined) so far?
- How can we bring this all together?
- What have we agreed upon?
- What was our original question? What main points can we share?
- We can say that…
- The main point here seems to be…
- The evidence seems to suggest that…

“When I observe students thinking together, they focus on coming to a shared understanding of a topic or final product through reasoning and constructively criticizing ideas. They strive for clarity and justification of ideas that push them to think about the quality and nature of abstract ideas. Ultimately, students construct new knowledge and new academic skills.”

Zwiers & Crawford, 2011


When students collaborate, they are “engaged in the kind of teamwork that is so highly prized in business and industry, although sometimes suspect in school settings where solitary work is still too often prized.”

Fisher and Frey, 2008