

Figure 2.15. Structures for Engaging All Students in Academic Conversations

Rather than posing a question and taking immediate responses from a few students, teachers employ more participatory and collaborative approaches such as those that follow. Teachers also ensure that students interact with a range of peers. For each of the illustrative examples provided here, teachers emphasize extended discourse, that is, multiple exchanges between students in which they engage in rich dialogue. It is also important that teachers select approaches that support the needs of students and encourage varying types of interaction.

Think-Pair-Share

A question is posed and children are given time to think individually. Then each student expresses his or her thoughts and responds to a partner, asking clarifying questions, adding on, and so forth. The conversation is often expanded to a whole-class discussion. (Lyman 1981)

Think-Write-Pair-Share

Students respond to a prompt or question by first thinking independently about their response, then writing their response. They then share their thoughts with a peer. The conversation is often expanded to a whole-group discussion.

Quick Write/Quick Draw

Students respond to a question by quickly writing a few notes or rendering a drawing (e.g., a sketch of the water cycle) before being asked to share their thinking with classmates.

Literature/Learning Circles

Students take on various roles in preparation for a small-group discussion. For example, as they listen to, view, or read a text, one student attends to and prepares to talk about key vocabulary, another student prepares to discuss diagrams in the text, and a third student prepares questions to pose to the group. When they meet, each student has a turn to share and others are expected to respond by asking clarifying questions as needed and reacting to and building on the comments of the student who is sharing. (Daniels 1994)

Inside-Outside Circles

Students think about and mentally prepare a response to a prompt such as *What do you think was the author's message in the story?* or *Be ready to tell a partner something you found interesting in this unit of study.* Students form two circles, one inside the other. Students face a peer in the opposite circle. This peer is the person with whom they share their response. After brief conversations, students in one circle move one or more peers to their right in order to have a new partner, thus giving them the opportunity to articulate their thinking again and hear a new perspective. (Kagan 1994)

Discussion Web

Students discuss a debatable topic incorporating listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Students are given content-based reading, a focusing question, and clear directions and scaffolds for developing arguments supporting both sides of the question. (Alvermann 1991; Buehl 2009)

Expert Group Jigsaw

Students read a text and take notes, then work together in small (3–5 students) *expert groups* with other students who read the same text to compare notes and engage in an extended discussion about the reading. They come to a consensus on the most important things to share with others who did not read the same text. Then, they convene in small *jigsaw groups* to share about what they read and to gather information about what others read. Finally, the expert groups reconvene to compare notes on what they learned.

Structured Academic Controversy

Like the Discussion Web, Structured Academic Controversy is a cooperative approach to conversation in which small teams of students learn about a controversial issue from multiple perspectives. Students work in pairs, analyzing texts to identify the most salient parts of the argument from one perspective. Pairs present their arguments to another set of partners, debate the points, and then switch sides, debating a second time. Finally, the students aim to come to consensus through a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of both sides of the argument. (Johnson and Johnson 1999)

Opinion Formation Cards

Students build their opinion on a topic as they listen to the ideas of others. Students have *evidence cards*—small cards with different points of evidence drawn from a text or texts. Students meet with other students who have different points of evidence, read the points to each other, state their current opinions, ask questions, and prompt for elaboration. (Zwiers, O’Hara, and Pritchard 2014)

Socratic Seminar

Students engage in a formal discussion in which the leader asks open-ended questions based on a text. The teacher facilitates the discussion as students listen closely to the comments of others, ask questions, articulate their own thoughts, and build on the thoughts of others. (Israel 2002)

Philosopher’s Chair, Strategic Collaborative Instruction, Constructive Conversations, and Argument Balance Scales are examples of other strategies, and there are many others.

Teachers and students plan ways to assess and build accountability for collaborative conversations. Possible items to consider include the following:

- Active Listening – Students use eye contact, nodding, and posture to communicate attentiveness.
- Meaningful Transitions – Students link what they are about to say to what has just been said, relating it to the direction/purpose of the conversation.
- Shared Participation – All students share ideas and encourage table mates to contribute.
- Rigor and Risk – Students explore original ideas, ask important questions that do not have obvious or easy answers, and look at the topic in new ways.
- Focus on Prompt – Students help each other remain focused on the key question, relating their assertions back to prompt.
- Textual/Evidentiary Specificity – Students refer often and specifically to the text in question or to evidence that supports their claims.
- Open-Minded Consideration of All Viewpoints – Students are willing to alter initial ideas, adjust positions to accommodate others’ assertions, and “re-think” claims they have made.

These can be assessed on a three-point rating scale (*clear competence, competence, little competence*) by the teacher and, as appropriate for their grade, the students.

Content Knowledge

Reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language are tools for acquiring, constructing, and conveying knowledge. Students who exhibit the capacities of literate individuals build strong content knowledge. As stated in the CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy, “Students establish a base of knowledge across a wide range of subject matter by engaging with works of quality and substance. They become proficient in new areas through research and study. They read purposefully and listen attentively to gain both general knowledge and discipline-specific expertise. They refine and share their knowledge through writing and speaking” (CDE 2013, 6).

The building and acquisition of content knowledge is a dominant theme across the strands of standards. In the Reading strand, students read a range of texts, including informational texts, and demonstrate an understanding of the content (RL/RI.K–12, Standards 1–3) and an ability to integrate knowledge and ideas (RL/RI.K–12, Standards 7–9). They acquire knowledge of written and spoken language as they achieve the foundational skills (RF.K–5, Standards 1–4) and learn language conventions (L.K–5, Standards 1–3). Other strands of the language arts, too, include attention to content knowledge. Students acquire the vocabulary of the disciplines (L.K–12, Standards 4–6). They learn to convey knowledge of structures, genres, and ideas as they write (W.K–12, Standards 1–3),