

# ALERT



## ADOLESCENT LITERACY: ENGAGING RESEARCH AND TEACHING

### Make room for **TALKING TO LEARN**

#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Talk is important for learning. Talking allows students to communicate their ideas, seek clarification, and build on ideas by listening to others. They do this in other ways too, but often talk is a strength for many students. Talk can provide a way for students to demonstrate what they know, and can also help the learner prepare to think, express and reflect (Fisher, Frey & Rothenberg, 2008, Zwiers & Crawford, 2011).

However, not all talk supports learning. Even though many students may prefer talk over other ways of communicating, they often need support to learn how to make their talk productive in the classroom. “For classroom talk to promote learning it must be accountable...what matters is what students are talking about and how they talk” (Michaels, O’Connor, Williams Hall & Resnick, 2010). In addition to having meaningful topics and authentic purposes for talk, learners need explicit instruction in a number of skills which contribute to productive talk. These skills include staying focused, taking in a variety of perspectives and ideas, asking for clarification, building on the ideas of others, and when needed, disagreeing in a respectful way.

#### **WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR ADOLESCENT LEARNERS?**

Adolescents tend to value social connections with their peers — a key characteristic of their development — and teachers can capitalize on this developmental characteristic by providing many opportunities for talk and collaboration. Purposeful and focused talk helps to bridge the gap between adolescents’ social need and the learning need of acquiring and using academic language (Fisher, Frey & Rothenberg, 2008).

When teachers provide opportunities for students to talk, they also open possibilities for students to share their perspectives and ideas which may boost their confidence and sense of contribution.



**LiteracyGAINS**

“[Learning conversations] engage, motivate, and challenge...they also help us build ideas, solve problems, and communicate our thoughts. They teach other people how we see and do life... They shape our identities, thoughts, beliefs and emotions.”

Zwiers & Crawford, 2011

## IN THE CLASSROOM

### GETTING STARTED

“By taking the time to teach specific oral strategies in the content of your subject area, you will boost your students’ confidence and performance.”

*Think Literacy, Cross-Curricular Approaches,*  
2003

- Create a safe learning environment for students.
- Purposefully plan for conversation by beginning with a focus on the learning goal(s).
- Brainstorm and co-construct a list of discussion etiquette, norms and behaviours (e.g., wait for your turn and don’t interrupt, use respectful phrases when disagreeing with another speaker). For more on discussion etiquette see *Think Literacy Cross-Curricular Approaches*, page 176.
- Co-create an anchor chart of conversation prompts and model each one (e.g., I wonder why..., I agree/disagree with...).
- Practice activities that allow for structured interaction (e.g., think-pair-share).
- Use wait time to allow for students’ internal dialogues, slow down and find out who heard what (West, 2011).
- Plan for questions that will promote lively discussions (Ministry of Education, 2004).

### TRY IT OUT: USING TALK WITH AN ANTICIPATION GUIDE

“I didn’t know what I knew until I talked about it.”

Quote from a grade seven student in  
Zwiers & Crawford,  
2011

Using a structure to guide talk can help learners stay focused and on-task. Using an anticipation guide with talk supports students to activate prior knowledge (including misconceptions) and to kick start thinking about ideas they will explore more deeply. Additionally, it encourages students to take a stand, voice an opinion, make connections, and/or predictions.

- Start by creating a few short questions or statements for the anticipation guide related to a text or topic.
- Remember to avoid questions or statements that are right or wrong or require a yes or no answer. Questions and statements most effective for an anticipation guide are those that invite students to take a stance (agree or disagree) and that have a range of valid responses (e.g., electronic devices improve our quality of life).
- The anticipation guide questions/statements can be distributed to students or displayed. Encourage students to individually think about each question or statement, and decide whether they agree or disagree. They may also want to jot some notes (e.g., providing reasons for their positions). Point out to students that this is not a test, but an opportunity for them to explore their own thoughts and opinions.
- Students then share their responses with a partner or small group. If it supports the learning goals of the lesson, open the discussion to the whole class.



Prompt students to revisit the statements after they have had the opportunity to add new information from the lesson or unit or through research. Encourage students to talk about their positions and if their thinking was changed or confirmed after the learning to support their metacognitive thinking.

## MAKING THE TALK ACCOUNTABLE

Usually having students talk isn't a problem. Getting them to be focused and on-task is sometimes a challenge. When talk supports learning, all members of a conversation are accountable for their contributions, achieving the goals of the conversation, and assessing whether the goals have been reached.

Fortunately, there are a number of supports that can help ensure that the talk is accountable.

### Assign roles

Make clear the role (e.g., questioner, clarifier, facilitator) each student will play in a group. Using numbered heads (have students number off 1, 2, 3... in a group) is a quick way to distinguish each person in the group, and then assign a role/task to each of the numbers.

### Make skills evident

Have a list of skills and protocols students are expected to use during their talk. For example, create a bookmark with a procedure for *Save the Last Word for Me* (See *Think Literacy: Subject Specific Examples Language/English, Grades 7-9*, p. 60), or list sample conversation sentence stems on an anchor chart and model using them with students.

### Co-construct understanding of productive talk

Co-construct descriptions of productive talk (e.g., what it looks like, sounds like) with students. Post descriptions for students to refer, and encourage them to use these to moderate their own and their peers' talk.

### Focus the talk with a product

Have students complete a product, such as a placemat, annotated quotation, or mind map, as a record of their conversation. Use it as assessment information combined with information gathered through observation.

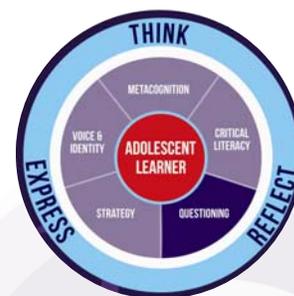
## SUPPORTING PRODUCTIVE TALK

Productive talk happens when students and teacher respond to and build on what others in the classroom have said. It is focused, meaningful, and mutually beneficial to the speaker and listener.

When talk supports learning, both the speaker and listener use skills (e.g., ask questions for clarification, rephrase ideas, use appropriate body language and eye contact) and have responsibilities (e.g., share opportunities to speak, respectfully challenge ideas, come to consensus). Brainstorm these skills and responsibilities with students and post them in the classroom.

“In a classroom filled with accountable talk, students...extend understandings by using the statements they have heard from their classmates to form new ideas.”

Fisher, Frey & Rothenberg, 2008



The *Adolescent Literacy Guide* outlines components which support students abilities to think, express and reflect. Questioning is one of the components to which this ALERT connects.

Generate with students the various purposes and prompts to make talk accountable:

Purpose	Sample Prompt
Ask questions to clarify understanding	<i>Can you tell me more about...? Would you say that again?, Can you give me an example of what you mean?</i>
Give a reason to support an idea	<i>This reminds me of...because... I think this is true because...</i>
Ask for evidence when something sounds inaccurate or vague	<i>I'm not sure about that. Can you tell me why you think it's true? Can you show me a place in the text that supports your idea?</i>
Give evidence to support statements	<i>It says here... (read a passage from a text that illustrates the idea). Here is another source that says...(read from another supporting source of information)</i>
Use ideas from others to add to your own	<i>I agree with...because his/her idea reminds me of...</i>

Adapted from Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Rothenberg, C. (2008). *Content-Area Conversations: How to Plan Discussion-Based Lessons for Diverse Language Learners*. ASCD: Alexandria, VA.

## IN BRIEF

Talk is an important vehicle for learning. Providing opportunities for talk addresses many needs, including the developmental needs of adolescent learners. Students generally want to talk, but they may not have all the necessary skills for productive talk. Learners benefit from explicit teaching on how to make their talk purposeful.

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## FOR MORE ON...

### Adolescent Literacy

Literacy GAINS. (2012). [Adolescent Literacy Guide: A Professional Learning Resource for Literacy, Grades 7-12](#).

### Learning Environment

Ministry of Education, Student Achievement Division. (2012). [The Third Teacher, Capacity Building Series](#).

### Small and Whole Group Collaboration

Ontario Ministry of Education, Student Achievement Division. (2011). [Discovering Voice](#). Toronto: Author.

### Talk Instructional Strategies

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2003) [Think Literacy: Cross-Curricular Approaches, Grades 7-12](#). Toronto: Author.