

Introduction

Who is this book for?

This book is for all teachers who value the role that discussion plays in helping students process curricular material. Actual face-to-face dialogue and verbal exchanges are becoming lost forms of communication for those who have grown up surrounded by social networking, texting, and blogs. These are the digital native students that we have in our classrooms today. Teachers who are seeking ways to add student-to-student discussion into standards-based lessons will find a wealth of ideas within.

Who are we, the authors?

We are educators. Between us, we have taught for almost fifty years, in classrooms ranging from kindergarten to twelfth grade. We have also taught teachers, both in the university classroom and in professional development workshops across the country. It is our interaction with teachers on the front lines of curriculum and instruction that encouraged us to write this book.

Why should we be concerned about building discussion into standards-based lessons?

Teachers are sensing the need to build on and reinforce oral language development, as today's students are entering our classrooms with a decreased oral vocabulary. Our students' primary form of communication between friends occurs via texting, social media sites, image-sharing sites and blogs. With most interaction transpiring digitally, students are losing the ability to read body language and interpret facial expressions. Face-to-face contact is essential in developing empathy for others. The opportunities for dialogue within the family are decreasing. In our fast-paced culture, fewer families than ever have a nightly meal together where, in the past, "family meetings" have occurred. When children travel in a vehicle with the family today, instead of singing songs, playing word games and telling stories, as in the past, the DVD screens pop down and watching a movie or video is the norm. Student-to-student classroom talk is needed to supplement the loss of conversation outside of the school setting.

What makes a good discussion activity?

Student engagement and the ability to embed content standards within the discussion are the key hallmarks of any effective strategy. There are several ways to structure student talk. The divisions in the book identify these structural components—individual and partner activities, small group activities, and whole class activities. The goal of the day’s lesson and the amount of time that can be devoted to the activity are factors in deciding which activity is appropriate for which lesson.

Where did we find these discussion activities?

The strategies in this book were compiled from a variety of sources. Some were designed by us, the authors, from our lesson plans and interaction with students in the classroom. Others we discovered at conferences, workshops, and professional development opportunities that we have attended over the course of our careers. These we have adapted and tweaked to make them our own. If we found a source for an activity as we conducted research for the book, the original creator is credited at the end of the strategy. Finally, some of these activities, such as Think-Pair-Share, have been in the general realm of instructional experiences for years. In all cases, we have modified the activities we chose with the goal that they be as useful as possible for both the teachers and students of the 21st Century classroom.

A Final Thought

The degree of sophistication and length of discussion varies within the book’s activities. Many students are more comfortable and more willing to talk with one other person than with a larger group. For students who have had little experience in face-to-face communication, we recommend beginning with the partner activities or with those larger group activities that require a slightly more minimal response from students, such as Pass the Word. This will help those less certain talkers gain the experience that bolsters confidence as the year proceeds.